

The book cover features a woman with long, wavy brown hair wearing a blue, off-the-shoulder, floral-patterned dress. She stands in a dark, atmospheric setting that appears to be a haunted house at night. In the background, there is a large, full moon, several bats flying in the sky, and a building with glowing windows. The overall color palette is dominated by blues and greys, with the woman's dress and the title text providing a strong contrast.

NYT, USA TODAY,  
AND BESTSELLING AUTHORS

MEARA PLATT

CHASITY BOWLIN

MARY WINE

LEXI POST

MARY LANCASTER

MAEVE GREYSON

SOFIE DARLING

MIA PRIDE

ELISA BRADEN

ELIZABETH ROSE

ONCE  
UPON A  
HAUNTED ROMANCE

AN HISTORICAL

ROMANCE COLLECTION

# **Once Upon a Haunted Romance**

## **An Historical Romance Collection**

Meara Platt, Chasity Bowlin, Mary Wine, Lexi Post,  
Mary Lancaster, Maeve Greyson, Sofie Darling, Mia Pride,  
Elisa Braden, Elizabeth Rose



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Text by Meara Platt, Chasity Bowlin, Mary Wine, Lexi Post, Mary Lancaster, Maeve Greyson, Sofie Darling, Mia Pride, Elisa Braden, Elizabeth Rose

Cover by Dar Albert

Dragonblade Publishing, Inc. is an imprint of Kathryn Le Veque Novels, Inc.

P.O. Box 23

Moreno Valley, CA 92556

[ceo@dragonbladepublishing.com](mailto:ceo@dragonbladepublishing.com)

Produced in the United States of America

First Edition October 2023

Kindle Edition

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# **Once Upon a Haunted Cave**

*Meara Platt*



# Chapter One

*Cornwall, England*

*August 1817*

“THEY ARE KNOWN as the Singing Caves, Miss Alwyn.” Ruarke MacArran, the daunting Duke of Arran, surprised Heather Alwyn by coming up beside her as she stood alone on the windy cliff heights overlooking the rocky Cornwall seashore and its honeycomb of caves near his impressive home, MacArran Grange. “You must never go in them.”

Heather shook her head and turned to him, only now realizing she had company. The hour was growing late, the afternoon shadows beginning to lengthen over the jagged rockface. The sun would still be up for hours. But the waves were heightening in intensity. Even now, she could hear their strident *whoosh* to shore and the soft roar as they crashed within the distant caves.

“Forgive me, Your Grace.” The sound of those waves battering the hollowed-out rocks, and the siren song emanating from those hollows, had left her a little spellbound. “I did not hear you approach. I was watching the girl.”

She thought she heard him sharply inhale. “What girl?”

“Oh, she is gone now. She came out of those very caves and ran down the beach.” Heather put a hand over her eyes to shade them from the sun, but the young woman, hardly more than a girl, was no longer in sight.

“Dear heaven,” she heard him mutter.

“Your Grace?” She was almost afraid to meet his gaze, for there was something about his dark eyes that had the power to devour her soul. It was ridiculous to feel this way about someone—a duke, no less—she had met only two weeks ago.

That he even knew her name was a surprise, for he had never spoken to her until just now. But he had been watching her since this morning, and she was a little undone knowing she had his attention.

What did this fierce man want with her?

He was undeniably handsome, tall, and splendidly broad in the shoulders. His hair was as dark as his eyes, and he wore dark clothes to match. There was a brutish magnificence about his face that reminded her of the jagged cliffs upon which she stood.

Still, she did not like his ability to make *her* heart flutter.

Nor did she understand why he had suddenly taken notice of her.

Well, perhaps he made it a point to know everyone who came and went from MacArran Grange. Not that he would have reason to pay her more than a passing glance when the house was filled with guests, several of whom were accomplished young ladies making their Society debuts. She was merely serving as companion to his aunt, Lady Audley. Hence, she was no one of importance.

“I can hear the caves singing,” she said, leaning closer to the edge as she watched the tide roll in. “Is this what gives them their song? The wave swells moving in and out, creating that distinct hum?”

“Yes, Miss Alwyn.”

She made the mistake of looking up at him again, and immediately felt the shock of his gaze sweeping over her. There was something quite seductive in the shape of his eyes, a slight droop at the corners, as though he had just gotten out of bed or was about to lure her into it. She quickly turned away, irritated this man had the power to affect her so deeply. Why was she feeling any attraction to him?

She could not look at him without tingling, but all women responded this way whenever he was in their presence.



There was no prettiness about him, just raw maleness.

“Why did you say I must never go in them, Your Grace?” If that girl, who did not look more than sixteen or seventeen, could scamper in and out of those hollows, then what was the point of forbidding her? She met his gaze directly, a gesture he must have found amusing, if his wry smile was any indication.

His aunt had brought her here, for Heather was the old woman’s companion, and her duty was to tend to her during the duke’s house party. This party was to last the month, and many of his friends and their eligible daughters had been invited as well.

The whispers were that the duke was on the hunt for a wife.

Well, good luck to him.

Not that he would need it.

Even she swooned at the sight of him, and she did not really like him. Well, she liked him a little too much, but was afraid of him. His expression was always stern and forbidding, and he held himself apart from everyone. Perhaps dukes had to do this, build a protective wall to repel all those who would seek to use them.

The young ladies at this duke’s house party did not seem to mind his dour nature, for they fluttered around him like sparkling butterflies hoping to gain his favor.

“Why should I not explore the caves, Your Grace?” Heather prompted him when he did not immediately respond.

“It is too dangerous.” Awareness ran through her when he unexpectedly circled an arm around her waist to draw her back from the edge. “Especially for you.”

She burned where their bodies touched, her turmoil prolonged while he held her for several moments longer than was warranted.

Until now, Heather thought she had been invisible to him. “Dangerous for me? Why?”

“Because you are drawn to them and the song they sing.”

“That is true,” she said with a nod, “but isn’t everyone?”

“No. Most people have a healthy fear and avoid them. Nor would most people hear their song even if they were standing where you are to watch the tide come in.” He drew her further back from the edge when she attempted to take another step forward. “This is not the first time I’ve noticed you here. Can you not see, Miss Alwyn? The Singing Caves have too strong a pull on you. Keep away from them. I have no desire to find your lifeless body on those rocks when the tide rolls out.”

“Are you saying this to frighten me? Is this how you amuse yourself in your idle hours? By scaring young ladies?”

“I never jest about those caves.” His voice was deep and resonant, reminiscent of the rumble of thunder on an approaching storm.

“Am I forbidden to walk along the beach, too?” She brushed back several strands of her hair that had escaped their braid and now whipped in her face because of the gusting wind. She did not mind, for the breeze was warm as it struck her cheeks. There was a dampness to it, too. The air was never dry around here because they were so close to the water. “Or is there harm in my taking a simple walk? I would like to understand your rules so I do not give further offense.”

His nicely formed lips twitched upward at the corners. “You have a mouth on you, don’t you?”

She winced. “I don’t mean to.”

“Yes, you do.” He now allowed a full smile as he held out his hand. “Come back to the house with me, Miss Alwyn.”

She stared at the masculine hand.

“Come.” He reached over and took hers, interlacing their fingers in a surprisingly intimate fashion as he turned toward his grand manor. “Lass, do you know what *Alwyn* means among the faerie folk?”

“No.” She looked up at him, wondering why he was holding her hand or even talking to her.

“In Celtic it means friend of elves. *Blessed* friend of elves. This is what you looked like standing by the cliff with the wind whipping at your gown—a delicate sprite about to fly away.”

Her laughter caught on the breeze and echoed around them. “I was in no danger of it. All I meant to do was walk down to the beach. What is so wrong with that? Sorry, that last remark sounded petulant even to my own ears.”

“I can see you are not happy with my warning, Miss Alwyn. Do you believe I issued it merely to be petty and tyrannical?”

She did not deny it.

This was her only time off, and she did not wish to spend it indoors, even though MacArran Grange was a beautiful house. The cliffs and beaches in this part of Cornwall were also beautiful, and somehow familiar, although she could not recall ever being here before. She wanted to explore as much of the area as she could before the house party ended and she had to return to dismal London with the equally dismal Lady Audley.

He sensed her reluctance. “You have no wish to go back inside?”

“No, Your Grace. Please understand, Wednesday afternoons are the only time I have to myself. I would rather spend the hours exploring, especially on such a perfect day.”

He glanced toward the sky.

Heather sighed, wishing he could appreciate the beauty of this gloaming hour and the magical hues to be seen as the sun began to set. Delicate lavenders and pinks mixed in with fiery oranges that stole one’s breath away.

The sky was almost cloudless today, save for a few wispy tendrils of white floating by on the August breeze. Goshawks

and gulls flew over the azure waters of MacArran Cove in search of fish swimming beneath its crystal surface.

He fixed his gaze on the distant waves, appearing to study their rise and fall as the wind swept them to shore. “My other guests will be taking tea on the terrace by now.”

“Other? Do you consider me a guest? I am no more than your aunt’s companion.”

He shrugged his broad shoulders, his gaze still on the cove. “You are a cut above a mere companion, I would say. Anyone who can tolerate my aunt as long as you have done has earned my respect.”

“Oh dear.” Heather was unable to hold back a light laugh. “Is she considered that much of an ogre?”

“You know she is. I’m told you have been with her almost a year now. It is about six months longer than anyone else has lasted. I marvel at your fortitude.”

She blushed at the compliment, but did not pass comment.

It was not fortitude so much as desperation. His aunt was an unpleasant woman, but Heather’s position as her companion was a precious salvation, and she dared not say or do anything to put it at risk.

“What do you think of my house, Miss Alwyn?” He now gestured toward the magnificent structure built of gray stone that Heather expected would stand for another thousand years.

“It is splendid,” she said, following his gaze. “The roses and ivy along the walls soften it. The shutters are the deep blue of the sea and connect this house to its surroundings. I understand it has recently been restored to its former grandeur. Did you have a hand in that renovation, other than merely supplying the massive funds required?”

“Yes.” He smiled again, a smile capable of melting her heart if she ever trusted him enough to be caught off her guard.

“It feels like it has your touch, a mix of power and perfection.” She could not help smiling back at him. “Will you

tell me more? The interior is decorated with impeccable taste. I have been in some beautiful homes, but none to match yours. The exterior is elegant, too. Every bit of its construction shows exquisite thought and attention to detail.”

His expression quickly changed, and he now frowned at her. “I do not need your flattery.”

“I was merely stating it as fact, Your Grace. You asked my opinion and I gave it. I would have been much less effusive if I did not like it.” This man was as changeable as the wind, yet she seemed to be warming to him. She did not understand why. He still looked quite forbidding and was obviously irritated with her.

He grunted. “Follow me. We’ll stay out here.”

“We? Where are you taking me?”

His dark eyes swallowed her up again. “Do you not trust me, Miss Alwyn?”

She met his gaze, unwilling to lie or flatter him, for she was never one to speak falsely. “No, Your Grace. I do not trust you in the least.”



## Chapter Two

“YOUR CANDOR IS refreshing, Miss Alwyn,” the Duke of Arran said with a hearty burst of laughter. He tucked a finger under her chin, tipping her face up so that she could not avoid his stare. “I suppose I do have a bad reputation.”

Heather was not certain what he would do next, but he gave a shrug and led her to a shady grove not far from the cliff where she had been standing. He stretched his big body under one of the trees, his gaze remaining on her, as he obviously expected her to join him.

“Has anyone ever told you that you look like an elf?” he said, apparently amused by her appearance as she sank onto the grass beside him. “Especially with those big, fey eyes and pointy little ears of yours. But I think you are not as delicate as you look.”

How wrong he was.

She was a hollow shell inside, quite alone in the world, and scared of what might happen to her if ever she lost her position as companion to his aunt. However, she was not about to confide in him.

Instead, she patted her gown to smooth it, and then shifted slightly so that she was not seated too close to him. Theirs was a comfortable spot, hidden from view. Few people would notice them if they passed by to walk along the cliffs or down to the beach. Nor could the two of them be seen from the terrace where everyone was having tea by now, since it was on the other side of the house.

It suddenly struck her how isolated she and the duke were.

She glanced up as a sudden breeze rustled through the silvery leaves of their shade tree. “Your Grace, should you not

be getting back? You will be missed by your guests.”

He emitted a light chuckle. “Are you that eager to be rid of me? Most ladies would be in a swoon over my attention.”

“I know,” she said. “I’ve seen how those lovely debutantes hang upon your every word. Miss Barclay in particular.”

He shrugged. “She is merely a neighbor.”

“She is fascinated by you.”

“Aren’t they all?” he said with notable sarcasm. “What about you, Miss Alwyn? Do I fascinate you?”

She brushed a fallen leaf off her lap. “No, Your Grace. I try to avoid you as much as possible.”

He grinned at her. “Yes, I have noticed.”

After a moment of silence between them, he plucked a blade of grass and began to twirl it in his roughened fingers. “They think I am going to offer for one of them.”

“Are you not?” She regarded him in surprise. “Then what is the purpose of inviting these young ladies and their families here? It is cruel to give them false hope.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Are you admonishing me?”

“I...do not mean to meddle in your affairs.”

“But you are.”

Heat rose in her cheeks as she silently chided herself for spouting off at him. But having tossed out an opinion he obviously did not like, she had to tactfully retreat from it at once. “The expenses of a debut Season are quite hefty; that is all I am suggesting. Not every family can afford to put their daughters forward for a Season, much less two. Some of these girls are under dire strain to make a good match in order to save their loved ones from financial ruin. It is not fair to keep them here when they could be elsewhere attracting the attention of a gentleman who will seriously court them.”

“And save them from a life of penury such as your own?”

“That is unfair...and unkind. Do you think I do not feel the frustration of my reduced circumstances every moment of every day?”

“Consider me properly rebuked, Miss Alwyn.” His groan sounded quite heartfelt for a man who was reputed to have an icy heart. “I have been thoughtless in my attitude toward you and the other young ladies. You have my sincere apology.”

She sighed. “It is all right, Your Grace.”

“No, it isn’t. I will set about correcting my behavior. Tell me, have you ever had a Season?”

She shook her head. “No, my father died shortly before I was to make my London debut.”

That eyebrow of his shot up again.

“Does this shock you?”

“Actually, no. You are obviously refined. Much more so than those peahens cluttering my house right now. Gad, they are silly creatures. And do not admonish me for saying so. We both know they are.”

“Perhaps it is you who are too severe.”

His features lightened as he broke into an unguarded smile. “You cannot resist rebuking me, can you? Point taken. But what happened to you, Miss Alwyn? Forgive me, I know I am prying.”

She decided there was no harm in telling him, since his aunt knew of her situation and would not hesitate to reveal the ugly details if ever he bothered to ask. “My father was a baronet. Sir George Alwyn, a kind man with an amiable disposition and absolutely no head for business. Hence, my present need to work to support myself.”

“Have you no other family? No siblings?”

“Not that I am aware. It was my father and me for most of my life. My mother died years ago, when I was quite young. I carry a miniature portrait of her in my locket. I do not



remember her at all, and would not know what she looked like if not for this locket.” Heather always wore it hidden beneath the bodice of her gown, and now drew it out by the chain to show him. She opened the silver heart to reveal the portrait inside.

He leaned closer and took the locket in his roughened hand to study it. “Interesting. You resemble her, although she appears quite young. She has the look of a girl from another century. Perhaps it is her expression, or the style of her hair.”

“Perhaps.” She gave a wistful sigh as she closed the heart with a light snap and then tucked it back in place.

“I am sorry you lost her so young, Miss Alwyn. And your father? Did he have nothing at all to leave you?”

“He did have a little. But it all went to his distant cousin, Thomas Alwyn, a horrid toad of a man in whom my father placed too much confidence. He is a supposedly respectable landowner with a fine estate not far from ours in Yorkshire.”

“Would he not take you in?”

“Oh, he was willing.” She emitted a long, ragged breath. “The problem was, he turned out to be a little *too* willing. I had to constantly be on my guard and lock my door against him. His wife was not pleased by the interest he showed in me.”

“Ah, that comes as no surprise.” He tossed aside the blade of grass and placed his hands behind his head, resting his torso against the shade tree. He closed his eyes as the sun filtered through the leaves and shone on his face. “Did his wife arrange for you to become my aunt’s companion?”

“No, Your Grace. That would have required a little thought or kindness on her part. She detested me for trying to steal her husband. He detested me because I would not unlock my door to him. My belongings were packed and I was sent away without so much as a shilling to my name. But that blame, I think, should fall upon my father for failing to provide for me.

He was just as irresponsible as his cousin who has now inherited all of his estate.”

Despite his closed eyes, Heather knew the duke was listening to her quite attentively.

“What did you do?” he asked. “How did you make your way to London and my aunt?”

“Lady Alwyn did pay for my mail coach ticket, I will give her that.”

“To make certain she got you as far away as possible. Did she pay for your food and shelter on your journey?”

“No, she did not care if I died of starvation or exposure to the elements along the way. I expect she hoped I would. My father had a few friends in London, so the kindly coachman offered to drop me off at the home of one of them. Do you know Lord Stockwell? He is chairman of one of the London banks. A very good man with a lovely family. They took me in and secured this position for me.”

“What will you do if my aunt discharges you?”

Heather’s eyes widened in sudden panic.

*Foolish! Foolish!*

Why had she confided in this dangerous man?

“Your Grace, have I offended her in any way? Is this why you are here, talking to me now? Or have I offended you?” Yes, of course she had riled him with her loose mouth and ridiculous need to spout unwanted opinions. “Do you... Does she intend to—”

“No, Miss Alwyn.” He sat up and opened his eyes to stare at her. “Calm yourself. Your position is secure. I did not mean to frighten you. It was merely idle curiosity on my part. Forgive me if my question alarmed you. I phrased it badly.”

She placed a hand over her racing heart. “No, I’m sure I overreacted. It has been a year since my father’s death, and I am still not used to being on my own. In truth, it terrifies me.”

Oh, why had she just blurted that?

Why would he care anything for her feelings?

Indeed, he appeared decidedly uncomfortable by her admission. His shoulder muscles flexed as he reached up to rub the back of his neck. “Miss Alwyn...”

“Yes, Your Grace?” Heather waited for him to continue and was disappointed when he said nothing more.

He rose and held out his hand to help her up. “I want you to come to me if ever you are in need of assistance.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Come to you?”

“Yes. Are you not in need of a protector? Allow me to take on that role. I want your promise on it.”

“My promise?”

His dark eyes once again pierced her soul.

What did this handsome brute of a man want with her? Certainly nothing respectable, for she knew of his reputation. He was not a rakehell in the strictest sense, not one to spend his nights drinking and gambling. In truth, he was not known to drink, and his aunt had bragged he never lost a wager, although he was not much of a betting man, either.

However, he was known to go about Town with the most beautiful ladies, some of them respectable *ton* diamonds. But usually, his nights were filled with less respectable ladies of the *demi-monde*. Was this what he had in mind for her?

Protector?

He would protect her straight to ruin. “Um...thank you for the generous offer. Your Grace, I must go.”

He did not prevent her from darting away, but she felt the heat of his gaze on her as she hurried toward the house.

“Heather, you fool.” She had let down her guard, and this was what it led to. She broke into a run, desperate to get away from him now that she realized his intentions.

Protector, indeed.

He meant to take her on as his mistress.

Was this not what all depraved men, such as he and her father's cousin, Sir Thomas Alwyn, did?

Why else would he insist on her coming to him?

But a more distressing thought crossed her mind, for she was not immune to his considerable charms. Her body still tingled from his touch.

*Those hands.*

Masculine, rough, and at the same time exquisitely gentle.

*Come to me if ever you are in need.*

Would she refuse his offer?



## Chapter Three

RUARKE KNEW HE had badly botched his encounter with Miss Alwyn yesterday, and now he could not draw near her without her flinching or finding an excuse to skitter away.

*Blast the girl.*

But he was as much to blame for phrasing his intentions awkwardly and making her believe he wanted to have his wicked way with her.

Well, the thought of having her in his bed had crossed his mind. But that pleasure would remain firmly in his fantasies and nothing more.

He might look like a frightening beast to the girl, but he would not hurt her for the world. In truth, he was worried for her safety.

She had seen the ghost.

Perhaps he should have told her then and there, but how did one start such a conversation when they had never spoken to each other before? *Ah, by the way, Miss Alwyn, that girl you saw by the Singing Caves does not exist. So, keep away from her because she is a phantasm who will lure you to your death the moment you draw near those caves.*

That would have been interesting.

No, he could not tell her about the ghost.

Forbidding her to go near those caves ought to be enough.

Still, he needed to watch her and protect her.

It troubled him that she had seemed to be under the enchantment of the Singing Caves when he came upon her by the cliffs. She had taken forever to notice him, and might

never have been aware of his presence had he not broken the silence.

*Enchantment.*

The term suited the girl, for she was beautiful. A quiet beauty, not the sort to make a grand entrance and dazzle everyone. But for him, her impact was more potent. The sight of her yesterday, her dark gold locks drawn back in a fat braid down her back, and her big eyes, as green as meadow grass, looking back at him, remained vivid in his mind.

Legend had it the caves were haunted by a young girl of about seventeen years who had dark gold hair and green eyes. Was she somehow connected to Miss Alwyn? Perhaps this was why he had been so disturbed by the sight of her standing by the cliff's edge.

He needed to learn more about his aunt's companion, but this would require their spending time together. That could not happen while everyone's attention was upon him. Still, he was determined to find a way to be alone with her. He had no intention of waiting until next Wednesday afternoon to approach her.

"Miss Alwyn, get up and fetch me another sherry," his aunt commanded, purposely sending her away as Ruarke strode toward them. "Go on! Move along, girl."

The evening's festivities were about to begin.

They were in the parlor, the men now joining the ladies after having imbibed their after-supper brandies and engaged in a hearty political debate. As the night wore on, they were to be regaled by an opera singer and afterward would organize into pairs to play cards.

"A moment, Miss Alwyn."

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," she said, looking down at her toes in order to avoid meeting his gaze. "Lady Audley requires her sherry."

She scurried past him.

“Lazy girl,” his aunt muttered as he took what had been Miss Alwyn’s seat beside the old crone.

“She isn’t lazy, Aunt Lydia. I’ve seen how attentive she is toward you. She treats you better than you deserve.”

“And how does she treat you, nephew? Quite nicely, I’m sure. Have you got her into your bed yet?”

“I am warning you, Lydia. I will not hear a disparaging remark against her. If you chase Miss Alwyn away as you did your other companions, I will cut you off without a pence and discharge your entire staff. I’ll wager you won’t last a day fending for yourself.”

“How dare you threaten me? We are in company and anyone might overhear your boorish remarks. Do you wish the world to know what a brute you are?”

“Everyone thinks it already.” But he said no more, for he hadn’t approached her to provoke a confrontation. “Tell me what you know about the girl’s father, the former baronet, Sir George Alwyn, and his wife, Lady Alwyn.”

His aunt pointed her nose in the air and gave a disdainful sniff. “I know nothing about them. Why do you care? The man was not a peer. Who knows how he obtained his title? I would not be surprised if it was through his connections in trade. I am sure his wife’s family was no better. What has the conniving girl told you about them? She is one to put on airs.”

He slapped his hands on his thighs and rose with a sigh. “Never mind.”

Why had he bothered with the embittered old crone? She would not understand about the haunted caves or care that Miss Alwyn might be in danger. He was not even certain there was a danger. But he could not dismiss those icy tingles running up his spine when he had spotted her yesterday staring down at those caves.

“That’s right,” his aunt muttered. “Do not waste your time with that one. She should not matter to you. With her parents dead and no family support behind her, she is nothing.”

“You are ever a delight.” He left her side to mingle with his other guests.

“Your Grace!” One of the peahens sidled up to him, smiling coyly and batting her lashes as though to entice him. “Will you partner me at cards after the recital?”

He shook his head. “Alas, I must decline, Lady Sylvia. Urgent business requires my attention, and I am not certain I will be done in time to join my guests for the card games. However, my cousin, Lord Hereford, will be delighted to take my place.”

He called over his amiable cousin and arranged the connection before he strode off to the next peahen and secured an escort for her.

He sensed Miss Alwyn, who had by now returned to his aunt’s side, watching him. He noticed the widening of her eyes and her astonished smile the moment she realized what he was doing. Never in his life had he expected to play the matchmaker. But her earlier words had stung. He was thoughtlessly amusing himself at the expense of these young ladies.

In his own defense, he had not done it on purpose. He was serious about finding a bride. It was time he married. But none of these ladies would do. Yet instead of making his feelings clear, he had given in to conceit and allowed them to continue fawning over him.

It was not well done of him to give them hope where there was none, especially since his own bitter experiences with hurt and hardship ought to have made him more compassionate. To allow others to suffer because of his careless arrogance was unpardonable.

As soon as everyone made their way to the music room for the opera singer’s recital, he withdrew to his study and searched for old books or family ledgers concerning MacArran Grange and its ghost. He found several that looked promising and opened one to read.



But it was not long before there came a light knock at his door.

He rose and strode across the room, prepared to bar entry to any peahen seeking a moment alone with him. If they thought to trick him into a compromising position, they would be the ones to suffer.

His brutish reputation was deserved, for he could be ruthless when necessary.

But there was something in the knock that had his heart beating faster, for he sensed who stood on the other side of the door before he opened it.

*His little elf.*

“Come in, Miss Alwyn.”

He had no qualms about allowing her in.

First of all, she could not trap him into marriage because she had no family to insist on his doing the honorable thing. Nor would he ever surrender to coercion. But this girl did not need to coerce him. If her reputation were ever sullied—a possibility, because his aunt was just the cruel sort of creature to spread such lies—he would not hesitate to marry the girl.

The realization caught him by surprise.

But it should not have been all that surprising to him, for he had sensed she was someone special the moment he set eyes on her the day of her arrival.

He stepped aside to allow her in.

“No, Your Grace.” She shook her head. “I dare not enter.”

“Very well.” He rested a hand on the doorjamb as he took in her appealing smile. “Why are you here?”

“To thank you for what you are doing.”

He arched an eyebrow. “What is it you think I am doing?”

Her smile now reached into her eyes and made them sparkle. “I expected you to ignore my words, but you haven’t.

May I say, your matchmaking skills are excellent. I could not have done a better job of pairing these ladies to their suitable bachelors.”

He responded with a light, rumbling chuckle. “I am glad my schemes have met with your approval.”

“I’m sure my opinion does not matter at all, but I heartily approve. I expect your cousin, Lord Hereford, will also be grateful. He has been trying to catch Lady Sylvia’s eye the entire week without success.”

“He’s a good fellow.”

She nodded. “He seems very nice.”

“Unlike me?” They were both nephews to Lady Audley, a woman who was impossible to tolerate. His cousin came from the poor side of the MacArran family and was a gentle, good-hearted soul. However, he also had the MacArran pride, and for this reason had yet to accept Ruarke’s offers of a loan or other infusion of capital to help him out.

Yes, pride was a trait that ran strong in all MacArran men.

However, his cousin was obviously willing to marry an heiress such as Lady Sylvia to save his holdings. Well, he would be a good husband to that silly lady, and would not come completely empty handed to the marriage, since he had a title and several good parcels of land to offer in exchange for her dowry that would be put toward improving them.

“No one would ever mistake you for nice, Your Grace.” Miss Alwyn cast him an impish smile, her gaze sweet and soft as she looked up at him. “I think it is because you do not dare show anyone this honorable part of you. But I have seen it and wish to thank you again. I had better return to your aunt.”

“Wait.” He caught her by the wrist, careful to keep his grasp gentle. “Before you go, I need to see you again.”

She paled.

What was wrong with him? His usual prowess with women seemed to be failing him with this girl. “Do not work

yourself into a state. I am not going to kiss you, Miss Alwyn. I have no intention of doing anything untoward. But I must learn more about you.”

She glanced at his hand still holding her fast. “Why?”

“To be perfectly honest, I’m not certain yet. Specifically, I wish to know more about your mother’s family. Did she ever reside here?”

“At MacArran Grange? How could she? Has it not been owned by your family for over a century, and much of that time in faded grandeur until you came along and restored it?”

“You seem to know my family history.”

“Your aunt constantly speaks of it. She enjoys flaunting her family connections, and is especially pleased by how magnificently you have improved the family fortunes.”

“But she is not pleased with me at the moment,” he said.

She glanced at her wrist again, for he was still holding on to it. “Because you are paying me too much attention. She has noticed and does not like it.”

“I am interested in you, but not for the reason you and she believe. Do not laugh at me, Miss Alwyn. There is a connection between you and MacArran Grange. It is a palpable bond, as though a string ties you to my home. I cannot shake the feeling that you belong here...or are in some way important to this house. Am I making any sense?”

She stared at him with those big green eyes of hers.

By heaven, she could lure a man to drowning in those emerald pools.

“I do feel it.” She released a breath. “I wanted to tell you, but did not think you would ever believe me. These past two weeks, I thought I was going mad. How can I know this place when I have never been here before? The house. The grounds. The Singing Caves. All of it is so familiar. Even the song of those caves. I was humming it before I had ever heard it.”

“Then my concerns are founded, Miss Alwyn. Do you have any idea why you are having these recollections and how they are significant?”

She shook her head. “No, not at all. It is a puzzle I would like to solve.”

“Let us figure it out together. This is why I want to meet you again. Tomorrow, all right? Do not put me off until next Wednesday. This is too important. You know it is.”

“All right.” She nibbled her lip, once more drawing his attention to the lovely shape of her mouth. “These evening entertainments, much as your aunt enjoys them, will tire her out. She always sleeps in after an active night like this one. We ought to meet in the morning.”

“How about sunrise at the grove of trees where we sat yesterday?”

“Yes, that is perfect. Everyone ought to be abed at that hour. I’ll be there, Your Grace.”

He released her wrist and watched as she hurried back inside the parlor.

He glanced up at the ceiling. “Lord, help me.”

It was an odd request for a man who had lost faith years ago. But something strange was going on. Miss Alwyn had seen the ghost and now admitted the MacArran estate was familiar to her. How was this possible?

*That ghost.*

The smart thing to do was send the girl back to London and never allow her to return. Was this why she could tell him nothing of her mother’s family when he’d asked yesterday? Had her father purposely kept his daughter in the dark?

Was it because of the ghost?

No, it was all too far-fetched.

Besides, he could not bring himself to send her away.

What irony?

He prided himself on being impenetrable, but Miss Alwyn had found a way into his heart with remarkable ease. He could not look at her without feeling her warmth penetrating its darkest recesses.

He did not like to think he was attracted to her beyond a casual interest, but he was. Nor did he wish to consider he might be falling in love with her.

Was he?

He certainly hungered for a taste of her mouth, those beautiful lips that fascinated him to the point of distraction. They were in the shape of a bow...or a heart...or a heart-shaped bow, the bottom one plumper than the top, but both of them perfect for kissing.

He groaned, knowing he would have wicked dreams of her tonight.

Very wicked.

He shook his head, irritated by these wayward thoughts, and then opened the book he had been reading on the history of the MacArran family. Several accounts were written of the infamous Dukes of Arran. He hoped they would reveal information on when the Singing Caves had been given the name. More important, he wanted to know precisely when the haunting of these caves had started.

He knew this ghost had been around for a while, perhaps seventy years or more. Few people ever saw her, but those who did described her as a girl with dark gold hair and green eyes.

Just like Miss Alwyn.

He rested his elbows on the desk and buried his face in his hands. "Heather, my little elf. Are you in danger? If so, how am I to keep you safe?"



## Chapter Four

**R**UARKE GREW FRUSTRATED when he found nothing helpful in this first book on his family's history. If the ghostly creature wanted Miss Alwyn, then how was he to stop it when he knew almost nothing of its origins?

More important, how did one stop a thing that was already dead?

Assuming it meant Miss Alwyn any harm.

He picked up a second book and read on, hoping to learn more. A paragraph, a sentence. Any details about this girl who had drowned so long ago. He knew from local lore that her name was Bella Evans and she had lived around his grandfather's time, perhaps a generation earlier.

"Bella Evans," he muttered, "what led you to the Singing Caves that day?"

Well, he supposed most of the villagers were permitted to come and go along the beach without restriction. This still raised the question, why had poor Bella gone there that day and drowned?

Which led him to another question. Having died, why had she not moved on?

When Ruarke heard the opera singer hit the final notes of her last song, he decided to close his book and return to his guests to partake of the various card games. His game was whist, and he chose to partner his aunt instead of one of the peahens. Since Miss Alwyn was always by his aunt's side, he motioned for one of the footmen to bring a chair for her as well.

"Do not bother about the girl. Who is she to sit with us? Go away, Miss Alwyn," his aunt rudely snapped. "I shall have

you summoned when I need you.”

“Very good, Lady Audley.” Miss Alwyn walked out of the card room, but Ruarke could not see where she went.

“I noticed her eyeing the silver earlier,” Miss Barclay remarked in her smug, nasal whine that always grated. “Better keep vigilant that nothing goes missing, Your Grace.”

This waspish young woman and her maiden aunt made up their foursome at the whist table. “Trump suit is hearts,” he said, ignoring the comment and doing his best to ignore her, too.

This Marriage Mart business brought out the worst in some people. Cynical as he was, even he was surprised by how much bile some of these debutantes spewed. Was this how they sought to tempt him? By maliciously demeaning others?

His own aunt’s laughter was as brittle as a witch’s cackle. “Indeed, Miss Barclay. I have my housekeeper count every piece of my silver nightly. I am certain Miss Alwyn is going to steal it all and run off with a worthless boulder some day.”

By heaven, he was going to have it out with his aunt. She had been difficult and curt with all her former companions, but he had never seen them dealt with in this venomous fashion.

He was to blame.

His aunt sensed he liked Miss Alwyn, and she disapproved.

Who was this old woman to look down on anyone? What had she ever done in all her life but take from him?

Nor were the MacArrans ever known for their piety. They had made their fortune serving as privateers in the more recent centuries, and as Varangian Guards to the Byzantine emperors in medieval times. His ancestors were little more than pirates and mercenary soldiers. Elite, ruthless, and powerful. Not a martyred cleric or wise philosopher among them.

Was it any wonder he looked like a brute?

Or that his aunt behaved like a brute?

The evening dragged on, the rounds of whist seemingly endless.

Ruarke retired late to bed.

Never one to require much sleep, he was alert and eager to start his day as soon as the sun peeked over the horizon come morning.

He washed and dressed, hastily donning a workman's attire consisting of a coarse linen shirt and dark trousers. He was not about to take the time to dress like a gentleman, perfecting the points on an overly starched collar or fashioning an elegant knot in a tie.

He donned a pair of sturdy hunting boots and quietly made his way out of the house.

He hoped Miss Alwyn would follow soon after. In truth, he was worried she might not show up. She could not have gotten much sleep last night. Not only did she have to put his aunt to bed, but she also had to attend to the additional chores, all of them unreasonable, the old crone demanded be done by morning.

As it turned out, he need not have worried about her missing their sunrise rendezvous. She was there ahead of him, seated in wait upon a fallen log in the grove, and smiling as he approached. "Good morning, Your Grace."

"Good morning, Miss Alwyn." He settled beside her. "I hope Lady Audley did not keep you up too late."

"I managed."

He frowned. "This nonsense has gone on far too long. I am the one who supports my aunt's household. I do not expect her to dote on those who serve her, but I will not tolerate abuse. I spoke to her about you last night. I see she retaliated by adding to your woes. Did you get any sleep last night?"

"Yes, Your Grace. The chores were trivial and petty. I will survive them."



“No, I think I must insist on giving you a raise in wages,” he said, partly in jest. In truth, he was the one who supported his aunt’s household and was quite generous in the allowance he provided her monthly to maintain her staff and all her luxuries.

“Raise my...” She looked as though she was about to say something, but quickly clamped her mouth shut instead.

His stomach sank as he realized what else his aunt had done to the girl. “She hasn’t paid you, has she? And you are too afraid to demand your wages.”

Fire raged through him.

“I have a roof over my head and food to fill my stomach. She will never give me a recommendation if I leave her. Without that, I will never secure another position. Please do not say anything. What am I to do if she tosses me out?”

Her cheeks turned the brightest pink.

*Oh, blast.*

She was now reminded of their earlier conversation and his insistence on *protecting* her. “Miss Alwyn, it is time we cleared the air about this mistaken impression you have of me. When I asked for your promise to come to me, I was only offering to help you out. I would never be so crude as to take you on as my mistress. To be clear about this, you will *never* be my mistress.”

She blushed to her roots, but let out the breath she had been holding. “Never?”

He smothered a smile.

Was that a hint of disappointment in her voice?

Ruarke intended to keep that in mind. “I only meant to protect you by securing another respectable position for you should the need ever arise. All you require is a sterling recommendation, and I shall be the one to provide it. Any family would snap you up when presented with a letter from the Duke of Arran.”

She brushed at her eyes as they moistened with tears. “Thank you, Your Grace. You have no idea how much this relieves me.”

“Do not thank me. I ought to have been more vigilant and done something about your treatment sooner. I promise you, it will be addressed this very day. But we are running out of time to discuss this matter of your ties to my home and the Singing Caves. I should have told you when we met yesterday on the cliff and you mentioned the girl on the beach...”

“I saw her there again this morning.”

He frowned. “You went down to the beach?”

“No, merely looked out across it from atop the cliff. Is it not odd that she was there? Does she not have a home?”

“Well...” He raked a hand through his hair. “Miss Alwyn, there is something I must tell you about her. This girl... Gad, you are never going to believe me. This girl... She isn't real. You must have heard about the MacArran ghost who haunts these caves.”

“Yes, but surely...” She jumped up and turned to him with her fists curled at her sides. “Your Grace? What game are you playing? Do you think I cannot tell what a ghost looks like? Some frail, wispy emanation within a cloud of smoke. That girl was healthy and real.”

“That you see her so clearly alarms me all the more. Sit down, Miss Alwyn,” he said with commanding authority. “I do not jest about those caves or the ghost. What did she look like to you? A girl of about seventeen with dark blonde hair she wears in a braid, just as you are wearing yours now? It is said her eyes are green, the color of meadow grass, just like yours. And she wears a plaid frock.”

“My gowns are all in solid colors.” She glanced at the severe, dark green muslin she wore.

“Because you dress like an old woman and not a young girl. Oh, do not be offended. You look lovely. You could wear

rags and still look like an elfin princess. But you must admit, there is nothing stylish about your clothes.”

“I dress for my work. I am not a debutante, merely an old woman’s companion.”

“We are getting off the point.”

She arched a golden eyebrow. “Which is?”

“You resemble the ghost. Gold hair and green eyes. You can see the ghost and hear the song in the Singing Caves. You know my home perhaps better than I do. Why do you think you rattle me so? Do I look like a man who is easily upset?”

“No, Your Grace.”

Since she had ignored his command to sit down, he now rose and put his hands on her shoulders. “Our MacArran Grange ghost is connected to you, Miss Alwyn. I am worried she will hurt you...or that my house will somehow swallow you up. I have noticed you walk toward a wall a time or two as though expecting to find a door there. I have seen you study the fireplace in the parlor as though it is out of place.”

She shook her head. “Not out of place. I think something is hidden behind it.”

“It was an old smuggler’s tunnel that I’ve had blocked off, since it was in danger of caving in.” He sighed. “What else do you see when you look at my house? Has the ghost appeared to you indoors?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? I’ve seen you pause a time or two at the top of the stairs, or stop to stare at a painting. Why?”

Her eyes grew wide. “You noticed all this about me?”

He cast her a mirthless smile. “I have not taken my eyes off you since you appeared on my doorstep two weeks ago.”

She shook her head. “You must have thought I was the ghost invading your beloved home.”

“No, Miss Alwyn. I assure you, I knew you were very real.”

“Oh.” She blushed again as he rubbed his thumbs gently along her shoulders.

He silently admonished himself for embarrassing her, but not even he could deny the spark between them. “Why are you able to see this ghost? Why do you resemble her? Tell me all you know. Everything you *feel*. All of it is important.”

“But I don’t know anything. My father’s estate is—was—in Yorkshire. As far as I know, I have only ever been in the north, and more recently London. I had never been to Cornwall before arriving for your house party...and yet what is happening, Your Grace? Why do I know this place?”

“The logical reason is that you must have come here as a little girl but were too young to remember.”

“In this house? How is it possible?”

“What of your mother? It is likely she grew up around here, perhaps in the village of St. Austell. She might have told you stories of this place. What is her family name? Who were her parents?”

She shook her head. “I have no idea where my mother was born and raised. Even if she did tell me stories, I was too young to recall them. I don’t know who her parents were because my father would never tell me. Our servants might have known, for most were in service before I was born. However, they would never talk to me about her or them. All I ever found out was my mother’s maiden name. It is Evans. Her name was Bella Evans.”

His heart slammed against the wall of his chest. “What?”

“Bella Ev—”

“No, it cannot be.” This was too much of a coincidence to be dismissed.

“Why are you looking at me so oddly?”

“Heather...” He gripped her shoulders tightly. “Miss Alwyn...”

“All I have of my mother is her portrait in the locket I showed you. My father would not even tell me about her as he lay on his deathbed. I don’t know why he deprived me so cruelly. She might have had family in Cornwall, but I shall never learn of them now.”

“She did. Your mother grew up here.”

“Why do you say that? I’m sure we’ll find hundreds of women with the name of Evans in Cornwall, and thousands throughout England. I wouldn’t know where to start looking. My maternal grandfather could have been a peer, or gentry, or a common tradesman. A butcher or a blacksmith, for all I know.”

“The local church will have records. That is the best place for us to start. But I think we must also speak to some of the old folk around here to learn all we can about the origins of this ghost and its connection to your mother.”

“Why are you insisting there is a connection to my mother?”

“Did I not mention the name of our ghost?”

“No.”

He kept his hands on her shoulders to steady her as he said, “Her name is Bella Evans.”

Miss Alwyn’s legs gave way, and she appeared ready to faint. But she recovered quickly, and her gaze was now blistering upon him. “I will never forgive you if this is a jest.”

“No jest,” he insisted. “Ask any of my staff or the village locals. We are not so far from St. Austell. I will take you there myself, if you wish. St. Augustine’s Church is the parish church and also close by. I’ll wager we find the birth records for both girls named Bella Evans there. Perhaps death records for both as well.”

She shook her head. “Do you think my mother died here?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll wager my entire estate that she was born here. All I am saying is there are too many coincidences to ignore. Their names, your familiarity with my house. Your resemblance to the ghost who haunts the Singing Caves. Your ability to *see* her.”

“If there is a connection, as you say, then what if the ghost is trying to talk to me? I should go to her and ask our questions.”

“I hope you are not serious, because I am never going to let you near her.” His hands were still on her slight shoulders, so he shook her lightly. “Do you understand me? You are not to go near that apparition.”

“But—”

“No! What if she is the one who harmed your mother? What if she wants to harm you? How am I to protect you from something I cannot see or touch? Miss Alwyn...Heather... please, do not attempt to speak to her.”

“And leave her to rot in those caves for eternity?”

Ruarke saw the pain in her eyes, but he would not relent. “Yes, if it means protecting you.”

“Your Grace, it isn’t fair. This poor girl must be suffering.”

“Suffering? Or thriving on her murderous anger?”

“She is a child!”

“She *was* a girl of seventeen, hardly a child. She is dead now. We do not know what she is in her ghostly form. I will send you from MacArran Grange before I ever allow you near her.”

Her throat bobbed. “You would send me away?”

“Do you think I want to?” He bent his head to hers, aching to kiss her beautiful, soft mouth.

“Please don’t send me away,” she said in a fragile whisper.

“Heather,” he said with wrenching agony, and drew her splendid body against his big, brutish one.

This girl shattered his soul.

Why her?

He dared not free his heart to love her.

And yet it was probably too late.

What if he could not protect her from the unknown?

“Oh, Heather,” he said, kissing her full on the mouth with scorching heat.



## Chapter Five

*IS THIS HOW kisses feel when one is in love?*

Heather knew she had fallen in love with the Duke of Arran. How could she possibly deny it after that kiss? She knew he hadn't meant to do it, for he drew away with a horrified look. Well, not really horrified.

Confused?

"Miss Alwyn, I don't know what to say. I did not mean for this to happen." He raked a hand through his hair, then sighed and gave her cheek a gentle caress, his knuckles as light as a feather against her skin. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I have just been kissed by a handsome duke. Wouldn't any girl be all right after that?"

"You are not just any girl." His voice was rough and raspy as he spoke. "We had better return to the house before anyone notices us missing. I doubt any of my guests will be awake yet, but their maids or valets might be."

"Yes, I see," she remarked as he led her toward the kitchen entrance where she might slip in unobserved. She expected he would then stride in through the front entrance, for this was his home, after all. Still, caution was required. "One of us should go in first, and then the other can follow after a few minutes."

"You first. I think I shall ride straight over to the village church and inspect their records. Births, deaths, marriages."

"What should I do in the meantime? I want to help."

"My ogre of an aunt will keep you too busy to do more than tend to her whims. But it would be helpful to make note of anything that feels wrong with the house. A door out of place. A secret passage, perhaps?"



“Like the smuggler’s tunnel you mentioned?”

“Yes, write all of it down. I prefer to leave nothing to chance.”

“I’ll make a list for you this very morning. There is a painting...” She shook her head, wanting to shake loose a memory that remained stubbornly out of her grasp. “Never mind. Perhaps I will look at it again while you are gone. Something about it feels important.”

He nodded. “I won’t be long.”

She stood by the kitchen door and watched the duke lead his magnificent stallion from the stable and ride off. As soon as he was out of sight, she left the house, intending to make her way back to the beach, since it was early yet and she would have hours before his aunt awoke to write her list. He would be angry, but she wasn’t really disobeying him.

She would keep away from the caves, just as she had promised him.

But the beach was another matter. If she and the ghost were related, would it not be helpful to seek her out there and question her?

The duke was being overly protective. He feared this ghost.

Heather did not.

All was quiet, not even a birdsong to be heard as she hurried past the grove of trees where they had been sitting a short while ago. She arrived at the cliff steps and paused to look up and down the beach. The Singing Caves were hardly visible in the distance. A mist hung over them, stubbornly lingering upon the rocks despite the sun burning down with all its heat and clearing off the rest of the beach and water.

Heather scampered down the stairs and hopped onto the soft sand. The tide was out, but she had not paid close attention to its rhythms and did not know when it would roll back in.

Well, it did not matter. She was not going to stay long, and the beach was safe even at high tide.

“Bella! Where are you?”

She did not wander far from the cliff steps, not only because she wished to keep a safe distance from the caves. Her reason was practical, for she could not afford to ruin her walking boots if caught by an errant wave.

“Bella!”

Silence.

The mist continued to hover over the patchwork of caves. In the next moment, several of its smoky tendrils began to swirl. “Bella? Is that you?”

A girl with golden hair and a plaid frock emerged and began skipping toward her. “Did you come to see me?”

*Dear heaven.*

Heather stared into green eyes reminiscent of her own. “I would like to talk to you. Will you sit beside me on the sand?”

Bella nodded and did a somersault before settling close. “No one ever plays with me anymore.”

“Who were you playing with when you...” Heather did not want to be the one to tell the girl she was dead. “Who was with you when you last went into these caves?”

Bella shrugged. “My sister. But then my head hurt so badly, and I couldn’t get up to find her.”

It was disconcerting to hear her speak.

“What is your sister’s name, Bella?”

“She played a mean trick on me and hurt me,” she said, now frowning and breathing heavily as she began to seethe.

Heather said nothing for the stretch of a minute, but shivers ran through her as the girl only seemed to grow angrier. “How exactly did she hurt you, Bella?”

By hitting her over the head? Leaving her to drown? Was this the mean trick Bella spoke of? But who would do such a thing to one's own sister?

"Do you want to see my pretty locket?" Bella said, her anger suddenly disappearing as though it was nothing more than a wisp.

Heather nodded. "Yes, are you wearing it?"

Bella shook her head. "It is my treasure, and I keep it in the Singing Caves."

"Will you bring it out to show me?"

The girl shook her head again. "Give me your hand and I'll take you to it."

"I cannot." Heather drew her hand back when Bella suddenly reached for it.

Perhaps coming here had not been too clever. The girl was getting upset again, this time at her. Heather quickly sought to mollify her before she threw a tantrum. "Bella, please understand. I am not allowed in the caves or anywhere near them."

"But that is where I always met *him*."

"Him? In the cave?" Whom had she met? A sweetheart? Did he have any involvement in her death? "Was he a boy, Bella? Or older? A man? Was he the one with you when you hurt your head?"

"No! James loves me. He gave me the locket. I told you! It was my sister, Millicent."

There, she had accused her sister again.

But it still seemed implausible to Heather that one sibling could ever hurt another. No, she wanted to know more about this secret sweetheart of Bella's. "Dear...tell me more about this boy who gave you the locket. You said his name was James?"

“His father did not want us to be together.” Bella smiled slyly and put a finger to her lips as though about to reveal a secret. “Shh, don’t tell anyone. Come into my cave and I’ll show you. James put his portrait inside my locket so I could look upon him whenever I wished.”

“Oh, I would love to see it. But Bella, I’ve told you I cannot go into the caves. The Duke of Arran has forbidden it, and I dare not disobey him.”

“The duke is a mean old ogre!” She tried to take Heather’s hand again. “He doesn’t want his son to see me.”

“You met his son in secret? James is his son and the one who gave you the pretty locket?”

She nodded. “The old duke doesn’t have to know. You won’t tell him about us, will you?”

“He will never hear it from me,” Heather assured her.

“Oh. Oh dear.”

“What’s wrong, Bella?”

The girl put a hand to her throat and then began to sift through the sand as though looking for something. “It’s gone. My locket! *She* took it.”

“Who? Your sister? But you told me you had it in the Singing Caves. You told me it was your treasure.”

“It is my treasure! I had it when I went in there. Where did it go?” She let out a keening wail.

Heather’s heart shot into her throat. She wanted to run, but dared not lose this chance with Bella. “Describe it to me. Let me help you find it.”

“It is silver and in the shape of a heart. His portrait is inside. She took it! She took it away from me and laughed about it!” Bella’s eyes began to darken as she stared at Heather. “Did you help her steal it from me?”

“No! I promise, Bella. I would never hurt you.”

“Did you help her?”

*Her eyes.*

They were suddenly as dark as storm clouds, turbulent and unearthly.

“No, Bella. You must believe me.” Heather leaped up, realizing she had overstayed her welcome. “The duke will be looking for me. I have to go.”

Bella tried to pick up a fistful of sand and throw it in Heather’s face, but howled when her hand simply passed through the grains like air. “You are as bad as my sister! You want to hurt me and trick me!”

Heather began to panic. She wanted to run back to the house, but her legs felt as heavy as pillars of granite and she could not move them. What was happening to her? “Bella, are you holding me back? You have to release me.”

“I won’t!”

*Dear heaven.*

“Please, Bella. Do not be angry with me. I am trying to help you. Do you know why you are still here? Do not cry. I will help you find your locket. Is this why you cannot move on, because you are missing your locket?”

Bella nodded, and then scampered to her feet and ran toward the caves.

Heather started to chase after her, suddenly finding herself free to move again. But she took only a few steps before she stopped.

*Dear heaven, what am I doing?*

She needed to run from the Singing Caves, not to them.

They were still surrounded in an eerie mist. She could barely make out Bella standing on the rocks and staring back at her.

Then Bella held out her hand.

Suddenly, Heather felt a jolt course through her body, and it knocked her to the ground. That granite heaviness overtook her again. She no longer had control of her limbs.

She screamed as Bella began to pull her toward the caves, as though she had managed to tie a rope around her waist along with the jolt and was dragging her ever closer.

That rope...that bond...that tie to his house the duke had spoken of.

It was not only to his house but to these caves, as well.

“Bella, stop! I cannot go in there!” She tried to pull back, but how? There was no actual rope to cut in order to break free of Bella’s hold. A wave washed onto shore and soaked the hem of her gown.

The tide was coming in.

A drowning tide.

“Bella, please! You must let me go!”

Her cries caught on the wind and were carried out to sea.

The ghost had first appeared to her as a pretty girl of seventeen. But that pretty girl was no longer present, for in her place stood an angry phantasm whose eyes were as black as onyx.

*Fool! Heather, you fool!*

What had she done?

She stumbled as she was drawn onto the slippery rocks near the caves and scraped her knee. Waves crashed all around her. “Please, stop! Bella, let me go!”

Those jagged rocks also cut her hands as she grabbed at them in desperation.

Her efforts were to no avail. Cold water surrounded her, soaking her gown and boots. Not that any of it mattered now. Bella held a powerful force over her and was about to drag her into one of those caves.

“Bella, please. I will die if you keep me here.”

The girl—or ghost, whatever it was—now tossed back her head and laughed. “Why should I care?”



## Chapter Six

**R**UARKE HAD JUST ridden out of view of MacArran Grange when he was overcome by a feeling of dread. Why had he left Heather behind? Did she not have as much right to search those records? A greater right, if her mother was somehow connected to this ghost.

“Come on, Hadrian. Take me home.” He turned his mount around and spurred the big gray to a gallop. Upon reaching the stable, he tossed the reins to his groom and then strode into the house to find her.

His housekeeper was just coming out of the music room where the opera singer had performed last night. “Mrs. Pool, have you seen Miss Alwyn?”

“No, Your Grace.”

His cousin, Lord Hereford, happened to be walking down the hall on his way to the stable for an early morning ride and heard the question. “Miss Alwyn’s an early riser. I saw her heading down to the beach. I’m surprised she isn’t grabbing every last moment of sleep she can, considering how our aunt keeps her dashing back and forth all day.”

Ruarke’s heart caught in his throat. “How long ago? Recently?”

His cousin nodded. “Could not have been more than five or ten minutes ago.”

Which meant she had gone back as soon as he rode off from MacArran Grange.

Ruarke raked a hand through his hair. “If she returns... If either of you see her, send her to my study and have her wait there for me. She is not to leave for any reason.”



“But Your Grace—”

“No, Mrs. Pool. Not even if Lady Audley screams for her. Assign a maid to attend my aunt today.” He began running as fast as his legs would carry him toward the beach.

He flew down the cliff steps and raced toward the Singing Caves as soon as his boots landed on the soft sand. No one else was on the beach, but he noticed small footprints leading away from the stairs and toward the caves.

Those footprints could only belong to Heather.

Had he not warned her of the dangers?

“Miss Alwyn!” The tide was coming in and would soon flood those caves. A mist hovered over them like an ominous shroud. “Miss Alwyn! Heather!”

The wind blew off the water in a fierce swirl, and waves now pounded the rocks with too much force for his voice to carry above its roar. One of those waves knocked him off balance and soaked him as he climbed onto the rocks toward the caves.

“Miss Alwyn!”

Surely she understood the power of the sea.

“Where are you? Heather! Can you hear me?”

He was about to call again when he heard a frightened cry. “Your Grace! In here!”

*Blessed saints.*

She was trapped in one of those caves. His worst fears realized.

But which one? “Miss Alwyn, keep talking to me!”

More waves, each one more intense and powerful than the first, surrounded him and soaked him with their spume. He had only a minute to find her before those waves filled the caves.

Anyone who could not swim out would drown.

And no one had the strength required to swim out, not even him...not against a crushing wall of water.

He followed the sound of her voice and caught sight of her gold hair and green gown as she fought her way to the entrance. Before he reached her, another wave crashed over the rocks and pushed her back into its dark depths. "Heather!"

He called again, his heart in his throat as he was met with silence. Then he heard a cough and a hoarse sob within the dank hollows. "Over here."

She was obviously exhausted and struggling to claw her way out. Could she hold on until he reached her?

Ruarke felt his legs being pushed out from under him as another wave rushed in and just as quickly rushed out with a forceful undertow. But he held firm, and was almost beside her when another wave hit.

He surged forward and caught her about the waist. But they were now deeper in the cave, and Heather was clinging to a jutting rock for dear life. "Heather, let go of it and put your arms around my neck."

She hesitated, afraid to lose her grip and be forever swept into the cave's dark maw.

"Do it now, Heather."

The sun could not penetrate more than a few steps beyond the mouth of the cave. Even now, as closely as he held her, Ruarke could hardly make out her slender form. If she slipped away from him, he would never find her again.

"Heather, trust me."

She was sobbing and gasping for air.

He was breathing hard himself as he fought against another surging wave. "Don't be afraid."

She was a slender thing, and each wave was now drowning them as it filled the cave and then pulled out with a riptide force.

He lifted Heather higher so that the water did not completely swallow her up.

“You little fool,” he whispered, inhaling a breath as the water rushed out again. “I ordered you to keep away from here.”

She tried to tell him something, but he could not hear a word above the piercing hum now resounding through the cave.

This was the *singing* he had warned her about.

They would talk later, save the rebukes and explanations once they reached safe ground, assuming they made it out alive.

He yanked her away from the jutting rock. “Put your arms around my neck and hold your breath. This next wave will fill the cave, and this time the water will not rush out.”

He kept his arms wrapped around her. She felt soft and supple against him, but he should not have been all that surprised. His body had reacted to her from the moment she stepped down from his aunt’s carriage that first day.

“I’m so sorry, Your Grace. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right, Heather. I am not angry.” Those were his last words before the next wave hit and held them underwater. By some miracle, he caught an ebb current and swam furiously with it so that it pushed them out of the cave and onto the treacherous rocks.

He tried to protect Heather with his big body, his back and shoulders taking a bruising as he slogged his way off the rocks with her safely in his arms. They were alive and able to breathe again, and this was all that mattered.

He ought to have been furious, for she had disobeyed him.

But she was shattered, now in tears and blaming herself.

He tried to calm her as he tumbled safely with her onto the sand and rolled them away from the rocks.

It was not a moment too soon.

Ruarke watched in horror as a monstrous wave rose out of the water and smashed against the rocks. It would have battered them with enough force to crush their bones, had they been caught.

But they were on the beach now, safe upon the warm sand as water harmlessly flooded around them and then swept back out.

In the next moment, a shrill cry filled the air, a sound as sharp as a knife, and capable of shattering eardrums. "Heather, cover your ears!"

*What in blazes is that?*

He had never heard such an anguished wail before, certainly nothing like it ever emanating from the Singing Caves.

It had to be the keening shriek of a raging ghost.

Ruarke wasted no time in carrying Heather to the cliff steps. But he had to set her down by the time they reached the stairs. His lungs were burning so badly, he thought they might burst.

His arms gave out, as did the rest of his body.

"We are done for if she comes after us." He set her down with a grunt and dropped onto the sand beside her, completely spent.

She sat on the bottom step and let the tears stream down her face.

"Stop crying, lass." His voice was little more than a rasp, as he needed several moments to catch his breath.

"How can I?" She took in sobbing gulps of air. "We almost died. It is all my fault."

They were soaked to the teeth, and Heather was shivering.

The pain of a thousand agonies was etched on her face as her gaze met his. “I am so sorry. I never meant—”

“I do not want to hear another *sorry* out of you,” he said with a growl of frustration, still shaken by how close they had come to dying. “Did I not warn you to stay away? Now do you believe those Singing Caves are haunted and dangerous?”

“I always did believe. But I saw her. I saw Bella and spoke to her.”

*Blast the girl.*

“You spoke to a ghost?” His question came out in another low growl.

Her eyes widened. Beautiful eyes of softest green. “Yes. Please, let’s get away from here and I will tell you everything.”

He rolled to his knees and took another moment to rise to his full height. It was a struggle, but Heather was also struggling. He looked down at her pathetic form and brushed back several strands of her hair that were now stuck to her cheeks. “You’re shivering and your lips have turned blue.”

She nodded and rose shakily.

He did not have a jacket to wrap around her, since he’d gone off to the church in the work clothes he had been wearing when meeting her in the grove earlier. But she was still shaking, so he put an arm around her shoulders and held her close. “I know I am sopping wet, but the heat of my body might warm you a little.”

“I don’t deserve your kindness.”

What was he to do about her?

Kindness? He was in love with her, and his heart was aching with the knowledge he had almost lost her.

But he was also furious.

Her shoulders slumped and she lowered her head, about to cry again.

“Blast it, Heather. What is wrong now?”

“How are we to avoid tongues wagging when we walk in looking like two shipwreck victims?”

He did not know and did not care. He could walk into his home stark naked while talking gibberish and all would be overlooked because he was a duke. But Heather’s reputation would be lost, he supposed. Especially with her gown clinging to her every luscious curve.

This girl had a body that could stop a man’s heart...or make it speed up to the point of bursting.

She was slender and delicate, and obviously too drained from her near-death escape to make it up the stairs. They had not climbed more than five steps before she faltered.

“Heather,” he grumbled, and hoisted her over his shoulder as a farmer might hoist a sack of grain. It was not in any way romantic, but his arms were numb and he would drop her if he had to carry her in his arms as though he were a gallant lover.

She ought to be grateful he had her slung over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” She tugged lightly on his hair. “Your Grace, put me down. We’ll be seen by your guests!”

“I am not putting you down,” he muttered, tightening his hold on her. “Of all the stupid, thoughtless—”

“I thought you said you weren’t angry.”

“I lied. We were about to die, and I did not want our last words to each other to be filled with ire and resentment. But we’ve made it out alive. I am so furious with you right now, I want to wring your little elf neck. What were you thinking? Did I not tell you to keep away from the caves? Not five minutes later, you are running toward them.”

“She came to me on the beach! I asked her questions, but we were only seated on the sand. I did not go anywhere near the caves.”

“Then how did you end up in one of them? Were you magically transported?”

“Something like that.” She tugged on his hair again. “Will you put me down? I am not a sack of grain to haul over your shoulder. I would rather not have you talking to my backside.”

“And I would rather not have you soaking wet and almost drowned.” Although he did not mind the soaking-wet part so much, since her body was exquisite. It was the fact she had almost drowned that had him seething. “Why were you at the caves?”

“Bella became angry with me, and...I did not realize ghosts had this power, but she pulled me into them.”

“Pulled you in?”

“Yes, as though she had a rope attached to my soul. Then her eyes turned a horrid shade of black, as dark as obsidian or onyx.”

“For pity’s sake.” He shifted her more securely over his shoulder as she struggled to free herself. “We are both going to fall if you do not stop wriggling, and I shall likely land atop you. I have no wish to squash you.”

“Just let me go.”

“So you can run back to your ghost and ask her more questions?”

“No! I’ve learned my lesson. I dare not go near her again. Besides, I gave you my word.”

“And you expect me to trust it now? Oh, hell. Do not start crying again.”

“I never meant to break my promise.”

“But you did.”

“I know, and I shall be eternally ashamed of it. But I learned something very important. Bella did not go into the caves alone.”

“Heather, do not start—”

“No! Do not cut me off. This is too important. Her sister was with her. I think she hit Bella over the head and left her there to drown. Do we know what happened to the sister? Maybe this is why Bella haunts the Singing Caves, because no one realizes she was there with Bella and got away with murder. I think she stole her necklace, too.”

“Stop talking, will you?”

“Why? Does it not all start to make sense?” She gasped as they neared the house. “What made you turn back? Weren’t you on your way to the church to read the birth and death registers?”

“I had a bad feeling about you, so I rode home. Good thing I did.”

“Did you see Bella? She was in the cave with us.”

Lord, this girl was shooting shivers up his spine. “No, just you.”

“Perhaps you scared her off.”

He set Heather down and took her by the shoulders. “Do you think that apparition is afraid of me? I can assure you, it is not. Do not be fooled by the fact it appears in the form of a pretty girl. It is no longer a corporeal being. It could be anything, a creature merely using poor Bella’s form to lure innocents like you into the Singing Caves. I am worried you do not seem to be nearly as afraid of it as you ought to be.”

“Not afraid? Did I not just describe her shockingly onyx eyes to you?” She made a sound somewhere between a cough and a huff. “I was always afraid. But I ached to know about my mother, whether she and Bella were related. This was more important to me than my fear. There is such an emptiness in my soul, as deep and dark as an abyss. Why would my father not tell me about my mother?”

Ruarke understood the reason. Was there any doubt now? Her father was afraid this ghost would try to claim Heather, as



it had tried years ago and almost succeeded in doing a few minutes ago. It was the only thing that made sense. He wanted to protect the daughter he loved.

The girl Ruarke now loved.

*Blessed saints.*

Was this what he was feeling? Mad, wild, fierce love?

“Your Grace, I am in imminent danger of being seen with you and having my reputation put in tatters.”

“You run no risk of that.” He ignored her little cry of outrage as he hauled her over his shoulder once again to carry her into the house. “I’ll make certain it is put right, should your good name suffer. I’ve told you I will protect you.”

“How? By ruining me and giving me no choice but to become your mistress?”



## Chapter Seven

HEATHER'S HEART ACHED so badly, she could hardly breathe. "Your Grace, you said you would not kiss me, but you did. You said you would never make me your mistress, but... And now you think you can because I let you kiss me, and then kissed you back."

Bella's ghostly laughter began to ring in her ears again, and she could not make it stop. This was tragic, not funny. She did not want to be any man's paramour, not even this one whose skin held the scent of bay spices and whose muscled arms felt like heaven.

She moaned. "I can hear Bella. She is laughing at me."

"Bloody blazes." He strode into the house through the kitchen, putting the scullery maids in a dither as he marched in with Heather tossed over his shoulder, both of them soaking wet. The hour was still early, and there could not have been very many people stirring. "Anyone utters a word about seeing me with Miss Alwyn, and you will *all* be sacked. Understood?"

Heather tried to kick him. What a cruel thing to say to those poor ladies! Was their life of drudgery not misery enough?

He carried her into his study and practically dumped her onto one of the tufted leather chairs before striding to the door to bolt it.

Her eyes widened as, having securely closed them in, he now approached her with a menacing stride. "Your Grace, what are you doing?"

His shirt was pasted to his body, revealing every exquisitely detailed bulge of muscle and sinew. His hair was

slicked back and his expression was as granite-hard as his incredible muscles.

He planted his hands on either side of her chair and leaned in close, his dark eyes blazing. “I am trying to save your life. What do you think I am doing? Must I lock you away to keep you safe?”

“No! That is outrageous. And now everyone will know I am in here with you and believe all manner of sordid activities are going on because you’ve bolted the door.”

“Are you berating me?”

She pursed her lips. Why was he being so stubborn? “I am merely pointing out the obvious. Will you allow me to return to my quarters and change out of my wet gown? You ought to do the same, because the water was cold and you will catch a chill if you are not careful. Besides, I am sure I am ruining the leather on your beautiful chair. Not to mention your big, wet boots tromping on the carpet.”

“You are still berating me.”

“I am showing concern for you. Do you think my heart is not aching because of my mistake? I completely misjudged Bella’s strength and almost got you killed because of it. It is one thing to be stupid and hurt myself, but unforgivable to hurt others. I am truly sorry I ever went down there... Well, not completely sorry. Actually, not sorry at all, despite her almost killing me. I believe she wants my help.”

“She has an odd way of asking for it.” He eased back with a groan. “You are coming with me to the parish church. I dare not let you out of my sight again. *Not ever.* And do not utter another word about your ruination. Most of my guests will still be abed and not thinking of you or wondering if you and I are down to breakfast. I have already arranged for one of my maids to attend my aunt if she happens to wake before we return.”

“You don’t mind having me with you at St. Augustine’s? I do not understand how you can stand to look at me after what

I've done. Well, I am grateful, even if you only want me there because you do not trust me."

"I do trust you, but I haven't calmed down yet over that *thing* who tried to drown you," he said.

"Bella isn't a *thing*. We must find out all we can about her and her sister, and their connection to my mother."

"Run up and change. I'll meet you in the entry hall in a few minutes."

"Your Grace, what about my reputation?" she asked. "I know you don't wish to discuss it, but I cannot be seen leaving with you."

"I've assured you that you won't be seen. Only my cousin is awake, and he will not breathe a word."

"And what of our return? Everyone will talk when we walk in together. It is already a disaster that your scullery maids saw us. And it was very cruel of you to threaten them."

He arched an eyebrow, the gesture making him look handsome and sinister at the same time. "I have no intention of discharging them, if this is what worries you."

"You don't? But they do not know this and must be cowering in fear."

"That's right, as they ought to be. I want them to believe I am serious. How else will they keep silent? It is no one's business what I do or whose company I keep."

"Are you not listening? If I go with you to the church, then everyone will know we have been together. All tongues will wag. Your aunt will give me the boot, and rightfully so. Everyone in Society will hear of it because you are a bachelor duke and they are all fascinated by you."

"Do you think I care?"

"Obviously, you don't. But it is my good name at stake, so I care very much. Women drop at your feet or, more accurately, fall into your bed. All you have to do is nod in their

direction and they come running. This is what they'll think I have done. Who will hire me then? And what good will your recommendation be? They'll all think you gave it because I was your...*you know.*"

He appeared irritatingly calm about the whole thing as he said, "I have a solution for that problem."

"I do not want to hear your solution," she said, truly uncomfortable for the droplets falling on her nose and running down her neck. She hoped the seawater had not permanently ruined her gown and boots, for she could not afford to purchase replacements. "I will not be your mistress."

"I had no such thing in mind."

"Then do you think to fob me off on one of the bachelors at your party as you have done with your peahens? Your matchmaking skills won't work for me because I haven't a shilling to my name, or any worthwhile family connections."

"I know of someone who will take you exactly as you are."

"Then he is an idiot." She frowned, truly weary of this pointless discussion. Yes, she wanted to go to the church with him and explore their records. But she did not think the risk was worth it. She would go on her own next Wednesday on her afternoon off.

What a hideous morning this was turning out to be. What could he possibly say to her to make things better?

He emitted a deliciously soft laugh. "An idiot, is he?"

She nodded. "Utter and complete. Not even *I* would marry me if given the chance."

"Heather, you are priceless," he said with a glint of mirth in his eyes. "Come to church with me."

"And be ruined?"

"Do not be dense." He ran his knuckles lightly along her cheek in an achingly sweet caress. "To arrange for the banns to be read. What if I were the one to marry you?"

She stopped breathing.

Truly, she could not catch a breath. “You would marry me?”

Was *he* real? Or had the ghost taken over his body?

“You don’t believe me. Must I kiss you again?”

She nodded, for one should be able to tell if a cold, dead thing had its lips on yours.

He drew her out of the chair and wrapped his arms around her. “Your Grace, I—”

“Be quiet, Heather.” His beautifully shaped mouth closed over hers with unexpected heat and a possessive hunger.

Her bones turned liquid, which was appropriate, since they were both soaked to the skin. There was something scorching and shocking about their wet bodies pressed together.

*Sweet mercy!*

What was she thinking?

She pushed out of his arms with a sob.

“Oh, my elf princess. Do not doubt that I am offering to marry you. Will you have me, Heather? Will you have me for your husband?”

“Then you are serious?”

He nodded and held his arms out to her. “Upon my oath.”

As his words sank in, every moment of strain and fear since her father’s death suddenly poured out of her. She flung herself in his arms and began to shed tears in earnest. She hadn’t dared cry since the day her father passed and she learned he had left her with nothing.

She still loved her father.

But did she not also have the right to be angry with him for leaving her so abandoned?

The duke kissed her brow. “No more tears, for I have you now, and no one will ever hurt you again.”

She looked up at him, knowing he had to care something for her or he never would have made the offer. But he was also quite honorable and probably blamed himself for being somehow responsible for the ghost. Just because the caves were on his property? How could any of this be his fault? Or was his offer prompted by pity?

“I cannot think when I am around you,” she said in a ragged whisper, no longer caring to know the exact reason. “I cannot breathe. Will you be angry if I tell you that I am in love with you? It cannot come as a surprise, since I doubt there is a woman alive who does not feel this way about you.”

“As long as you are among them,” he said with a chuckle. “I think it is time you called me Ruarke.”

She nodded. “Ruarke...*Ruarke*. I tried so hard to avoid you. I thought you were curt, brooding, arrogant, and I did not want to like you. But my heart had other ideas. It is awful that your every frown or scowl or obnoxious tip of your chin endeared you to me all the more.”

“Heather,” he said with a soft laugh, “I don’t know whether to love *you* all the more or feel insulted.”

She emitted a ragged breath and smiled up at him. “Please, love me. Do you think it is possible someday? For I have lost my heart to you and love you so very much.”

He kissed her softly on the mouth. “Yes, Heather. It is quite possible.”



## Chapter Eight

RUARKE WAS NOT certain how it had come to this. Marriage. Nor did he know how he would feel or how he *should* feel now that the matter was resolved.

He was a betrothed man.

He waited for the moment of dread to hit, the realization he had made a mistake. But it never came. The decision to marry Heather Alwyn turned out to be an easy one for him, as he sensed it would be the moment he had set eyes on her.

There was a softness to the girl, a vulnerability he could so easily have used for his own selfish ends. Instead, all he wanted to do was wrap her in his arms and protect her. Make a life with her. Perhaps find the happiness that had always eluded him.

But first, they had to get rid of the ghost.

He strode downstairs after changing his clothes, and went to wait by the entry hall to meet her. She was already there, staring at the portrait of a former Duke of Arran, his granduncle, James. He watched as she drew out her locket and held it up to his portrait. “What do you see, Heather?”

“Look at the lockets, mine and the one in this painting.”

Ruarke drew in a breath. “This is why it drew your attention. I never noticed what he was holding in his hand. I thought it was a watch fob, but it is her locket.”

“Not Bella’s locket, but one to match it. Bella’s had a portrait of him inside. The one he is holding is open to reveal a portrait of a girl. No doubt it is Bella. But look at my locket. It is the same girl. It is *his* locket.”



She turned to Ruarke in dismay. "I have been wearing it, thinking it held a portrait of my mother. But this is James's Bella. He is the boy she loved... Well, before he inherited the dukedom. She knew him simply as a young man and heir. I have been wearing Bella close to my heart all this time. But what of my mother? And how did I come to possess his locket?"

Ruarke placed an arm around her shoulders. "Perhaps we'll find the answers at the parish church."

He walked her to the stable and helped her into the curriole standing in wait beside it. They rode in silence, each of them lost in their thoughts. It was not long before the spire of St. Augustine's Church came into view.

"We're almost there, Heather." Ruarke flicked the reins to urge the matched grays forward. Within moments, he would be arranging for the banns to be read, and next they would review the parish records.

Heather cast him a hesitant smile when they arrived, and he held out his arms to help her down.

"I am of a mind to obtain the license and simply be done with it," he said. "I mean, be done with the agony of waiting. I have no second thoughts about marrying you."

She shook her head. "I do not understand why you are so sure of me."

"Do you prefer to wait?"

"No, I would marry you today if I could. It is *your* haste that troubles me."

"Stop trying to talk me out of marrying you."

"I'm not. You are my dream come true. Almost too good to be real. Have you considered that our ghost may have cast a spell over you? Think hard before you say anything about posting the banns, Your Grace."

"Ruarke. Call me Ruarke. And no, that *thing* has not cast any love spell over me."

“How can you be certain? Oh, I suppose it is because you are not in love with me. Perhaps a little lustful and overly protective?”

He laughed. “Is this how I appear to you?”

“Your eyes smolder when you look at me, and then there is your rakish smile.” She sighed. “Let’s see what the church records turn up.”

The vicar, an older gentleman by the name of Felix Orman, met them at the door of the church. “Do come in, Your Grace. Ah, and you have a lovely companion with you. Welcome, my dear. To what do we owe the honor?”

“A wedding,” Ruarke said, placing Heather’s arm in his. “Miss Alwyn and I are officially betrothed and would like to have the banns read starting this Sunday.”

“What joyous news! Come into my study and we shall make the arrangements.” Orman waved them on, gesturing for them to follow him through the church. It was a typical house of worship for these parts, not too big, but well maintained, and had beautiful stained-glass windows that cast light of many colors onto the pews. “So, you have decided to marry here?”

Ruarke nodded. “Yes.”

“You do us a great honor. Goodness, how did you manage to keep your courtship quiet? News spreads through our village like wildfire. The gossips certainly got it wrong this time, did they not? We thought your house party was held for the purpose of finding yourself a bride. But you must have had Miss Alwyn in mind all along.” Orman motioned them past the pews and beyond the altar toward a door at the rear. “How else would the betrothal contracts be so quickly put in order? Solicitors are a solemn lot and know how to keep secrets. Well, I suppose it was all taken care of in London.”

“Quite in order. Nothing to be done but marry Miss Alwyn.” Ruarke ignored Heather’s light pinch to his arm. She was irritated with him for making their betrothal seem official

when no contract had been drawn up for her to sign. She would howl when he took her to the bank and opened an account for her.

He intended to deposit a sinful sum, for he refused to have her at anyone's mercy ever again. She was too intelligent and had too much spirit to be chained like an ox to toil for undeserving souls such as his aunt.

"It is also possible I will simply acquire the license and marry Miss Alwyn within the week," he said, smothering a chuckle when she pinched him again. "Will it take long to prepare the license?"

"Assuming we decide not to wait," Heather added with a light frown up at him. "Which has not been decided upon at all."

The vicar looked from one to the other in mild confusion. "I'll ask my wife to serve tea and refreshments, and we shall discuss whatever arrangements you wish to make."

Ruarke turned to Heather once the vicar had rushed off to find his wife.

"Pinch me again, my little elf," he said with a grin, "and I will insist he marry us here and now."

"I knew it." She stared at him with her lovely eyes wide. "You are under a spell."

"I am not, I assure you."

"Then tell me, why are you convinced I am the right woman for you?"

"You have a nurturing heart."

"And?"

"What more need I say?"

"I don't know. Should there not be something more?"

"Not for me." He cupped her face in his hands and gave her a soft kiss on the lips. "Everyone believes I have led a

charmed life, but my early years were brutal and filled with beatings. My father was not a kind man, and my mother was at best indifferent. Lady Audley is my father's sister and cut from the same abusive cloth. Is it any wonder she treats you as she does? I am only glad she has not beaten you."

"I think I would have hit her back if she tried," she said. "That would have been a step too far even for a wretched companion such as myself. But how could your parents do this to you? To hurt a child? Their own child? It is beyond cruel."

"For whatever insane reason, my father believed he was beating strength into me. I made myself a vow never to permit anyone to raise a hand to my children. I promised myself that they would be loved as I never was. I do not need my wife to be a dazzling showpiece who has no compassion or understanding of another's suffering. I want someone who is kind to the core, whose instincts are to help and nurture. Who cannot bring herself to be cruel. I saw those traits in you immediately."

She shook her head and gave a shaky laugh. "You are describing the attributes of an excellent nanny."

"I never desired a single one of my nannies." He cast her a wry smile. "They were all hideous. But you are lovely."

"It does not feel like enough reason to marry me."

"Because you think I can get away with less? Is this all you want? To be my mistress?"

"No!"

"Then why are you trying to talk me out of marrying you?"

"I'm not. I am merely trying to make sense of my good fortune. Oh, I hear the vicar returning."

Ruarke understood her hesitancy.

She needed to hear that he loved her, not a vague promise to love her in the future. But his scars cut deep, and he could not yet admit his feelings. It was enough for now. Let her

believe he was marrying her out of whatever reasons satisfied her.

She would soon understand how deeply he cared for her.

Theirs would be a love match, just as a match between James and Bella would have been had circumstances not prevented it. In this regard, he was much like his granduncle, a man who loved deeply and faithfully. James had never married. Ruarke now understood the reason why.

He had only ever loved Bella.

Upon James's death, the dukedom had passed down through the younger brother's line, Ruarke's grandfather first coming into the title, then his father, and finally himself.

Ruarke acceded to Heather's request and agreed to the banns being read for three Sundays in a row. He knew she was insisting on it for his sake, to give him time to back out if something awful turned up in her family history.

Having completed the marriage arrangements, Ruarke now began asking questions about the ghost.

The vicar blanched. "You've seen her, Miss Alwyn?"

"Yes, on the beach. She was coming out of the Singing Caves. What can you tell us about her?"

"Me?" He mopped his brow. "I am fairly new to the area, assigned here only fifteen years ago. But my curate was born and raised not far from here in the village of St. Austell. Let me find him."

He scurried off again.

"He looked ready to pass out when we mentioned the ghost," Heather remarked.

Ruarke took her hand. "Because he has a healthy fear of it."

They did not have long to wait before the vicar returned with his curate, an elderly man who looked somewhere around fifty or sixty and whose name was Simon Cornwake. The

vicar's wife rolled in the tea cart and offered each of them a cup of tea and raisin cake. "How lovely," Heather said, and smiled at the woman.

Since the vicar's wife appeared to have no intention of leaving them to their privacy, Ruarke decided to let her remain. In fact, she could be helpful to the discussion. Women always knew more about family histories than men did. "When did the ghost first come into being, Mr. Cornwake? Do you know who the girl is exactly? It is common knowledge her name is Bella Evans. But who was her family? Were they of importance in the area? Were any questions raised regarding the manner of her death?"

The curate took a sip of his tea and then set down his cup. "I shall do my best to answer all your questions, Your Grace. Just keep in mind that most of my knowledge is gossip handed down from my grandparents to my parents, and now to me."

Heather squeezed Ruarke's hand. He covered it with his own as the curate began to relate his story.

"My grandmother was only a girl when it happened, but she knew Bella. They were neighbors and schoolmates. According to her, Bella was a lovely child. She never put on airs, even though her father was the local magistrate and quite prominent in the area."

"Bella is also my mother's name," Heather said. "Bella Evans was her maiden name. I think she might have been born here."

"And possibly died here," Ruarke added, putting an arm around her. "We hope your records will tell us all we wish to know. Miss Alwyn's mother might have been named after this very ghost."

"But our ghost also had a sister," Heather added. "Do you know what happened to her?"

"Millicent? She was a half-sister to Bella," Cornwake said. "The magistrate's first wife died several years after giving birth to Millicent. She was their only child. He married Bella's

mother about a year later. Several years after that, Bella was born. They were the magistrate's only children, two girls about six years apart in age."

"What happened to the elder daughter, Mr. Cornwake?" Heather asked.

"Oh, Millicent went on to marry a Barclay. You must know the current Miss Barclay, Your Grace."

Ruarke nodded. "She is attending my house party."

"A most unpleasant young lady," the vicar's wife muttered.

The vicar cast her a warning glance. "My dear! You must not speak unkindly of our parishioners."

"I am only saying what is true."

Ruarke was curious. "Tell me, Mrs. Orman. I expect we hold the same opinion of her, but what has she done to make you think this of her?"

"She is a sneaky thing. Always jealous of others and not above accusing someone of misdeeds if she considers them a rival. I think this trait must run in her family. Her mother is the same way. Just last week she made a fuss about her gloves being stolen when—"

"Please, my dear," the vicar said. "She found them and all is well."

"Millicent was also a sneak, according to my grandmother," Cornwake interjected. "She claimed Millicent was terribly jealous of Bella. After the younger sister died, Millicent was the only child, and her father doted on her. Miss Alwyn, I see you are frowning."

"Is it possible Millicent was with Bella when she drowned? What did your grandmother tell you of that day?"

He shook his head. "She always thought it odd that Bella lost her life in those caves. Bella was an adventurous girl, but understood the tides. Everyone in these parts did, for anyone raised near the sea learns early to respect its power. That's

what always troubled my grandmother. Bella would never have gone to the Singing Caves at high tide. No, Your Grace. My grandmother was adamant about that.”

“Was there an investigation conducted?” Ruarke asked.

“Yes, but nothing ever came of it. An inquest was held, led by the Duke of Arran, your very own great-grandfather, but he determined her death to be accidental. The girl slipped and hit her head, that was the ruling. My grandmother never believed it. She had seen Millicent walking to the beach with Bella that afternoon.”

“Did she report this to the duke?” Heather asked.

“Yes, but Millicent insisted she had returned home and not gone down to the beach or the caves with her sister. There were no witnesses to contradict her statement. It was a sad day for the village. Bella was a beautiful girl with golden curls and sunshine in her smile. She had eyes as green as an Irish meadow. Those are my grandmother’s exact words.” Cornwake paused a moment to stare at Heather. “Miss Alwyn, I could be describing you. Well, there is nothing more to tell.”

“What of the other Bella Evans, Miss Alwyn’s mother?” Ruarke asked.

The curate shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t know anything about her. She could have lived here, but I was sent off to school as a boy, and then continued my studies at Oxford. There are gaps in my knowledge of our little corner of Cornwall.”

“May we look at the registers now?” Heather asked.

The vicar rose. “Yes, of course. Let me bring them in here for you.”

He and the curate piled four massive books upon the vicar’s desk, then left Ruarke and Heather to their reading. It did not take Ruarke long to find the birth record of Heather’s mother, and to his surprise, the record of her marriage to one Sir George Alwyn, baronet. “Heather, here it is. All of it,



including the names of your maternal grandparents, Joseph and Sarah Evans. See, it is right here.”

She put a hand over her heart. “Is there a chance my grandparents are still alive?”

He glanced at the book of death records. “We could spend time searching through that tome, but I think Mrs. Orman is the one to ask.”

He took a moment to step out of the room to call for her. “Mrs. Orman, can you tell us anything about Miss Alwyn’s grandparents, Joseph and Sarah Evans?”

“Oh, indeed. Yes, I can. I had no idea they were related to you. How dense of me not to make the connection. But I never heard either of them speak of a daughter or a granddaughter. I thought they had no children. How odd... Well, they passed on quite a few years ago. It was not too long after we arrived.”

Ruarke took hold of Heather’s hand, knowing how deeply she must be feeling their loss. “It should not be too difficult to learn more of your mother’s ancestry now that we know who her parents were.”

“Why did my father never tell me about them? And why would my grandparents never mention me or my mother to Mrs. Orman?” She furrowed her brow as she continued to look at him. “It feels as though they wanted to hide all connection to me.”

“To protect you, Heather. I’m sure they loved you. But what if you came here as a child and saw the ghost? Or were somehow drawn into the Singing Caves and almost lost your life? It would have frightened them. Look, here...in this entry. Bella and Millicent Evans’ father had a brother. And that brother had a son, who must have been your grandfather, Joseph Evans.”

She looked over his shoulder as he traced through the Evans family history.

“Here’s more, Heather. Your grandfather then had a daughter he named Bella, no doubt in honor of his drowned

cousin. Then Bella married the baronet.” He looked up at her, trying to make sense of it all. “But she must have died in Yorkshire, because her death is not recorded here. Let’s see if we can find anything about you.”

“Was I born here? Does it say?”

“No, you are not in here,” he replied. “Since your father’s estate was in Yorkshire, you were likely born there, just as your mother likely passed there. But it is also possible your mother brought you down here one summer before her death to visit her parents. We’ll have to talk to their neighbors or village elders for confirmation. But I’m sure she must have done so.”

“I would like to see where my grandparents lived. I wonder if it will also appear familiar to me.”

“It might. We will get there soon, I promise. Hopefully, the neighbors will have answers to our questions. We need to find out how old you were at the time, and what did you see that scared your family so badly, they resolved to keep you away from here forever?”

Heather’s lips began to tremble, and Ruarke knew she would soon be in tears. “They took this drastic measure to protect you,” he said. “How deeply they must have loved you. Why else would your grandparents never try to get in touch with you? Why else would your father never speak of them? He was not a cruel man. In fact, you described him as kind.”

She nodded.

“He would not have cut off his own wife’s family without good reason.”

She drew out her locket and stared at it. “How did it come down to me?”

“We may never know, but it is possible my ancestor gave it to your mother because she shared Bella’s name. A token, perhaps as he lay dying.”

“Ruarke, I think I know how to break the haunting,” Heather said. “There are two lockets. One your ancestor kept close to his heart and felt so strongly about that he included it in the painting hanging in your entry hall. That is the locket I now wear, and mistook the girl in it to be my mother. But Bella described another locket to me, the one he had given her that held his portrait.”

“We don’t have that one.”

“Millicent stole it after she struck down Bella.”

“Then it is likely lost to us forever. Who knows what she did with it?” Ruarke mused. “She could have tossed it into the sea, for all we know.”

Heather began to nibble her lip. “What if we need both to free poor Bella? Do you think this is what keeps her bound to the caves? This is where the two of them secretly met. I’ll wager James used to sneak out of the house through that secret tunnel you recently sealed up, so he would not be seen. But Bella now needs to reclaim the locket that contains his portrait. We must discover what happened to it.”

“How? It is an impossible task. We wouldn’t know where to start looking, assuming it hasn’t been discarded or destroyed long since. But those lockets may not be the only way to free Bella. You are an Evans, Heather. I am a MacArran. I think it is significant that an Evans loves a MacArran.”

“Just as those two loved each other in the past? Oh, of course! Do you think our marriage will be enough?”

Ruarke raked a hand through his hair. “It is possible.”

Heather regarded him with loving eyes. “Is this not the most romantic thing ever to happen? We were fated to meet and fall in love, thereby closing the circle.” She inhaled sharply and her eyes grew wide. “Does this mean you are in love with me?”

He smiled. “Seems so, doesn’t it?”



## Chapter Nine

AFTER SEVERAL HOURS of combing through the parish records, Ruarke knew there was no more information to be found in them. He rose and held out a hand to Heather. “We had better return to MacArran Grange or they’ll be sending out a search party for us.”

She nodded. “Your aunt will be screaming for me, no doubt.”

“Let her scream. Your days in service to her are over. I’ll move you into one of my guest quarters. In fact, I ought to put you beside me in the duchess suite of rooms.”

“No.” Her cheeks immediately turned a bright pink. “We are not yet married.”

He sighed. “An oversight I hope to remedy, perhaps as early as tomorrow if you will allow it. I have no intention of waiting the month until the banns are read.”

It was midday by the time they arrived back at the Grange. Ruarke’s guests were milling about the dining room, eager for their next meal. “My apologies for keeping you waiting. Miss Alwyn and I—”

“The indecency!” His aunt barged forward like a bull. “Miss Alwyn, you are discharged. Pack up your things and leave at once.”

“Miss Alwyn, don’t you dare take a step,” Ruarke shot back. “As for you, Aunt Lydia, since when is going to church to arrange for banns to be read indecent?”

“Church? Banns?”

“That’s right. Be quiet, or you shall be the one sent packing. I had hoped to do this more gracefully, but it seems

there is no point. Miss Alwyn and I are betrothed.”

“What?” His cousin chuckled heartily and came forward to embrace him and then Heather. “Well done, Miss Alwyn. I was beginning to despair he would ever marry. Seems love is in the air, and now I might have to follow suit.”

Ruarke grinned. “You are welcome to do so, Hereford. We just left the vicarage. In fact, my curricule remains at the ready should you have a mind to ride over. The vicar will be delighted to accommodate you.”

His cousin turned to grin at a blushing Lady Sylvia. “That is good to know.”

Several guests now came forward to congratulate Ruarke and Heather. Some appeared disappointed, but his aunt’s look was venomous. “Why you scheming little—” She immediately broke off, no doubt realizing Heather would soon be his wife and hold sway over his purse strings. “Well, it is a shock,” she stammered, now reconsidering and hastily attempting to make amends. “Of course, you shall be welcome into our family if this is my nephew’s wish.”

However, Miss Barclay was not so quick to embrace Heather’s good fortune. She stepped forward with a smug expression on her face. “I would not be so quick to welcome her, Lady Audley. You worried she might be a thief, and now I must tell you that my necklace has been stolen.”

Ruarke frowned. “Your necklace?”

“Yes, Your Grace. I saw that it was gone this morning and came looking for you to report it. I noticed Miss Alwyn by my door last night. I had just come up to retire to bed and thought it odd at the time. Now, I must insist her room be searched.”

Heather’s eyes widened. “But I didn’t take it. I would never—”

Ruarke placed a comforting arm around her shoulders. “Hush, my girl. I know you are no thief.” He summoned his housekeeper. “Mrs. Pool, kindly go up to Miss Alwyn’s room and search for an expensive-looking necklace. I am sure you

will find it in an obvious spot. Miss Barclay, would you care to tell me exactly where Mrs. Pool might find it?”

“How would I know?” Miss Barclay asked.

“Because you planted it there. By the time you retired, Miss Alwyn was already in the kitchen attending to the trivial chores my aunt had requested be done last evening. She could not have been anywhere near your bedchamber.”

The spiteful wasp would not back down. “That is an outrageous accusation! I know what I saw!”

“This should be interesting,” Ruarke’s cousin said, following him and Heather into his study along with Miss Barclay and her maiden aunt. Lady Audley followed as well, no doubt considering whose side to take. But since her comfortable style of living was dependent on his good graces, Ruarke expected her to sit quietly and only jump in once the outcome was obvious.

He turned to his other guests and held up a hand to keep them from following him in. “Please help yourself to the lavish repast awaiting you in the dining room. We shall not be long.”

“I insist they stay on and witness Miss Alwyn’s undoing,” Miss Barclay said, her mouth curled in an ugly sneer.

“As you wish.” Ruarke shrugged. “The truth will out.”

Mrs. Pool returned with a locket in hand. “Is this the one? I am so sorry, Miss Alwyn. I know you did not take it. You were downstairs with me all that time. A dozen of His Grace’s servants also saw you with me. You will be cleared of this.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Pool.” Heather emitted a soft cry the moment she saw the necklace in the housekeeper’s outstretched hand, and then turned to Ruarke. “This is the twin of my locket.”

“Hah! Now she is claiming to have one just like it.” Miss Barclay huffed. “But it is mine.”

“Indeed,” her priggish aunt said. “It has been passed down the generations from mother to daughter since Millicent Barclay’s day.”

“Is that so?” Ruarke exchanged a look with Heather. He could not believe what the woman had just said. Did Heather understand the significance?

Now he glanced heavenward, for miracles did happen.

These Barclays were about to prove Millicent guilty of killing her own sister. The locket was identical to Heather’s. Was it possible Millicent had kept it with her all these years? Just the sort of wickedness a mad sister might dream up. Not only to hold on to the necklace, but pass it to her heirs. How better to laugh at everyone, knowing she got away with murder?

But the locket would prove Millicent was at the caves with Bella that day and stole it off her neck after knocking the poor girl unconscious.

“Open it,” he commanded Miss Pool, who still had it in her hand.

Miss Barclay glanced at it uncertainly. “There is nothing inside.”

Ruarke frowned. “Are you certain?”

“Quite. It contains nothing inside.” Her gaze was now brazen and combative as she tried to grab it away.

Ruarke took it instead and held it out of her reach. “Not a portrait of the Duke of Arran’s son? The boy who loved Bella. He gave her a necklace identical to yours, which contained his portrait inside. If yours is empty, as you claim, then you will not mind if I open it and see what is inside.”

“But I do mind.” She tried to snatch it out of his hand again.

He easily held it out of her reach and now tried to open it, but his hands were big and awkward as he fumbled with the delicate clasp.

“Here, let me show you.” Heather took it from him and easily opened it. “Dear heaven,” she said in a breathless whisper, staring at the portrait it revealed.

He turned the full force of his fury on the Barclays. “Nothing inside? Then this one cannot possibly be yours, for it clearly has the portrait of a young man. My own granduncle, James. You dare to bring this locket into my home? This keepsake given to Millicent’s sister by her true love. Bella always wore it. She was wearing it the day she died. That her sister had it and passed it on through your Barclay line only proves she was there with Bella that day at the caves.”

“Your Grace, what are you suggesting?” Miss Barclay’s outrage was now turning to fear as his words began to sink in.

“Was Millicent’s secret carried down through the generations as well? Did you know she was a murderess? That she wore this locket after Bella’s death for her own sick amusement because she hated her sister and had killed her? Get out of my house. Get out and never set foot in here again.”

His words had shocked not only the Barclays, but all of his guests, who had ignored his earlier request to leave them to their private discussion. Apparently, a lavish meal set out for them in the dining room was no temptation when there was a scandal about to erupt. Miss Barclay had foolishly insisted they remain, thinking she was about to humiliate Heather. Instead, she had done herself in. The onlookers were now whispering excitedly among themselves.

“Bella got what she deserved,” Miss Barclay said with a sneer, too full of venom to keep quiet and silently slip away. “She’ll never be free of those caves.”

With that, she and her aunt stormed off to pack their belongings.

“Good riddance,” Ruarke muttered.

Heather’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “They are wrong about Bella being trapped. This locket was never Millicent’s to give away. I shall return it to its rightful owner.”



She withdrew her own locket, a perfect twin to the one in Ruarke's hand, and showed the others who were with them in the room. "This one belonged to my mother. I always thought it was a portrait of her, but it is Bella."

"Merciful heaven," Mrs. Pool muttered.

Heather nodded. "This is what Bella has been waiting for, the return of her locket. But I think I must give her mine as well. Two hearts reunited in love."

"I'll place them in the Singing Caves," Ruarke said. "But Heather, you must stay here. It is too dangerous for you to come with me."

Heather would not hear of it. "Bella won't hurt me now. I know she won't. You have to let me go to her. I must be there. Truly, how else is she to understand what we are doing?"

"No, Heather—"

"Who else can see her or speak to her? You cannot do this properly without me. Besides, I know I cannot come to harm when I have you to protect me."

Ruarke groaned. "You place too much faith in me."

She placed a hand lightly on his arm. "I know I shall always be safe with you."

"Low tide happens this evening, just before suppertime," Ruarke's cousin said.

Ruarke sighed. "Hereford, you always were a font of trivial information, but this time you've proved yourself quite useful."



THE SUN SHONE late into the evening at this time of the year, so there was plenty of light as he and Heather made their way to the Singing Caves.

Heather held both lockets in her hand.

They were not the only ones present, for word had spread throughout the village. It seemed to Ruarke as though all its inhabitants were in attendance. The vicar was there with his wife and his prayer book. The curate was beside them with tears in his eyes.

Ruarke's houseguests also came along, for this would be quite a story to tell when they returned to London.

The vicar led the onlookers in prayer.

Ruarke was never one to pray, but perhaps tonight would change him.

The sky was an array of colors, of pinks and lavenders, as the sun began its descent on the horizon, and the sea sparkled. Ruarke climbed the rocks and held out his hand to help Heather onto them. "Are you sure about this? I can go in alone."

"I have to be with you. I am ready."

He could have ordered her to stay behind with the others, but she was right. He felt it as well. She *needed* to be with him.

He had brought a lantern along, and now lit it. "Here we go. Do not let go of my hand."

They entered the cave where Bella had drowned.

The ground was dank but mostly dry because the tide was out.

Heather took a deep breath. "Bella, we've brought you a gift. It is your missing locket. Your sweetheart had a similar one made for himself that held your portrait. They are both yours now. Take them with you as you cross over. It is time for you to go. James is waiting for you." She set them on a rocky ledge within the cave. "Be happy, Bella."

They waited a moment to see if their ghost would respond, but were met with silence.

Ruarke dared not remain inside any longer, even though there was still time before the tide came in. But he did not like the idea of Heather remaining in the cave another moment. “Let’s go, love.”

He led her back out.

They had just stepped down from the rocks and onto the sand when they heard a trill of laughter.

Heather gasped. “She’s seen the necklaces.”

“Good, now let’s get you away from here,” Ruarke muttered, and they quickly rejoined the onlookers at the other end of the beach.

He handed the lantern off to his cousin and wrapped his arms around Heather. Despite being certain they were doing the right thing, he would not manage a calming breath until Bella was gone.

Heather did not appear concerned and insisted they would soon see a sign. He had no idea what it might be. A dove flying overhead? A flash of light from inside the cave? A ghostly aura floating upward to heaven? Or nothing at all?

What if they were wrong and the return of the lockets did not work?

Heather grabbed hold of his hand and squeezed it. “It is happening.”

He sucked in a breath. “What do you see?”

“They are both on the rocks, waving to us.”

“Both?”

“Yes, Bella and James. He’s come for her. Oh, Ruarke, he waited for her all these years.” She waved back at them and blew Bella a kiss. “He looks so much like you. No wonder she fell in love with him.”

“They are not us, Heather. I fell in love with *you*, not her,” Ruarke said.

She looked at him with her eyes wide and glittering. “You called me *love* before in the cave. And now, are you... I thought... I...”

“You thought I only wanted you because you would make a good nanny?” He kissed the tip of her nose. “You probably would. But I am in love with you, Heather. You claimed my heart the moment I set eyes on you.”

“Love at first sight?” She nodded. “This is how it was for me, too. Why did you not tell me sooner? Oh, I suppose you had to be cautious, considering you are the Duke of Arran and I could have been a scheming fortune hunter.”

“I quickly saw that you were not.”

“Look at that brilliant light,” his cousin called out.

Ruarke turned his gaze heavenward.

Everyone was looking up now to *ooh* and *aah* as a fiery light shot across the darkening sky. “I think we must name it the MacArran-Evans comet,” he said in jest.

Heather cast him an impish grin. “Or the Evans-MacArran comet.”

He laughed. “So it shall be. I understand what they must be feeling. I would wait an eternity for you.”

She looked up at him in wonder. “I would do the same for you.” She nestled in his arms, her back against his chest as they watched the spectacle of light. “I love you, Ruarke.”

He kissed her slender neck. “I love you, my elfin princess. By the way, I am marrying you tomorrow. Do not think to argue, for you shall never win this argument...although you will likely win every other one we shall ever have during our long and, dare I hope, mostly peaceful marriage.”

True to his word, Ruarke obtained the license and they married in St. Augustine’s Church the following morning, each of them vowing to love the other to the end of their days and beyond.

They held true to their vows.

The End

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## **About Meara Platt**

Meara Platt is a *USA Today* bestselling author and an award winning, Amazon UK All-star. Her favorite place in all the world is England's Lake District, which may not come as a surprise, since many of her stories are set in that idyllic landscape, including her award-winning fantasy-romance Dark Gardens series. If you'd like to learn more about the ancient Fae prophecy that is about to unfold in the Dark Gardens series, as well as Meara's lighthearted, international bestselling Regency romances in the Farthingale series and Book of Love series, or her more emotional Braydens series, please visit her website at [www.mearaplatt.com](http://www.mearaplatt.com).



# **Once Upon a Haunted Garden**

Chasity Bowlin



## Chapter One

*August 28th, 1832*

THE LIBRARY AT Rosehaven Manor was awe-inspiring, filled to the brim with leather-bound volumes and priceless artifacts. Miss Louisa Jones's fingers itched to touch them. But, as per her training, she remained seated before the dark and somewhat brooding master of the house, her hands folded primly in her lap and her posture perfect. It was an interview for a position, after all. One that she had gotten entirely on her own, for that matter. She needed to know that she could manage her life without Effie's assistance. Oh, Effie would never withdraw her aid. But it was a matter of pride for Louisa to prove that she could do it without her mentor's influence.

"Your references are most excellent, Miss Jones," Mr. Blackwell mused. He seemed less than pleased about it, strangely.

She felt herself blushing under his regard. From her first sight of him, she'd felt strangely breathless and, while the phrase did not adequately convey her feelings, out of sorts. He was a ridiculously appealing man. His features, on the whole, were not what would be called handsome, and yet he was arresting. His face was all sharp planes and angles with deep obsidian eyes, and his dark hair that waved away from his face in a casual disarray implied he was not bothered by vanity. But then, he didn't need to be. He wasn't the sort who would have to put in very much effort to appeal to women. "Thank you, sir. You are very kind to say so."

He placed the letters back on the inlaid top of the desk. "You will not think me kind for very long, Miss Jones. Despite your excellent references, I'm afraid you have wasted your journey here."

Louisa's polite smile faltered. "I beg your pardon?"

He folded the papers all together, then bundled them back into the small folio before shoving them across the surface of the desk toward her. "I am terribly sorry that you've come all this way. You'll be compensated for your time and expense, and I shall arrange lodging for you at the local inn until transportation back to London can be obtained."

It was much more than simply choosing another candidate, Louisa thought. That was a very decisive dismissal. She had offended him somehow. It was the only possible explanation. But how? They'd barely spoken. "My apologies, Mr. Blackwell. I was under the impression that the position was already mine and this interview was simply a formality."

"I'm afraid my man of affairs, Mr. Hatton, was a bit presumptuous, but alas . . . we would not suit, Miss Jones," he answered firmly.

"Isn't it more important that your aunt and I suit one another?" she demanded. Her tone was no longer polite. There was a decided snap to it. But it couldn't be helped. The sting of humiliation, to be summed up and dismissed without even offering her a chance, was unbearable. Under the circumstances, she found her control of her behavior with such charged emotions quite impressive.

His dark eyebrows lifted with incredulity. "My aunt?"

"Yes. That is why I am here, after all—to be interviewed for the position of companion to your spinster aunt, Miss Mary Blackwell. Isn't it?"

His demeanor shifted instantly. She'd heard people refer to a man's expression as thunderous before, but she didn't believe she'd ever seen anything that actually fit the description so well. He was furious.

The words were bitten out, his jaw clenched tightly. "There appears to be some miscommunication, Miss Jones. I am not seeking a companion for my aunt."

"Then what is the position, Mr. Blackwell?"

He stared at her for a moment without speaking. He'd once more schooled his face into a mask of impassivity, and whatever he was thinking or feeling was simply unknown to her, hidden in the depths of that dark gaze. The silence, however, was grim. At long last, he ground out the words, "My wife, Miss Jones. Mr. Hatton was to find me a suitable candidate for marriage."

Louisa could not have been more shocked. "You cannot possibly be considering seeking a wife in such a fashion!"

"I am," he stated. "I gave Mr. Hatton very specific requirements, and he has chosen to ignore them all."

She didn't flinch. Even if everything inside her recoiled at that slight, she knew better than to allow any outward display of her misery. It wasn't as if she wanted to marry him. He was practically a Bedlamite, it seemed. But rather, his immediate dismissal of her, as if she didn't even warrant consideration, was a reminder of all the many times in her life when those around her found her lacking.

Oblivious, he continued, "Please wait here while I speak to Mr. Hatton and get to the bottom of this." Then he rose from his desk and stormed out.

Alone, Louisa deflated in the chair. Her posture was no longer rigidly straight as befitted the comportment of a graduate of the Darrow School. Instead, she slumped, her shoulders rounding with defeat and her chin dropping to her chest dejectedly. But that only lasted for a moment. She'd be going back to London with her proverbial tail tucked between her legs, but that didn't mean she would simply sulk like a spoiled child because she didn't get her way. Instead, she rose. With no need to worry about the sort of impression she was making, she gave free rein to her curiosity. Getting up, she strode toward the shelves and began to examine the ancient artifacts displayed there. Since she wasn't getting the job, there was no reason to worry about what he might think of her.

One item in particular piqued her interest. It was a bronze dagger. Lifting it, she marveled at the weight of it as she

turned it over and over in her hand. It was a lovely piece, not Roman or Greek, but Norse, she imagined, based on the carvings.

She was just about to replace it on the shelf when she felt it. A mere whisper of wind moving across the back of her neck, ruffling the fine hairs that had slipped from her chignon despite her attempts to tame them.

*A breeze*, her mind insisted. But it was August. And in the wake of that current of air, her skin was ice cold.



“A COMPANION?” DOUGLAS demanded as he paced the drawing room. “That is what you told this poor girl who has traveled so far from her home?”

Mr. Hatton held up his hands in mock supplication. “I could hardly place an advertisement or contact an agency and ask them to send prospective brides to interview for the position of Mrs. Blackwell, could I? And the girl doesn’t have a home. Not really. She’s a graduate of the Darrow School and resides there until such time as she can obtain suitable employment . . . or another proper situation.”

Douglas shoved his hands into his hair in frustration. The young woman currently in his library was a complication he had not counted on. Hatton had been entrusted with a simple task: find a plain woman with no prospects who would happily marry him and after their requisite year as husband and wife, live entirely separate from him. She would be able to content herself with the financial security their arrangement would afford her. Miss Louisa Jones was not the sort to be satisfied with such things. And if he married her, letting her entirely walk away would be an impossibility. Just seeing her as she’d entered the room had created an awareness in him that he knew could only be disastrous.

He’d lived his entire life with caution, with an awareness that when the men of the Blackwell family allowed their emotions to hold sway, only disaster and tragedy would

follow. He could not afford any sort of entanglement, even an honorable one, with a woman who so thoroughly entranced him.

“Hatton, you know why I insisted on a plain and unassuming spinster for a bride! I will not damn some innocent young woman to the terrible fate that so many women meet when they have the misfortune to marry into this family!”

The older man’s face flushed and he looked away, unable to meet Douglas’s gaze. “That is superstitious nonsense, sir. You are not like your uncle. Not at all.”

“Not yet,” Douglas replied. “Not yet. But am I like my grandfather? Or my grandfather before him? It isn’t just my uncle, as you well know! Historically speaking, there is only one way this will play out. I will not wager that young woman’s life on it.”

Hatton shook his head. “You haven’t the time to be choosy. You had one year from the date of your uncle’s death to take a wife or forfeit the fortune. With only a few short weeks remaining, finding another prospective bride will not be easy. In fact, it might well be impossible!”

Douglas paced the length of the drawing room. “There are local women—”

“Who know the history of this family and this place, or think they know it,” Hatton pointed out. “They would never consent.”

Douglas cursed under his breath. It was true enough. Half the people in the village wouldn’t even look at him. Those that would did so with blatant hostility. His options were limited. “Damn it all.”

“She is made of much sterner stuff than you imagine, sir. Miss Jones is no milk and water society miss. That young woman has a spine of forged steel and a character that is just as firm,” Mr. Hatton stated. “Take a chance. It’s your only option, really.”

Douglas watched the older man walk away, victorious in his *fait accompli*. With the weight of the world on his shoulders, he turned and made his way back to his library where Miss Jones was no longer simply waiting patiently. Instead, she was holding an ancient bronze dagger, part of his uncle's extensive collection of antiquities, examining it as though she were the expert curator of a museum rather than a young woman trapped between the serving and upper class.

Her dark auburn hair was pulled back in a severe fashion, though strands of it were fighting her efforts admirably. For a moment, he let himself imagine the texture of it. Like silk, he thought. Like her hairstyle, her drab gray gown was intended to be functional only and not in the least flattering. None of that could disguise her beauty. He fervently prayed that he was not on the cusp of making a terrible mistake.

"Miss Jones, there is a matter of some confusion that must be cleared up prior to our discussing your future here at Rosehaven Manor," he said.

She looked back at him, startled. "I wasn't aware I had a future at Rosehaven Manor, sir. You had made that abundantly clear."

"What I made clear was that you would not be my aunt's companion. That remains true. But the other position, the more permanent one, upon reflection seems to be the best course of action. I realize you came here expecting to be hired as a companion, but I'd very much like to ask you to remain at Rosehaven . . . as my wife."



## Chapter Two

LOUISA NEARLY DROPPED the ancient artifact she held. “You cannot be serious. Only moments ago, you stated—and rather firmly, I might add—that I was not suitable.”

“I have reconsidered my stance, and my opinion has altered significantly,” he replied.

“I will not be made fun of this way!” Louisa could feel her face flaming with indignation. The whole business reminded her of the cruel teasing she’d endured as a young child. Offers of friendship had been extended simply to lure her into a situation where she could be humiliated before everyone. “It’s one thing to have brought me here at great expense and difficulty; it is quite another to laugh at me in the process.”

“I am not making fun of you. I can assure you, Miss Jones, that the offer is very real,” he said. “My intentions are honorable. If you would permit me to explain?”

Reluctantly, Louisa nodded. She didn’t trust herself to respond verbally.

“My uncle, whom I inherited Rosehaven from, died nearly a year ago. I was still with the army then. Between the difficulties in resigning my commission and the lengthy journey home, the year that he allotted for me to find myself a bride has nearly gone. While you are not the sort of young lady I imagined marrying, you are the only one to whom I can be wed in the amount of time I have left—if I fail, all is forfeit. Not the house, because it is entailed, but the fortune with which to sustain it will go to a cousin, who will then have one year to find a bride, and so on . . . until it reaches someone down the line of inheritance that is already married or willing to become so.”



Louisa's eyebrows rose nearly to her hairline. She'd never been so insulted in her life. Given that she'd lived a good portion of her young life either in the rookeries or on the street, that was certainly saying something. "So I'm not what you want, but I'll do?"

He sighed, a sound of frustration and, she could only imagine, disappointment. "I am explaining this all very badly. Had Mr. Hatton been more forthcoming about my reasons, this might have been avoided. I specifically told him to seek a spinster with limited prospects. Someone who would not balk at the sort of arrangement I am offering."

"I am a spinster with limited prospects," she insisted.

"On that point I must beg to differ. No woman, Miss Jones, who looks as you do is ever without prospects."

Louisa blushed furiously under the weight of his regard. He looked at her in a way that she understood, a way that many men had looked at her in her life. But she'd never enjoyed their attentions. With him, it was another matter altogether.

"But what sort of arrangement?"

"We will live here as man and wife, with all that entails, for one year. Long enough to meet the terms of the will. Then we will part and live very separate lives."

Louisa could not imagine any man making such a choice. "Why? Why would you choose such an arrangement?"

He shrugged. "I dislike disorder, Miss Jones. I prefer my life to be regimented, dull, boring, and entirely uneventful. I seek to avoid anything that will spike my temper or even positive feelings. Emotional upheaval is to be avoided at all cost."

*Lies.* At the very minimum, what he'd offered was certainly no better than a half truth. "And you think I would cause you *emotional upheaval*?"

“Not intentionally. The failing lies entirely with me, Miss Jones. I am well aware of how peculiar all of this is. But my time is limited. And while you do not meet the parameters I set forth for Mr. Hatton, I would still offer you this opportunity. It could mean a life without being in servitude to anyone else.”

“But no chance for love or even contentment in marriage,” she pointed out. There was a hint of response. A slight tightening of his jaw that made her wonder if perhaps what he’d described wasn’t what he wanted but what he thought he should have. “What about children?”

“There will be no children. The marriage will be consummated so that no one can challenge its legitimacy, but precautions will be taken.” He didn’t elaborate, and she hadn’t the nerve to ask. So he continued, “In return for your sacrifices, you would have financial security, an elevated position in society, and a kind of independence few married ladies—or unmarried ladies, for that matter—enjoy. I will have a room prepared for you, Miss Jones. You will remain here for the night and you may consider the offer. If you choose to accept it, I will obtain a common license and we shall wed immediately. If you elect to disdain this offer, I will arrange for your transportation back to London and see that you are well compensated for your time.”

He sketched a slight bow, then turned on his heel and left. Once more, she was alone in the library. With the dagger still in her hand, she turned and replaced it carefully on the shelf. On unsteady legs, she returned to the chair she’d occupied before. How she wished she could talk to Effie! Or even Alexandra. The young girl had become a confidant of sorts over the years. Of course, given Alexandra’s obsession with gothic novels, her opinion could hardly be counted. The whole thing sounded remarkably like the plot of one of her fanciful books!

*What am I going to do?* It was insanity to even consider it. But he’d offered her something that she had craved throughout her life. Not simply independence or security—but independence *with* security. To have financial security without

having to work for others was a fantasy for most young women of her class. She could hardly imagine what it would be like to live her life with no threat of being sacked at the whim of a capricious employer. No fighting off unwanted advances. No bowing and scraping in the face of unreasonable demands. She could have her dignity and her pride as well as a roof over her head. And all she'd have to sacrifice was the possibility of things she might never have anyway—or worse, things that never lasted and only led to bitterness and heartache.



## Chapter Three

LOUISA HAD AWAKENED from a fitful sleep. The air was still and thick in her chamber. The curtains at the open window did not flutter at all. And yet her skin was ice cold. The sensation was so similar to what she'd experienced earlier in the library that she knew it could not be simply her imagination.

Alexandra, if she were there, would blame it on a spirit. And perhaps it was, but Louisa wasn't brave enough to call out to it in the dark of night. Instead, she lay there in her bed, willing the sensation to go away. At long last, it did—the cold receded. No. It did not recede. Rather, it moved away from her. It didn't simply dissipate. It moved over her body like a caress.

The shiver that racked her was not born of that cold but of fear. What was it? If it were a spirit, what could it possibly want with her?

The absurdity of it all was too much. "It's not a spirit. Such things are nothing more than fiction," she said aloud, her voice barely more than a whisper. "It's been a trying day with a great deal of . . . *upheaval*. You are overwrought and questioning the decisions you have made."

And she had made her decision, if one could even term it that.

*Married. But not really married. A wife for one year, and then a wife in name only.* She had accepted Mr. Blackwell's proposal and would be his bride—living in his home for one year.

However much she might have weighed it, measured it, and turned it over and over in her mind for dozens of times that day, she was still confounded by it all. Each time, she had come up with the same answer. It was the best opportunity

she'd ever be presented with in her life. And she wasn't about to let a drafty house and an overactive imagination get the better of her.

When she'd come to Kent seeking employment, she'd never imagined that the course of her future might be altered so dramatically. While it wasn't something every girl dreamed of, it was something that a girl such as herself—one who had known the misery of true poverty—could not ignore. Even if it wasn't in the normal way of things, it was still beyond anything she might have imagined for her future. But it wasn't the wealth, the position, or even the very enigmatic man to whom she'd found herself betrothed. Instead it was that indefinable feeling which she sometimes had, an intuition of sorts that led her down the paths she was supposed to go. It was that same feeling she'd had when presented with the option to attend the Darrow School on Effie's charitable nature. She'd known it was the right thing to do instantly. It had been the same with the proposal. Rational arguments aside, she'd heard that voice inside her urging her in that direction.

But now, in the dark hours of the night, alone in the great house save for the servants two floors above and an elderly woman at the opposite end of the corridor, one she had yet to even meet—and her prospective husband, wherever he might be—that certainty wavered. Doubts crept in, along with dozens of questions. Not least of which was why a man who was handsome, well connected, and on the verge of being incredibly wealthy would need to marry a woman with no pedigree and nothing beyond a grasp of etiquette and decorum to recommend her. The nonsense he'd uttered about wanting an orderly life rang hollowly. Men who truly wanted an orderly life got themselves a wife to make it so. To marry and then just eschew it to live like a bachelor—it was nonsensical.

Rolling from her side and onto her back, she stared up at the canopied ceiling of the bed. She was wrestling as much with the decision she had made as with the prospect of informing Effie what she had done. And she was wrestling

with the realities of being married to a man she knew nothing of.

In the end, the mystery of whatever the problem was that required such a drastic solution pricked at her mind in a way that left her decidedly unsettled. Too unsettled to even think of sleep.

Pushing back the sheet, she rose and padded on bare feet to the window. There, she looked out at the garden below. Movement caught her eye, and as she turned her head to see what it was, her breath caught. She blinked, rubbing her eyes to be certain that they were not deceiving her.

A wraith-like mist moved through the garden. Stark white against the darkness, it drifted to and fro, winding around hedges and bushes in a serpentine fashion until it simply vanished. There was no gait. No steps. It appeared to simply float until it vanished beyond the hedgerow where it flanked the lane.

“It is a mere trick of the light,” she whispered to herself. “Nothing more. There are no phantoms here . . . nor anywhere else.” And yet, even as she backed away from the window and retreated to the confines of her bed, she was not fully convinced of that fact. Certainly not as convinced as she ought to have been.

A cold chill snaked over her skin, despite the oppressive heat. And yet it was different from the cold sensation she’d experienced before. This came from within. A warning from her own intuition. It was accompanied by a sense of foreboding. There were ominous goings-on afoot—not ghostly, but ominous—at Rosehaven Manor. What they might mean for her future there was as yet unknown.

“Please let me know if I have made a terrible mistake,” she whispered in nearly silent prayer against her pillow. “Let this not be the first time my intuition leads me astray.”



IT WAS MID-MORNING when he returned. He'd left at first light to make all the necessary arrangements. Now, Douglas bore the common license tucked inside his coat as he led his mount up the graveled drive and toward the hulking shape of Rosehaven Manor. But he hadn't reached the house when he drew up short. There was a lone figure walking along the lane. No phantom, but a flesh and blood woman who was poking and prodding at the bushes with a stick. *His betrothed*. Miss Louisa Jones.

"Did you lose something?" he asked, as he neared her.

She looked back at him, wide eyed. There was a leaf stuck in her hair. "No, I . . . well, I was just admiring the foliage."

*Lie*. That was immediately apparent. Why? And then it simply came to him. Had she heard the stories of the White Lady of Rosehaven? Or had she seen her? "Foliage," he mused. "Or perhaps some remnant of a white gown trapped in the brush?"

Her guilty flush was confirmation. With a heavy sigh, Douglas dismounted and approached her. "Did you see Rosehaven's infamous phantom, Miss Jones?"

"I saw something," she countered. "I do not believe in phantoms."

Her reasonable response was not unexpected, but it was very welcome. It was also not entirely convincing. But Rosehaven was no place for anyone given to hysterics. "Perhaps I can aid you in your search, or answer any questions you may have about what you saw."

"What I *thought* I saw," she stressed. "It was very late, or very early depending upon one's perspective. It was very warm last night, so I moved to the window hoping for a breeze. There was someone walking through the garden and then along the lane here. Wearing white."

"Someone. Not something?"

Her lips firmed into a thin hard line, her expression revealing just how dubious she found that option. "I realize

that many people are given to flights of fancy and succumb to superstitious notions. I am not one of those people, sir.”

“Indeed, I can see that you are not. I would caution you, Miss Jones, about asking too many questions to servants or to those in the village—assuming they would speak with you at all,” he said. “The Blackwell family is not thought very kindly of here. You will find that out soon enough.”

“You make it sound as if they see you as some sort of villain!” she protested.

“Not me, Miss Jones. All the Blackwells, but specifically any who reside at Rosehaven. Our history with the village is not a pleasant one, and they are entitled to view us as such. You will not receive a warm welcome there, I am afraid.”

“My lord, I am the illegitimate child of the disgraced daughter of a baronet. My mother’s family has refused to acknowledge me, and my father’s family is entirely unknown to me. I have not been warmly welcomed anywhere. I daresay that I will survive their snubs,” she answered.

Her tone was matter-of-fact, her delivery of that sad statement revealing the pragmatism that was likely responsible for her decision to agree to his proposal. “Yet you have thrived, Miss Jones. Where most would have crumbled, you have risen above your humble origins.”

“They are less than humble. Some would even call them ignoble,” she pointed out. “Most people in the upper classes tend to frown upon those in the lower classes rising above anything.”

It wasn’t an accusation, but simply an observation. And it was an observation he could not refute. “Perhaps my years in the army, seeing more of the world than simply what exists here, has given me a more egalitarian view of things.”

“Perhaps it has,” she mused. “So who is this phantom people speak of?”

“Her name is unknown,” he replied. “But for the last century, there have been tales of her wandering the grounds



here and even being seen in the village. The White Lady of Rosehaven is presumed to be the tragic love of one of my ancestors . . . a woman who paid the ultimate price for loving unwisely.”

“Or the guise of a phantom affords young women an opportunity to sneak about at night without anyone being the wiser,” she countered.

A smile tugged at Douglas’s lips. “You are very suspicious of your own sex.”

“I’ve lived in a school with other girls for the past decade. I know precisely how sneaky we can be. I also know we have no choice but to be sneaky because so many limitations are placed on us by society,” she pointed out. “Such ruses are not unheard of.”

“No, they are not. But do not be so certain it’s a ruse that you blind yourself to the dangers it might present. Many think that seeing her is a harbinger of tragedy to come,” he warned. “And on that note, I have the license. I’ve spoken with the vicar at the local church, and he’s agreed to perform the ceremony tomorrow morning at nine. Mr. Hatton and the vicar’s wife will act as witnesses. If you have no objections, of course?”

“No. I have no objections.”

Douglas nodded. “Mr. Hatton will meet with you later today to discuss the terms of our arrangement and the support that will be afforded to you once you leave Rosehaven.” And imagining that she would leave Rosehaven in a year, that for an entire year, he would face the temptation of her daily—both of those things were a source of unease. “I shall see you at dinner, Miss Jones. Do not wander too far. The ground is uneven, and the rain has left pockets of mud that are quite treacherous.”



LOUISA WATCHED HIM walk away, leaving her standing in the middle of the lane. Alone. And as puzzled as ever. This man

who was to be her husband was a mystery to her—a puzzle that demanded solving.

“My own curiosity will be the very death of me,” she murmured. But even as she continued her exploration of the gardens and the surrounding grounds, she was mindful of his warning.

When she reached the back of the house, where the formal and decorative gardens gave way to the more functional herb and vegetable gardens of the kitchens, she caught sight of a maid sneaking a rest. Leaning against the side of the house, well away from the windows and the prying eyes of a strict housekeeper or cook, the girl’s face paled when she caught sight of Louisa. But Louisa offered a reassuring smile to the young woman. Instantly, the girl’s expression changed. It became closed, guarded—perhaps even hostile.

They all knew, Louisa realized. Everyone in the house would know what sort of marriage she had entered into. *That she was not there to stay.* And that meant she would have little authority there. He, her betrothed, couldn’t possibly understand the dynamics at play. But she’d known there would be problems of that sort. The servants would not respect her. In truth, she wondered if she would still be able to respect herself.

She was one of them—one of the serving class, and she’d dared to rise above her station, but not for any reason so noble as love. It was a mercenary agreement, and they would all know. The next year would be interesting, indeed.

Retreating to the house once more, she made her way to her chamber. She would wait there until her meeting with Mr. Hatton. But eventually, she knew the issue would have to be addressed.



## Chapter Four

“IT’S TOO MUCH. I couldn’t possibly accept such a generous settlement,” Louisa protested. The amount of funds that Mr. Hatton had named was more than she could even imagine. The number was positively astronomical.

“Miss Jones, Mr. Blackwell is aware that you are sacrificing a great deal to enter into this . . . arrangement with him. Trust me when I say that he has considered the settlement he offered very carefully and has reached a more than reasonable figure,” Mr. Hatton offered in a placating tone. “Take the offer, Miss Jones. Accept it. You may renegotiate the terms with Mr. Blackwell at the time you part—if you still feel that you need to do so.”

Need to part or renegotiate? Hatton’s meaning was not clear, and she had the impression that it was intentional. Surely the thin, bespectacled little man was not attempting to play matchmaker! But if he was, if he had some vision of there being a happily ever after for them, he was at least an ally. And she needed one.

“There is one thing, Mr. Hatton . . . the servants.”

“Yes, Miss Jones.”

“This is an unusual marriage, and regardless of any attempts to keep our private business just that, they will know. And they will gossip. Among themselves or with people outside this house. Those sorts of rumors could be quite damning.”

He frowned. “Indeed. You are quite right. I’ve heard veiled statements already.”

“I need to have authority over the household staff. Complete authority so long as I live here.”

Mr. Hatton nodded. "I had not considered that your position here would be complicated by your former status as a . . . a . . ."

"Servant? Yes, while I held an elevated position within the households where I worked, I was still an employee. But those positions are never easy, Mr. Hatton, as you know. You cannot sit with the servants around their dinner table, but you are not always welcome in the family dining room. We are very much trapped between worlds. They will not accept me easily."

Hatton nodded. "Indeed, we are, Miss Jones, and you are quite right. His lordship may not be aware of the difficult position you will be in while residing here, but upon reflection, I can certainly understand it. It might be a situation best handled not by Mr. Blackwell at all but by Miss Mary. You have yet to meet her, but I think it is high time."

In truth, she'd all but forgotten about the doddy aunt. The very reason she had agreed to come to Rosehaven, and the woman had slipped her mind entirely. Louisa flushed. "Certainly, Mr. Hatton."

"No fear, Miss Jones. Show her no fear. She is a bit like an animal. If she senses that she has the upper hand, she will use it."

With that warning echoing in her mind, Mr. Hatton rose and rang the bell pull. Within seconds, a maid entered the room. "Miss Jones wishes an audience with Miss Mary."

The maid's only immediate response was to blink rapidly in shock. Then she composed herself. "I will see when the mistress is available."

"You mistake my meaning, girl," Mr. Hatton stated flatly. "Miss Jones will see Miss Mary. Your task is to inform Miss Mary that she should attend us in the drawing room."

When the maid was gone, Louisa immediately scolded the man. "Mr. Hatton! I cannot believe you would be so high-handed." Of course, he had arranged her presence there

through nothing less than subterfuge and manipulation. Was it truly a surprise? “She will be predisposed to dislike me now.”

“My dear girl, she dislikes everyone,” he warned. “Trust me when I say that it is best to seize the higher ground and to do so immediately. Strategy is vital.”

It was perhaps ten minutes, but no more, when the drawing room door opened once more and an elderly woman entered draped in a gown that was at least three decades out of date. Despite that, it was flattering to her still-slim figure. Her hair might have been blonde in her youth, but it had now turned a perfect snowy white, perhaps aided by powder. She moved with the effortless grace of one much younger. Like a dancer.

Immediately, Louisa thought of the wraith-like figure she’d seen the night before. Was it possible that she had found the very corporeal source of that ghostly vision?

“It is quite impertinent to issue a summons when you are a guest in this house, Miss Jones,” the woman intoned disapprovingly.

She was a bit like Mrs. Wheaton, Louisa realized. The woman had wrapped herself in authority to shield herself from the slings and arrows of others. Mr. Hatton’s words made much more sense to her in that light. “It was also quite impertinent to have a guest under roof for more than a day without bothering to greet them.”

“No quibbling about whether or not you are a guest?” Miss Mary asked. “You came here thinking to be employed and find yourself prepared to take up the role of chatelaine.”

“You are correct. I am not a guest, at all. I am betrothed to your nephew and will become mistress of Rosehaven tomorrow,” Louisa replied. “But I would not have enmity between us. I understand that it is your position. This house has been your domain—”

“For too bloody long,” the woman snapped. “It’s about time someone else saw to the running of this place. It’s

exhausting, Miss Jones. I will be happy to turn those reins over to you.”

Her tone would have shocked some gently bred young lady. But Louisa had grown up in the rookeries, after all, where fishwives shouted and prostitutes called out their wares with equal profanity and enthusiasm. “In that case, I should think you would have been eager to welcome me here.”

Miss Mary’s chin lifted, and she eyed Louisa with something that might have been approval. “Leave us, Hatton. I can’t abide your hovering. I promise not to gobble the girl up. After all, she’ll be easing my burdens significantly.”

When they were alone, Louisa braced herself for what was to come. It could be anything. The woman was impossible to predict. But Miss Mary did not begin castigating her for her impertinence. Instead, she walked over to Louisa and simply picked up her hand. She turned it palm side up and began to examine it with great interest.

“You’ve had an interesting life, Miss Jones,” Miss Mary observed, delicately tracing lines on Louisa’s palm. “This is your life line. For most people, it will fork once. Yours has forked twice. Based on where these forks present along the line, that represents a significant change—once when you were a child and once as an adult. Then it remains strong and steady. What do you think that means?”

“I could not begin to guess, ma’am,” Louisa answered. “I’ve never given much credence to palm reading or any other sort of divination. Being an observant person with a basic understanding of human nature allows those who would call themselves soothsayers to feed people what they want to hear.”

Miss Mary’s head lifted, her chin jutting forward in challenge. “And for those of us who do not care what they want to hear?”

“I meant no offense. But I prefer to put my faith in more rational things,” Louisa insisted.

Miss Mary dropped her hand. “You will humor me, Miss Jones. Come to the table here, by the window.”

Louisa rose, following Miss Mary to the spot she had indicated. From a pocket concealed within the folds of her skirt, the older woman withdrew a deck of cards. Tarot. Louisa had seen them before, used by a fortune teller at a fair. She put no faith in such things, but if humoring Miss Mary would ease her way at Rosehaven, she’d tolerate it.

“Choose three cards,” Miss Mary instructed.

Louisa did as she was bid. Miss Mary spread those cards in a line and then turned over seven more cards, forming a cross with them. For the longest moment, she simply stared at the cards, studying them one by one, then drawing back to take in the full array.

“There is darkness ahead of you,” Miss Mary said, her voice laced with warning. “But not without hope. You have the strength to overcome it . . . but do you have the will?”

It was nonsense. Vague statements that could be interpreted in dozens of ways depending upon what she wanted to believe. Louisa tapped her finger on one of those cards. “What does this card mean?”

Miss Mary smiled much like the cat who’d gotten the cream. “That would be the lovers, Miss Jones.”

If she’d needed proof that Miss Mary’s reading was nonsense, that did it. Mr. Blackwell wanted nothing to do with her, at least not for very long.

“Do you know why Mr. Blackwell wishes to marry me?”

Miss Mary shrugged. “I know why he refused you at first. You are too pretty, Miss Jones, for a man like my nephew to resist.”

“A man like your nephew?”

“One who struggles with his inner nature, one who fights to find balance between passion and reason. You tempt him, and that is what he seeks to avoid at all costs. But time is

running out, and now he has to play the hand that fate—and Mr. Hatton—have dealt him.”

“You are mistaken, madame!”

Miss Mary tapped one long, elegant finger against the card in question. *The Lovers*. “Not I, Miss Jones. I merely relay what the cards tell me. But even when fate sends us down one path, we must choose whether to stay on it or change course. You will find your own way. And perhaps he will too. I will see you at dinner, Miss Jones. And felicitations on your pending nuptials.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Jones—Louisa. I shall call you Louisa. Too much of this Miss Jones and Miss Mary and ma’am business. I will be Aunt Mary to you,” the woman declared. “After tomorrow, of course.”

And with that, she breezed from the drawing room, leaving Louisa shaken. Like one might be in the wake of a powerful storm.





## Chapter Five

IT WAS A shockingly brief and perfunctory service. There was no celebratory breakfast awaiting them when they returned to Rosehaven. In truth, hardly a word was spoken in the carriage on the way home.

Douglas spared a glance at Miss Jones—Mrs. Louisa Blackwell, he corrected—and noted the tension that had settled over her pretty features. He wanted to dispel it, to offer some assurance that they hadn't just made a terrible mistake. But how could he? For him, it had been the right choice. The only choice. But for her, she'd given up any hope of having a family of her own. The twinge of guilt that thought created within him was decidedly uncomfortable.

Of course, stealing glances at her had other unfortunate effects. She was alluring. In a way that was completely effortless, she commanded his attention. How many times during the previous day had he halted what he was doing when thoughts of her and their situation intruded? Countless, he admitted. Proximity only made his growing obsession with her more evident. It also underscored his decision to keep their relationship as brief as his uncle's will would allow. He could not afford to indulge his preoccupation with her. *She could not afford for him to do so.* One year, and he would watch her walk out of his life forever. If he'd endured the hell of various wars for nearly a decade, surely he could achieve that.

Douglas hadn't told her the entire truth. Certainly, he did like an orderly life, and emotional upheaval was something he had worked very hard to avoid. But he hadn't told her why. He hadn't dared to disclose to her the terrible fate that so many women met when they had the misfortune to become entangled with a Blackwell man. Jealous. Possessive. Irrational. Whether it was love or something much darker,

Blackwell men could not be trusted when it came to the safety of the women in their lives.

When the carriage finally drew to a stop, he breathed a sigh of relief. He needed distance between them—a reprieve from his own thoughts. But luck was not on his side. The moment he stepped down from the carriage, he heard the sound of hoofbeats. A lone rider was coming up the drive.

It was all Douglas could do not to curse bitterly. As if, he thought, there weren't enough complications in his life already, his cousin had arrived.

“Ho, Douglas! Felicitations,” Terrence Blackwell called out as he halted his horse. With one graceful motion, he dismounted, his booted feet crunching on the gravel. “I’ve arrived just in time to celebrate your nuptials.”

The words rang hollowly, no doubt as they’d been intended to. His marriage to Louisa meant that Terrence was no longer the contingent heir. Had Douglas failed to meet his late uncle’s conditions in the time allotted, the family fortune would have been Terrence’s for the taking, so long as he managed to get himself married. It could not be coincidence that he had showed up now.

“Terrence,” Douglas acknowledged. “I wasn’t aware you’d planned to visit.”

His cousin’s answering smile did not reach his eyes. His gaze remained cold and sharp. “I wasn’t aware that I had to inform you, cousin. It is the family home, after all. You are merely its caretaker for this generation. Isn’t that how Uncle James stated it in his will?”

It was, and now he was trapped by his uncle’s last wishes. “Of course, Terrence. We will have the servants ready your usual room.”

“And in the meantime, you may introduce me to your charming bride.”

Douglas gritted his teeth. “Of course.” Turning back to the carriage, he caught the worried gaze of his bride. She stared at

him with concern. *As if she knew something was amiss.* Forcing himself to offer a reassuring smile, he offered her his hand and helped her alight from the vehicle. “Louisa, allow me to introduce my cousin, Mr. Terrence Blackwell. Terrence, my wife, Louisa.”

Terrence stepped forward, taking her hand and bowing low over it before pressing a kiss to it. “It is an honor to meet you, Cousin Louisa.”

“Likewise, Mr. Blackwell,” she murmured softly.

Douglas found himself watching her closely, gauging her reaction. Terrence was handsome and charming. He had no qualms about seducing married women. And he didn’t seem overly concerned about the family curse and what it might do to any woman he entangled himself with. But Louisa seemed immune to his charm. She didn’t blush or stammer in his presence. Instead she leveled an assessing stare at him and kept close to Douglas’s side. He should not have been grateful for that, but he was. “Let us adjourn inside and enjoy some refreshment. I do believe a storm is coming in.”



LOUISA TRIED TO contain her shudder. Terrence Blackwell was not a man to be trusted. Based on the tension she could feel emanating from her husband, he was well aware of the fact. What was the source of the enmity between them? Did it have something to do with the inheritance that had prompted their marriage? And, if so, did that mean Terrence also posed a threat to her? She had far more questions than answers, but it had been that way since her arrival at Rosehaven.

Ill at ease, she placed her hand on Douglas’s arm and allowed him to lead her into the house. Douglas. Only the day before, he’d been Mr. Blackwell. The day before that, he’d been a complete stranger. Then Louisa realized she’d have to write to Effie. She would be expecting word, and if she didn’t receive it, the Duchess of Clarendon would descend upon them in her very impressive fury.

The butler, with cool disapproval apparent in his tone, informed them that a meal of cold meats and cheese had been laid in the breakfast room for them. Miss Mary was awaiting them there.

“Did you stay in the village last night?” Douglas asked his cousin.

“No, I’m just down from London this morning. Left at first light and rode hard all the way,” Terrence replied.

*Lies.* Louisa didn’t even need her intuition to know that. His horse had been fresh and rested when he arrived. There was no way that horse had been ridden all the way from London just that morning. A glance at her husband, who was facing away from his cousin, showed that his jaw hardened considerably, tension and anger transforming his features. He knew. He knew that Terrence was lying. But what a thing to lie about. What purpose did it serve?

With her hand still on his arm, Louisa squeezed gently. He glanced over at her, but the look that passed between them was one of understanding.

“Terrence, what in heaven’s name are you doing here?” Aunt Mary asked. “After the last time, I would have thought you too ashamed to show your face here. I certainly would have been.”

Louisa glanced over her shoulder at Terrence. There was an almost imperceptible tightening of his features and a hardness in his gaze, but the cool smile never left his face.

“I’ve always had a quick temper, Aunt Mary,” the man answered. “It was a shock, of course, to discover the terms of Uncle James’s will and how I’d essentially been all but disinherited unless Douglas failed to do as he’d been told. But then, Douglas always does what he is told, doesn’t he?”

There was no disguising the bitterness that infused his words. But then he continued, “Alas, I wouldn’t be here if I could be in London. I’ve gotten into a bit of a bind with one of the gaming halls, scoundrel that I am. I’ll not be able to show

my face in London until the next annuity from the estate is deposited.”

Not a lie, Louisa decided, but most definitely a half truth.

“Well, it is the family home, and to our eternal dismay, you are family,” Aunt Mary conceded.

The animosity between everyone in that room was palpable. It was exhausting. “I find I’m not very hungry, but with the excitement of the day, I am a bit tired. I think I’ll lie down for a bit.”

“Let me show you to your new room,” Douglas offered.

*New room?* She’d be moving into the master suite with her husband. While theirs wasn’t to be a lasting marriage, it was to be a real one for the duration of the year.

“Thank you, I confess to still being a bit lost here,” she replied with a smile that belied her nerves. Then they exited the room, leaving Mary and Terrence to verbally swipe at one another.



## Chapter Six

AS THEY ENTERED the master suite, Douglas was furious. He'd wanted distance between them. He'd wanted to ensure that he was as far from temptation as possible. Yes, their marriage would have been consummated regardless, but they were practically strangers. It had never been his intent to pounce on her the very day of their wedding without the benefit of knowing one another better. But Terrence's arrival had changed everything in an instant. Louisa would no longer be in her chamber down the hall until she was comfortable, but moved into the master suite with him until such time as Terrence left. And given what he'd said about not being able to return to London, that would not be for some time.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I hadn't intended that we should share these chambers . . . yet."

"I'm aware. I'm also very aware of why the plans must change. Your cousin is not to be trusted."

He laughed bitterly. "You have no idea just how true that is. He is dangerous, Louisa. Whatever you do, do not let yourself be caught alone with him."

She laughed, the musical sound slightly tinged with bitterness. "You do not know the full extent of my upbringing, sir."

"Douglas. We are married. Addressing me so formally might raise questions that we do not want to answer."

She nodded. "Douglas. You are quite right. But to allay your fears, I spent the earliest years of my life in St. Giles. My mother and I shared a room with another woman, her husband, and their two children. It was relatively warm and dry, but far from safe. I know only too well when a man has nefarious intentions. You develop a sense for those things after a while."

Douglas couldn't fathom that the delicately pretty creature before him, with her soft features and ivory skin, had not just come from such a place but managed to survive it by her wits. The realities of life in the rookeries—squalid, impoverished, crime- and disease-ridden—were beyond harsh.

“I am sorry you had to go through that,” he offered, uncertain what else to say.

Her lips quirked. “I am not. Everything that I have experienced in life has shaped me into the person I am today. I am rather happy with who I am. Would you alter the course of your past if it meant being someone different from who you are today?”

“I do not know, truthfully. Regardless, we need to discuss our current situation and how it has altered the way we might deal with one another.”

“You wish for me to stay here in the master suite with you,” she surmised. “There are two bedchambers?”

“There are,” he said. “But I do not think that will be sufficient for our plan to work. The servants here have no loyalty to me. I have been away for many, many years. Most of them had never laid eyes upon me until this past year when my uncle died. But Terrence grew up here and lived here off and on for the decade I was with the army. He has their fealty.”

He saw her uncertainty. Her expression shifted almost imperceptibly before she once more schooled it into impassivity. “Then we are to share a bed chamber?”

“Yes. Until he leaves, which may not be for some time. Months, perhaps,” he admitted. “I had thought that we might take our time and get to know one another a bit before we embarked on the more intimate part of our marriage—to give you some distance and privacy as we adjust to this new state.”

“To be perfectly clear, the distance and privacy were entirely your idea. Not mine. I understood when I agreed to the marriage what I was committing myself to.”

It was as if all the air had been sucked from the room. God above! The more he discovered about her, the more fascinating he found her.

She cocked her head to one side, staring at him curiously. “How well must we know one another for it to be enough?”



HE'D STEPPED CLOSER to her with each word, until they stood toe to toe. Staring up into his dark gaze, Louisa felt herself swaying toward him. She'd never been kissed. But growing up as she did, she certainly knew more about it than many young ladies did. And all the nonsense from Alexandra's gothic novels made it sound positively divine. “How well do you normally know the women you take to your bed?”

The moment the question escaped her lips, she wished she could call it back. It was terribly provocative. And bold. So very, very bold.

His lips curved in a smirk. “There is no way to answer that question that does not cast me in a negative light. I think it's best, always, to let the woman in question decide what is well enough. But perhaps there is a small experiment we might try.”

“Oh? And what is that?” she asked. Was that truly her? There was no denying the flirtatious challenge in her voice, but where in heaven's name had it come from?

“A kiss, Louisa. Only a kiss.”

Before she could think of some appropriate response, he'd simply swooped in. His lips covered hers, moving over them in a way that was mesmerizing. For all his seeming indifference to her initially, that kiss was a revelation. It was gentle but insistent. Generous and also demanding. It was not at all what she had thought. She'd certainly seen others kissing and so much more. But she'd never experienced it. She'd never known that it would sweep her away into a haze of pleasure.



When his arms closed about her, pulling her against him, her lips parted in surprise. He swiftly took advantage and deepened the kiss. And Louisa was simply lost to it. All thought fled and she clung to him, ready for whatever might come next.



## Chapter Seven

DOUGLAS PUNCTUATED THAT kiss with a slight nip, his teeth scraping gently over the lushness of her lower lip. The shiver it elicited from her was enough to test his resolve. He wasn't going to bed her. Not yet. Despite the intense desire he felt for her and her apparent willingness, he knew that wasn't quite enough. Louisa, with her sweet and passionate response, was still an innocent. And they had known one another only three days. He was selfish enough to want it, but not self-serving enough to give in to those desires.

Forcing himself to gentle the kiss, to ease it back from the cusp of calamity and to something sweeter, something that was far more about romance than about naked lust. When his breathing had slowed, when the blood that had been racing in his veins returned to its normal pace, he pulled back more still. With a final brush of his lips against hers, he released her.

“That was not how I intended for things to go. I want to be certain that when you invite me to your bed, Louisa, it's because you want me there and not because you feel it is simply what a wife is supposed to do. We have enough things stacked against us in this without adding the weight of obligation.”

She shook her head. “You are mistaken, Douglas. Nothing that has passed between us has been because I felt it was what I ought to do. If I were concerned with that, I would have refused you outright.”

The startled laugh that erupted from him shocked them both. It had been a long while since he had laughed. Certainly, he hadn't since returning to Rosehaven. “Indeed. I suppose you would have. In light of that, Louisa, I would advise you to

rest while you may. I imagine there will not be any sleep for you tonight.”

“Where are you going then?”

All trace of amusement fled. “To find out precisely what Terrence is doing here and what he really wants. Nothing he says can ever be taken at face value.”

With that resolve firm in his mind, he turned and left the room. It was best that she not be present for his confrontation with Terrence. She was a distraction for him, and with his cousin, having all of one’s faculties about was imperative.

He found him in the billiard room. It was where Terrence normally spent the majority of his time while in residence. Or at least, it always had been. It seemed his habits had not changed.

“Cousin, I would have thought you had better things to do today than keep me company,” Terrence said, lifting his gaze from the billiard table even as he took his shot.

Douglas nodded in agreement. “Certainly more enjoyable things, but then there is little that would not be preferable to being in your company. I cannot simply toss you out of this house, not without providing other suitable lodgings for you. Uncle James made that a contingency, didn’t he? Now I must support you regardless of whatever wastrel endeavors you throw yourself into.”

Terrence lined up the next shot. “Unless your marriage is dissolved. Or something happens to either of you before the year is out. . . . What a pity that would be.”

As the billiard ball sailed down its path, Douglas slammed his hand down on the table, sending the shot awry. “Do not threaten her . . . or me. You will regret it, Terrence. I’m not the easy-tempered boy you remember. And I know now what you are capable of. Stay away from Louisa. Hide out here from your creditors as you like, but make no mistake that I will hand you over to them myself if you make too much of a nuisance of yourself.”

Douglas didn't wait for his cousin to reply. Instead, he turned on his heel and walked out. Behind him, he heard the crashing and banging indicative of Terrence's temper tantrum. He didn't smile. There was no satisfaction in it. Terrence was dangerous, but for the time being, his hands were tied. Unless he provided other suitable lodgings for Terrence, he was forced to let him remain at Rosehaven.

"So I'll find him suitable accommodations," he murmured and detoured to the library. He'd have Hatton look into the matter. The man knew the contents of his late uncle's will front to back. If there was a way around it, he would know.



LOUISA HAD RETREATED to a small settee in the sitting room of the master suite. It hadn't been her intent to fall asleep, but the nerves of the day, the restlessness from the night before, and the strange mix of emotions which had resulted from the kiss she'd shared with Douglas that morning had left her overwhelmed. Sleep had been a reprieve from the turmoil.

But she awoke with a shiver. The room around her was freezing. A fact that should have been impossible. It was the tail end of August, after all. Even as dismal as English weather could often be, an icy chill to the air defied all explanation.

Unable to simply shrug it off as her imagination, Louisa did something that would have made Alexandra proud even as she cringed. "What do you want? I know you are here. I can feel your presence!"

The answer came in the form of a loud thump near the door—as if someone had banged on the wall. Louisa was terrified, though she knew it would not be to her benefit to let that be known. So she rose and walked towards the spot where the noise had originated from. No sooner had she reached it than the doorknob rattled. It was a clear indication that she should follow whatever it was to wherever it might lead.

Three times, Louisa thought. Three times, whatever that presence was, it had reached out to her in some way. It had

caused her no harm beyond raising a bit of gooseflesh on her skin. Even as she told herself that, her heart was racing. It beat in her chest like a drum as she opened the door and stepped out into the corridor.

Looking left to right, she waited for some sort of sign. It came with the fluttering of a curtain at the opposite end of the hall. With a mix of false bravado, reluctant courage, and curiosity, she headed in that direction.

It was almost like a child's game, being led about by knocks, bangs and ruffled drapery. Was it the spirit of a child? She dearly hoped not. Perhaps it was the only way the spirit had to communicate with the living. The particulars of how that all worked was something of a mystery to her. No doubt Alexandra would have known instantly.

"I should have paid more attention to those horrid novels," Louisa murmured.

When she'd turned at the end of the corridor into another wing of the house, she simply stopped and waited. This time, it was a plume of dust which led her to a door near the end. Reaching for the handle, she was somewhat surprised when it turned easily beneath her hand. And yet, when she pushed the door, it did not open easily. The wood had swollen with the heat and humidity. She was forced to put her hip against the door and shove with all her might.

When it finally crashed inward, she stumbled into the musty room. The curtains were drawn tightly. Only a small sliver of light managed to penetrate. It was enough that she could see the outline of furniture dropped in holland cloth. Stepping deeper into the room, she narrowly skirted a settee at the foot of the bed to reach the window. Pulling the curtains wide, she secured them and then turned to take a better look.

It was a room very similar to the one she'd been given on her arrival, at least in terms of size. Tugging one of the dusty furniture coverings away, she found rich, rosewood pieces inlaid with delicate patterns. There was something about the

room itself that felt *feminine*. Whomever that room had belonged to had been a woman. Of that much she was certain.

Curious but also compelled, she moved to one of the pieces of furniture hidden beneath its dusty shroud. Tugging the fabric away, she found herself staring at a small writing table. The curious thing was that it appeared to have been left in a state as if the person who had been using it might walk in at any moment. There was a half-written letter lying atop it and a quill dipped in ink that had been dried for years.

Picking up the elegant stationery, Louisa instantly felt uncomfortable. As if it were a terrible violation of privacy . . . because the letter was addressed to her husband.

*My dearest Douglas,*

*I am a horrid creature for hoping this letter does not find you well at all. I hope it finds you in the same agonizing misery that I currently contend with—the loneliness I feel when we are not together. The days without you seem to grow longer each time you return to university.*

*When I think of how you urged me to run away with you, to elope, I find myself regretting my refusal. Even though I know it was the right thing to do, that you must finish your education and that we must marry in a respectable manner, I cannot help wishing the days until that may happen had already passed. What I would not give to know that at your next visit home we would be married, instead of merely enjoying another all-too-brief holiday together.*

*Your uncle*

And that was where the letter stopped. No signature. No indication of the author's identity. Only of her expectation that she would one day occupy the position that Louisa currently held as Mrs. Douglas Blackwell.

It wasn't jealousy that she felt. She certainly was not entitled to feel such a thing. But she did feel deceived in some

ways. Should he have told her that he'd been on the cusp of marrying someone else? Someone else who had, if her instincts were correct, met a very tragic end?

“Who are you?” Louisa whispered to the empty room. But it wasn't empty. Not truly. That familiar rush of cold air surrounded her for an instant before receding. As it did, a small compartment beneath the writing desk sprang open—a hidden drawer.

Dropping to her knees, heedless of the dust, she reached into that drawer and brought out a cloth-wrapped bundle. The cloth itself was a lovely cream and blue paisley shawl. Within its folds, she found a small leather-bound book that was obviously a journal and several letters addressed to Miss Caroline Farris. What had become of her? And if it was her, why did her spirit still linger at Rosehaven?

With far more questions than answers circulating in her mind, Louisa elected to take the lot of it with her. Lifting her skirts, she tied the shawl about her waist and created a pocket of sorts. Why she felt the need to conceal those items she did not understand. But if Caroline Farris had felt that they needed to be hidden away, she wasn't going to brandish them about for others to see. She would have answers, and there was only person to ask. It was not her husband.



## Chapter Eight

LOUISA FOUND AUNT Mary in the morning room. She was drinking her tea and staring intently at the cards spread out before her.

“And whose fortune are you telling now?”

Mary shrugged, lifting one elegant shoulder. “No one in particular. I’m simply seeing what the future in this house may hold.”

Louisa stepped deeper into the room. When she reached the table, she looked down at the assortment of cards and felt a shiver race through her. They looked quite ominous. “What is this?”

“The Tower,” Mary replied. “It warns of impending chaos and trouble. There are dark times ahead at Rosehaven, my dear. Secrets,” she added, tapping another card, “hidden agendas, lies. Dark times, indeed.”

“Who was Caroline Farris?”

Louisa couldn’t say who was more startled by the question, Mary or herself. She’d intended to ease her way into that conversation, to subtly and slyly conduct her investigation. Clearly, she had failed. She’d changed her gown to one that gave her actual pockets and now removed the journal tucked inside it. The letters, she had hidden in their rooms. They were intimate in a way that she could not imagine Douglas would wish his aunt to be privy to.

“You’ve been snooping,” Mary finally replied, but there was no censure in her voice.

“Not snooping. I was invited.”

Mary’s eyebrows lifted. “By whom?”



“Caroline Farris,” Louisa replied. “Or whatever remains of her in this house.”

Mary blinked in surprise. “You’ve seen her?”

Louisa took the seat opposite her. “Not exactly. I have . . . felt her presence. Cold spots, drafts, a fluttering curtain. And while I would like to dismiss those as simply the vagaries of an old house, we are in the throes of summer heat. And by following those things, she led me to her room and to that journal. The question I have, is why?”

Mary leaned forward, her voice barely above a whisper. “There are ways to find out. There is a woman I know who claims to have the ability to commune with the spirit world. She is in London. I will write to her . . . but are you prepared for the answers, Louisa?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I must speak with Douglas.”

“He’s gone out,” Mary said. “I saw him riding away earlier this morning. He appeared to be in quite a temper. Likely because of his conversation with Terrence. That boy does certainly know how to get under everyone’s skin.”

“Man. He’s not a boy at all, is he? He’s a man fully grown and should have the corresponding accountability for his actions. To call him a boy is to facilitate his continued immaturity.”

Mary blinked in surprise. Then she laughed. “I like you, Louisa. I do not say that about many people. But I do like you. It’s the rare bird who isn’t afraid to speak her mind so freely. Are you intimidated by anything at all?”

“I haven’t encountered it yet. I’m certain it exists, however. I think I’ll go back upstairs. When Douglas returns, will you tell him I’d like to speak with him?”

With Mary’s nod of agreement, Louisa left the drawing room and made her way back upstairs. Once again, she was left only with more questions. What had happened between Douglas and Terrence to invoke his temper?

As she reached the top of the stairs, she saw the same maid she'd seen once before—the one who'd been loitering outside the kitchen. Once again, she was not working. But this wasn't simply shirking her duties. The girl was giggling in Terrence's arms as he kissed her neck. It was clear that they were well and intimately acquainted with one another.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Terrence pulled himself away from the maid long enough to give her a scathing look, before dismissively adding, “You are a married woman. If it requires explanation, my cousin is more of a prig than I thought.” With that, the two disappeared into one of the many bedrooms along the corridor, their laughter echoing behind them.

Impotently furious, Louisa lifted her chin and made her way back to the master suite. The insolence and utter disregard for propriety was bad enough, but there was something even more disturbing about it. There had been a familiarity between Terrence and the maid, Fanny, who, according to what Louisa had discovered earlier, had only been employed at Rosehaven for a few months. And Terrence, allegedly, hadn't been back to Rosehaven since the reading of James Blackwell's will. So when had there even been an opportunity for them to meet?



IT WAS LATE when Douglas arrived home. His earlier encounter with Terrence had already put him in a foul mood, but his meeting with Hatton had only worsened it. Unless Terrence did something truly diabolical, they were stuck. The will had stated that Terrence could only be denied the right to reside at Rosehaven if he posed a threat to its other inhabitants or until he was no longer the heir apparent to its current owner.

So he might have a child with Louisa, something he had not planned to do at all. Or wait for Terrence to actually bring harm to someone. Those were his options. Neither was acceptable. The first for a variety of reasons and the length of

time that would be required. The second because it was the very thing he hoped to avoid.

Passing the butler in the entryway, he directed, "Have a tray sent up for Mrs. Blackwell and myself. We will dine in our suite tonight."

"Certainly, sir," the elderly man replied with a note of censure in his voice. It was clear that he held Louisa in some disregard.

"Let me make something very clear. My wife will run this household to her satisfaction. If she says a staff member should be fired, they will be fired. If she says she dislikes the way someone is fulfilling their duties, then her word is law, and they will be sent packing. I've tolerated your rudeness and disrespect for long enough. I will not have her tolerate it, as well. And if that is a problem for you, you may collect your severance and leave immediately."

The aged servant ducked his head in his first ever display of deference. "Certainly, sir. I shall be certain that all the staff is made aware of Mrs. Blackwell's authority."

Taking the stairs, Douglas made his way directly to the master suite. When he entered, Louisa was seated at a small table. Spread out before her was a small book and several letters. But she wasn't looking at them. She was looking at him and had clearly been waiting for some time.

It was bad form to abandon one's wife on their wedding day, regardless of the circumstances of their marriage. "I'm sorry. I had to get out for a while. I wasn't fit company for anyone. Discovering that we are likely stuck with Terrence for the duration put me in a foul mood."

"Well, I'm on the verge of making it much worse, I'm afraid. But first, tell me about Caroline Farris."

The last thing he'd expected was to hear that name from Louisa. In truth, he rarely spoke of Caroline to anyone. "She was my uncle's ward. We grew up here together."

“And you were in love,” she said. There was no accusation in her voice. It was merely an observation.

He considered his answer carefully. “I thought I was, but we were very young. So young that I think neither of us was capable of really loving someone. Had she lived, we would have married, and we might have been happy together . . . but I do not know. I’m not certain anyone who is a member of this family is capable of love.”

“How did she die?”

A sigh escaped him. He didn’t talk about Caroline—hadn’t even spoken her name in years. “She had a riding accident. There was nothing she loved better than her horses, and she was the most accomplished equestrienne I have ever seen. But even the most skilled rider can have an accident. She was thrown and struck her head on a stone. When we found her, she was unconscious. And when we brought her home, she lingered in that state for several days, before ultimately passing away.”

“I do not think it was an accident. I think she was murdered . . . and her spirit is lingering here at Rosehaven.”



## Chapter Nine

LOUISA WATCHED HIM react to her statement. Denial, disbelief, anger. She saw all of those things flash by. That they knew one another so little and still she could read him so clearly was both strange and comforting.

At last, he demanded of her, “Why would you say such a thing?”

Louisa took a deep breath and prepared to tell him the strange truth. “All of my life, I’ve had a certain instinctive understanding of when I am in danger . . . and of who is dangerous. I’ve trusted those instincts, and that have never steered me wrong. The first day that I was here, when you left me in the library, I felt this strange chill. The air wasn’t just cold, but it moved and undulated. Surrounding me. And while I was startled, I didn’t feel threatened.”

“That is hardly proof,” he said skeptically.

“It happened again that night in my room, when I saw the figure in white.”

“Then what you saw could not have been Caroline—”

“No,” she concurred. “It was not. What I saw was a living, breathing person with actual form. Of that, I am entirely certain. And I have a suspicion of who that person was. But first, I need to tell you about my encounter with Caroline today.”

That was greeted with stony silence. Then after a moment, a curt nod. It was clear that he was far from convinced. Still, Louisa continued. “I did have a bit of a nap this morning. When I awakened, it was to that same strange cold sensation. The window was open, but it’s terribly hot outside. There is not even a hint of a breeze. And yet that cold air was whirling

about me. And I decided that there must be a reason for it. So I told this spirit to lead me to what it wanted. And it did.”

“How?”

“First was a thump on the wall beside the door. Then the curtains stirred at the end of the hall. I took that turn. Then outside what I assume had been Caroline’s room, a puff of dust came from beneath the door... perfectly silhouetted against the light so that I might see it.”

“Again, that is not proof.”

“No. But of all the rooms in this house for me to wander into, isn’t it strange that the one I discovered was hers? And that while I was in that room, the secret drawer beneath the writing table simply sprang open and revealed all that you see here . . . her journal, the letters that the two of you exchanged.”

“So you think Caroline’s ghost has contacted you because she’s jealous?”

Louisa shook her head. “Not at all. I think she’s reaching out because she thinks I am in danger . . . the same sort of danger she was in, because Terrence was the one who killed her.”

Silence filled the small room. He didn’t say a word. Louisa kept waiting for him to have some explosion of temper, or worse, to simply laugh in her face. But ultimately, she decided that his silence might be worse. “Say something, for heaven’s sake,” she admonished after it became intolerable.

“That is quite a leap. You spent a great deal of your formative years surrounded by those with criminal intent, and it has colored your perception of the world. What reason would Terrence have to kill Caroline?”

Louisa spread her hands. “To prevent you marrying her and having an heir. Had you married your uncle’s ward, there is little question that the outcome of your uncle’s will would not have changed, even if the contingencies within it did. The fortune would have been yours, and he would have nothing.

And now, because we have married, he is at risk of losing everything once more. Do you think it a coincidence that he showed up here on the same day we married? That he stood there next to his fresh, well-rested horse and told us he'd ridden all the way from London just this morning? If I spent too much time around the criminally intended, Douglas, you have spent too little."



HE WANTED TO deny all of it. Not because it was unbelievable, but because it was entirely believable. Not wanting a thing to be true did not make it so. If he'd stayed there, married Caroline when they were younger and not left to join the army, would she have still been alive? Had Terrence really killed her? He wished that he could so easily deny the claim, but he had little doubt his cousin was capable of such a thing. The question was whether or not there had been opportunity.

"What have you gleaned from reading her letters and journals?" There was a bite to his tone, one that he could not help. It felt like an invasion of privacy, but then, they were now married and privacy was very much a thing of the past. How could he resent it if what she said was true? He'd never encountered a ghost or apparition. At least, he hadn't to his knowledge, but he couldn't outright deny that such things existed when his uncle had been such a firm believer. Indeed, the entirety of Pluckley believed it. And if ever there was a rational source for such accounts, surely it would be Louisa Blackwell nee Jones.

"I haven't read them. I did read the half-finished letter that she'd been in the middle of writing to you. When I realized who the letters were intended for and who they had likely come from, I felt it wasn't my place to read them. I have looked at her journal a bit, but only to flip through it until I could find the last entries . . . the events leading up to her death."

"They were fairly innocent," he admitted. Then wryly added, "But not entirely."

“We are not in love. We were not married or betrothed at that time. Our worlds were completely separate, and our paths had never crossed. There is no betrayal in this, and there is no jealousy. You had a life before we met. Likely one that involved more women than simply Caroline Farris. And I daresay when our year is up, there will be women after we part ways,” she offered with a very matter-of-fact shrug.

It irked him—the notion that she was completely unbothered by the idea of him with another. And while it had been his wish to live apart, he wanted her to be at least somewhat aggrieved by the fact. “Indeed. You are remarkably rational about these matters, and that is why I find your account of your interactions with this *spirit* to be credible. But I would hope that it is not Caroline. I would hope that she has found peace.”

“Perhaps this is why she is not yet at peace,” she suggested. “If we can uncover the truth of the events surrounding her death, it might ease her soul.”

Moving towards the table where she sat, he took the chair next to her and began perusing the assorted letters. Most of them were innocent. A few of them hinted at the passionate kisses he had shared with Caroline. But mindful of how innocent she had been, things between them had never progressed beyond that.

He had often written back to Caroline on the same stationery she had sent to him, turning it sideways and writing overtop of and in between her large, flowery scrawl. It seemed as though a century had passed between that time and the present. He certainly felt a century older.

“What children we were,” he mused.

Louisa opened the journal, turning it to the last entry and passing it to him. “That is the most damning entry.”

Picking it up, he scanned the entry. And his blood ran cold.

*Loathsome Terrence has come home. No doubt he's heard that Douglas and I intend to marry when he*



*returns from London next week. He's here to pester poor Uncle James about his share of the estate. If he were left all the money in England, he would manage to spend every last drop. 'Tis simply his way.*

*I've taken to avoiding him. I eat my meals in my room. I spend as much time as possible away from the house. I go riding. I take baskets of food to the poorest of the tenant families. Most of them will not accept it because it comes from Rosehaven. Superstitious nonsense, really. I've looked for the lady in white countless times and have yet to see her. It's likely one of the baker's shameless daughters sneaking about to meet a footman . . . or Terrence.*

*How I hope that Uncle James will give him enough money that he will once more go back to London and leave us here in peace. His presence disrupts the entire household.*

The entry was dated three days before the fateful ride that had ended in Caroline's tragic fall. Six days before she died. And he hadn't realized that Terrence had been there the entire time. His cousin had told him that he'd arrived only shortly before he himself had, and he'd taken him at his word. He had been too distraught to do anything else.

"I should have been here," he said. "If I'd been here, she would not have felt the need to hide from Terrence. She would not have been without someone to protect her from him."

She shook her head. "For what it is worth, he would have simply found another way. He wanted to ensure that you were on equal bachelor footing when your uncle died. That was the only way he could be certain that the will wouldn't be changed, and he would have had allies in this house then just as he does now. The woman in white that I saw my first night here . . . I believe it was the maid, Fanny. I saw them together in the corridor today. They were very familiar with one another, and not simply in the liberties he was taking. Beyond that, they seemed to be well-known to one another."

He knew the maid she spoke of, and he also knew that the girl had only come to work there six months earlier. The butler had stated she was his niece, though that had always seemed a rather dubious claim. To his knowledge, the man had never acknowledged having any family at all.

“Then we send her packing immediately.”

“If we do that,” she protested, “then we give up any advantage we have. For the time being, until we know precisely what he’s planning, we need to go on as if nothing has been discovered about his past crimes.”

“So we just pretend to be lost in newly wedded bliss and oblivious to everything else going on?” he asked.

Louisa’s answering blush told him, without her needing to say a word, that she was thinking of the kiss they had shared that morning. It had never been far from his mind. Even when he’d been tending to other things, that awareness of her, of how much that simple kiss had stirred his desire for her, had been ever present.

“I think bliss might be a bit of a stretch. After all, everyone is fully aware of your reasons for marrying me,” she replied.

“What the world thinks of us isn’t important, Louisa. All that matters, at least for the next twelve months, is how we deal with one another. I want to kiss you again, but only if you want that too.”

She was silent for a moment, staring into his eyes. Whatever she saw there must have swayed her, because she simply launched herself into his arms. And he was selfish enough to accept all that she offered.



## Chapter Ten

SHE HADN'T MEANT to quite literally throw herself at him. But she couldn't regret it because kissing him felt like a little bit of heaven. When his lips touched hers, she could forget about Terrence and whatever schemes were afoot. She could forget about the ghostly presence at Rosehaven. *She could forget that everything between them was only temporary.*

His arms had closed around her, but his hands were far from still. They moved over her back, her shoulders, her hips. And everywhere he touched her, she burned. The pins fell from her hair, one by one, as he plucked them free. When the mass of it was loose, he buried his hands in it.

But Louisa was not content to be a passive participant. She explored his body as well, marveling at the firmness of his flesh which was so very different from her own. Then he was pulling back from her. Immediately, she missed the heat of that kiss.

"I'm sorry, Louisa. I didn't intend for things to go quite so far," he explained, his voice roughened and his breathing a bit ragged.

"Do you regret that they did?"

"I should," he said. "But I won't lie to you."

"My only regret is that you stopped," she admitted, her voice little more than a whisper. "It is our wedding night, after all."

"You should have time to get to know me—"

"I know all that I need to know. I know that I can trust you. Do not ask me how I know, but I do," she insisted. "And we do not have the luxury of waiting. Terrence would challenge

the validity of our marriage in order to claim everything for himself.”

“This thing between us has nothing to do with Terrence. His presence is simply a reminder of what else is at stake. But you and I . . . this is only about us, what we feel and what we want.” It was uttered firmly, but the doubt was easily visible in his gaze.

“If you think I’m trying to seduce you out of obligation, you are mistaken,” Louisa said. “I know what I’m doing. And I know what I want. I’m not some shrinking violet who with no notion of what passes between a husband and wife. So when I say I want this, I know precisely what that means.”

Apparently her words convinced him. He rose from the chair, lifting her easily into his arms, before striding toward his bedchamber.

Nerves, excitement, desire. The mix of feelings left her breathless, but none of that swayed her from the feeling that what they were about to do was right. And when he deposited her on the bed, Louisa raised herself up on her elbows and watched as he began stripping off his clothes. His coat and cravat were first, followed by his waistcoat and shirt.

It was a marvel to look at him. Smooth, sun-bronzed skin over firm, sculpted muscle. The dark hair covering his chest and bisecting his ridged abdomen tempted her. She wanted to touch him, to feel that beneath her fingertips. So she did. She sat up and reached for him, her fingers trailing over his skin to appease her curiosity.

But he gripped her wrist, halting her exploration. “You need to get out of that dress before this goes any further.”

Accepting the challenge in his gaze, Louisa began to unbutton the bodice of her dress. When the last button was freed, she took a deep breath to calm her nerves and then shrugged her shoulders to free herself from the garment. With the fabric pooled at her hips, she shimmied herself free of it

entirely. He scooped it up and then tossed it aside along with his clothing.

Layer by layer, she removed each item until she wore only her shift. Only then did he climb onto the bed with her, bearing her back onto the mound of pillows. When his lips closed over hers again, it was an entirely different thing. This wasn't simply a kiss, but an orchestrated and strategic assault. He seduced. Claimed. He was both generous and demanding at once. Thought fled entirely, and she could do nothing but give herself up to the sensations he stirred within her.

With skilled hands and expert lips, he brought her to the brink of madness, then beyond it. Waves of pleasure exploded within her. It was only then that he joined their bodies. There was a moment of discomfort, though she was so lost in the throes of her release it was barely noticeable. It was the intimacy of it, the vulnerability of giving herself to him entirely, that overwhelmed her. It was no longer just physical pleasure. There was a feeling of completeness she had never known before. But as before, he drove her to the brink of ecstasy, until she was all but mindless with it. She could do nothing then but lose herself in the pleasure he could give her—in the pleasure they could find together.



“THEY’VE CONSUMMATED THEIR marriage! You said it was to be in name only.”

Fanny rolled over in his bed and looked at him with sleepy eyes. She was a sly creature. It was one of the reasons he had sent her to Rosehaven to sabotage his cousin’s efforts to find a bride. “Explain to me how you misinterpreted that!” Terrence demanded of her.

“I never said it would be in name only. I said it would be a marriage of convenience. For one year. Then they would part ways,” she insisted. “But he did tell her they would have no children.”

Terrence frowned. “How, if they are going at one another like animals in rut, is that possible?”

“He said that precautions would be taken,” Fanny insisted sitting up in the bed. Naked, she stretched to shamelessly accentuate her best assets—a pair of truly remarkable breasts.

Even as a man who had partaken in more than his fair share of carnal pursuits, it was an impressive sight. And a distracting one. After appreciating the view for a moment, Terrence tossed her dress at her. “Precautions? French letters fail. Withdrawal is hardly a guarantee. And none of that changes the fact that he’s married her. The only way I get the money now is if he dies and I can be certain there is no heir in her belly!”

“You could always just kill them both,” Fanny suggested.

Terrence didn’t immediately discount the idea. It might well be his only real option. “I think the White Lady of Rosehaven needs to make another appearance. A more bold one this time. After all, everyone believes her presence is a harbinger of tragedy. What greater tragedy could there be than for a husband to be so overcome with jealousy that he kills his young bride and then himself?”

Fanny leaned back against the headboard. “You better marry me after all this. Who else would put up with your scheming and turned a blind eye while you tup every halfway pretty maid in the house?”

Terrence only smiled. He wouldn’t marry her. Fanny would simply disappear like so many other young women did. Maids ran off all the time, after all. And he wasn’t about to make an actress who’d slept with half the ne’er-do-wells in London the mistress of his home. But he needed her cooperation for a bit longer, and he’d let her keep her delusions to ensure her assistance.

“Get dressed so you can get to your room and change into your costume,” he directed. “We’ve no time to waste.”



## Chapter Eleven

LOUISA COULDN'T SAY what it was that had awakened her. The room was dark. Douglas was still in the bed beside her, his breathing deep and even. Looking at him, she was so tempted to just lie there. But there was a sense of urgency that was undeniable.

Easing from the bed, she reached for her chemise and slipped it on. She'd been shameless enough already without parading around in the nude. Inexplicably drawn to the window, she looked out into the darkness of the garden beyond. Instantly, she knew where the sense of urgency had come from.

The white shrouded figure moved through the garden. The moon was bright, but not bright enough to see any details at such a distance. Just as before, it wandered along the garden paths to the lane, and then disappeared from sight. Turning away from the window, she gathered her dress but didn't bother with shoes. She was shrugging into the gown even as she slipped from the room. Padding down the corridor barefoot, she would have to be quick if she had any hope of catching up to whomever was impersonating the fabled ghost.

Rounding the corner to the stairs, Louisa drew up short. Terrence stood before her, a cruel smile playing about his lips.

"You know what they say about curiosity and cats, don't you, dear cousin?"

Louisa tried to hide the shiver that raced through her at the obvious threat in his words. "I certainly know what they say about every dog having his day."

That cold, bone-chilling grin on his face turned into a snarl. "You'll regret insulting me, Cousin Louisa. And it may well be the last thing you do."

She had no other warning. His hand snaked out, grabbing her upper arm and hauling her with him. But not down the stairs. Instead he pulled her to the opposite end of the corridor. The panic she'd felt at first began to fade and she struggled against him, even as she drew in a deep breath to scream for help.

He'd clearly guessed her intent, as he slammed her into the wall, pressing his hand over her mouth and nose. "Do not make a sound. I have a pistol in my pocket and I will shoot you without qualm. Then I will shoot Douglas. And there is no one in this house who would gainsay me . . . except for poor, dear Aunt Mary who's ready for Bedlam with all her talk of cards and crystals." Roughly, he released his hand.

"What do you mean to do with Douglas?"

"Nothing," he said. "So long as he doesn't manage to get himself another wife before the year is out. You see, that's the tricky wording of Uncle James's will. It doesn't matter who he's married to, or how many times he has married, so long as on the one-year anniversary of the reading of the will, Douglas has himself a wife. If he fails, then it becomes my turn. I'll have my chance at the family fortunes then."

"It was Fanny I saw in the garden. Wandering around in the dark wearing white like some sort of phantom, to scare away any poor superstitious village girl who might be tempted to ignore the family's dark history," Louisa surmised. It was a stalling tactic. He'd pushed her back against the wall, but there was a table beside her—a table bedecked with a small but heavy and very ornate candelabra. Fumbling for it, she finally managed to close her hand over it just as he abruptly let her go.

She could see him reaching for the gun in his pocket. It was her only chance. Swinging the candelabra upward, she caught his arm with it, the ornate scrollwork slicing his hand. Then she brought it crashing down again, this time against his forehead. Blood welled from the laceration instantly, running into his eyes.



Louisa scrambled away, screaming as she then ran down the corridor back to the room where she'd left Douglas sleeping. Even over her own ragged breathing and pounding heart, she could hear Terrence's heavy footfalls. She'd only managed to best him before because of luck and the element of surprise. That would no longer be on her side. With no other choice, Louisa screamed for all she was worth.



DOUGLAS SAT UP with a jolt. He wasn't immediately certain what had awakened him, but he was instantly aware of one thing. He was alone. Louisa was no longer in the bed beside him.

Something else penetrated the haze of sleep. The air around him was freezing cold. So cold that he could see his breath. Instantly, memories of Louisa's description of her encounters with Caroline came to mind.

"Are you here?" he whispered.

There was no sound, only the opening of the outer door to their chamber. It was a clear indication that he should follow. Feeling both foolish and afraid, he rose from the bed. Moving quickly, he grabbed his trousers and struggled into them. Shirtless and in his bare feet, he ran into the corridor. He could see Louisa running toward him, and chasing after her was a bloodied Terrence.

*Caroline had warned him.* She had warned him to spare Louisa the same fate she had suffered.

Rushing forward, Douglas grabbed her, pushing her behind him. He could see Terrence brandishing the pistol, but when he saw Douglas, Terrence abruptly stopped. When Terrence raised his hand, leveling the pistol, Douglas knew he meant to fire. He would kill him, and then he would kill Louisa. Unwilling to let that happen, Douglas did the only thing he could. When he saw the minute flinch in Terrence's hand, just before the other man squeezed the trigger, he threw himself back against the wall, dragging Louisa with him.

The shot went wide. Without giving Terrence the chance to reload or fish the matching pistol from his pocket, Douglas launched himself at the other man, tackling him to the carpeted floor.

It seemed that Terrence lacked the skills to do battle with another man, someone who could match him in strength. His cousin apparently only ever engaged in violence against those who were weaker than himself.

Drawing his fist back, he hit Terrence again and again. Only when Terrence stopped moving entirely did he manage to pull himself back from that brink, back from allowing the damnable Blackwell temper to drive him to murder.

Turning to Louisa, he said, "Rouse a servant and send for the magistrate."

She nodded mutely and then stumbled toward the stairs on unsteady legs. He wanted to call her back. She was in no condition for such things, but he could hardly leave her alone with Terrence, even though he was unconscious at present. There was no way to know how long he would remain that way.

A pained groan from his cousin only confirmed it was the right choice. When Terrence's eyes opened, Douglas hauled him up by his coat and the used Terrence's own bloody cravat to bind his hands. "You'll hang for what you've done."

"What did I do other than have a midnight tryst with your bird that got slightly out of hand?" Terrence demanded, pausing to spit blood from his mouth. "Do you really want all of England to know what a trollop you've married?"

"It has nothing to do with Louisa," Douglas said. "And everything to do with Caroline. You killed her because I meant to marry her. Because Uncle James would have written you out of his will entirely then."

Terrence laughed. "You'll never be able to prove it."

"I don't need to." With grim satisfaction, Douglas explained, "You'll be in the local gaol until the next assizes."

And by then, Uncle James's will, with all of its contingencies, will have been met. You'll be both penniless and disgraced. And I will have just cause to deny you entrance to Rosehaven ever again. No doubt Fanny will be less than enamored with you once your every avenue to the Blackwell family fortune has been closed. She might even be persuaded to testify against you."

There was a flicker of fear in Terrence's gaze then, the realization that all his scheming had been for naught. He was on the cusp of losing everything. "I'll go. I'll leave here, and you can have the bloody fortune!"

"That isn't good enough. Caroline deserves justice. I failed to protect her in life, but I will not betray her again in her death."



## Epilogue

*October 1st, 1832*

IT WAS WELL into the evening by the time they returned from the assizes in Ashford. Just over a month since the constables had taken both Terrence and Fanny into custody. The servants were abuzz with the gossip. They had both been found guilty of their respective crimes. Terrence was to face transportation, and Fanny was sentenced to a seven-year term in prison for her role as a conspirator.

Mary felt vindicated, per her own report, stating that she had always thought poor Caroline's demise had resulted from something far more nefarious than a mere riding accident. And, of course, her cards had told her that it would happen just so. Or so she informed them dramatically as she sailed from the room with a swish of her heavily flounced skirts.

"Why did the magistrate and the judge keep talking about all the tragedy wrought by this wretched place?" Louisa asked as soon as the door closed.

Douglas's glance at her revealed far more than he had intended. She knew instantly that he didn't want to tell her. It was evident in his expression, in his posture, in the very air around him.

"You can tell me," she urged. "After everything I shared with you, knowing how positively hysterical it sounded, you have to know that you can trust me as I trusted you."

"It's not the same thing at all, Louisa," he said softly. "You were worried about me thinking you mad. I'm worried about you thinking me a murderer. That's what everyone believes all Blackwell men to be—past, present, and future."

She said nothing, just waited patiently for him to continue. After a long sigh, he did.

“My father murdered my mother. Much like Caroline’s death, it was made to look like an accident. A fall down the stairs. But I saw it all. I know what he did. He pushed her in the middle of an argument, and she fell to her death. It was never proven, never taken to trial. But everyone knows. Then there is my grandfather who buried three wives, all of them under mysterious circumstances. That is how he amassed the Blackwell fortune. There’s blood on every groat.”

“They are not you,” Louisa said simply.

“How can you be sure that I will not turn just as they did?”

“Because you have integrity, Douglas. You are not capable of such wickedness. If you were, you’d have continued to let the world think Caroline’s death was an accident just to spare the family more scandal. Truth and justice mean more to you than personal gain.”

“I want her to be at peace,” he said softly. “I cared for her very deeply. But I wasn’t in love with her . . . not as she loved me. I’ve felt guilty about that for years.”

Louisa looked down at her clasped hands. “Perhaps you would have grown to love her as she loved you.”

“I don’t think so. Certainly there was affection and a kind of love. But loving someone and being in love with them—that is something entirely different.” He paused then, looking away thoughtfully. “No, I was meant for something else.”

“For the army? The life of a soldier?” Louisa asked. Though she smiled, it felt as if her heart was breaking. She’d made the terrible mistake of falling in love with him. It had been a valiant fight to keep her feelings contained, but she had failed pitifully. And in eleven months, he would send her away.

“No. The army wasn’t my purpose. Just a distraction. It allowed me to escape the gossip and conjecture of this place.

To go where no one knew my family history and expected me to turn into a monster.”

She looked up then, meeting his gaze steadily. “Was I destined to become a fallen woman just because my mother had?”

His eyes widened with shock. “Of course, not. And women do not fall alone. There is always a dishonorable man somewhere within their stories. Someone who made promises they had no intention of keeping.”

“I know something about that,” she said. “I made promises to myself that I have not kept.” And all of them had involved shielding her heart from him, of keeping some kind of distance between them.

“What does that mean?”

“I promised that I would guard my feelings, that I would not form any sort of attachment to you. Because we will part at some point, and I have no wish to have my heart broken. That is why I think we should go back to our separate chambers. I can return to the room I stayed in when I first arrived.”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t want that. I want you with me, Louisa,”

“I can’t. I am not Caroline. I cannot love you and have only a pale glimmer of affection in return,” she admitted.



HE HADN’T DARED hope. Not really. Even without her confession, he’d known that when their year was through, he would not give her up. Louisa had invaded his thoughts. His heart. She had burrowed into his very soul, it seemed.

“And why would you think that you do not have my love? I think perhaps you’ve had it from the moment I first saw you. Hatton had his way after all. He’d had it in mind all along that I should have a love match,” he confessed. “So he found the one woman in all of England, perhaps in all the world, that I would never be able to resist.”

Douglas watched her, analyzing every flicker of emotion on her face. There were many. Despair, hope, longing, tenderness—and perhaps that was what love truly was. It wasn't a single emotion but the presence of every emotion, swirling in a storm created by one person. Louisa could make him feel everything, and he had hope that perhaps he was that to her, as well.

“I thought I could resist you, too. That I could guard my heart well enough to keep you from stealing it.” His mouth twisted in a rueful grin on that admission.

“I didn't steal it,” she protested. “It was an even exchange. I took yours, but I gave you my own in return.”

“Stay with me, Louisa.”

“For the next eleven months?”

“Yes . . . and then for every month after. I never want to part from you. And I say to you something that I have never said to another woman. I do not just love you. I am in love with you. Hopelessly and permanently.”

She smiled despite the tears glistening in her eyes. “How convenient it is that I feel exactly the same, and that I have no intention of going anywhere.”

With a flick of his fingers, he locked the door behind him, and then Douglas held out his hand to her. And when she came to him, he showed her in every way that he could just how deeply he loved her and how much he wanted her.

The End

## **Author's Note**

The village of Pluckley in Kent is reputed to be the most haunted village in England. The pseudo haunting perpetrated by the villains this story is an homage to the legend of the Lady of Rose Court. And Caroline's ghost was a sad one for me, but it is purely fictitious. There is nothing in the many paranormal tales from Pluckley that relates to her tragic tale. But I like to think that after she saved Louisa and her killer was brought to justice that she found her own sort of peace. If you'd like to read more about Pluckley's ghostly inhabitants, a simple Google search will result in a wealth of information.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed my contribution to this ghostly collection.

Chasity Bowlin



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## **About Chasity Bowlin**

Chasity Bowlin lives in central Kentucky with her husband and their menagerie of animals. She loves writing, loves traveling and enjoys incorporating tidbits of her actual vacations into her books. She is an avid Anglophile, loving all things British, but specifically all things Regency.

Growing up in Tennessee, spending as much time as possible with her doting grandparents, soap operas were a part of her daily existence, followed by back to back episodes of Scooby Doo. Her path to becoming a romance novelist was set when, rather than simply have her Barbie dolls cruise around in a pink convertible, they time traveled, hosted lavish dinner parties and one even had an evil twin locked in the attic.

Website: [www.chasitybowlin.com](http://www.chasitybowlin.com)

# **Once Upon an Enchanted Well**

*Mary Wine*



## **An Ending is Also a Beginning...**

LADY WILMITON WAS displeased.

Rhona knew the pinched look around the lady's face heralded the arrival of the Lady of the House's temper. Normally Rhona would have fled back to the cottage where she lived with her mother, but her father was dead now and Lady Wilmiton was in charge of everything until her son came of age.

So there would be no running away.

Rhona stood alongside her mother while the lawyers waited for Lady Wilmiton to sign the documents they had laid in front of her. But the Lady scowled at the paper, clearly displeased with what was written on it. She'd already signed more than a dozen sheets, a necessity of inheritance but this one seemed to anger her.

She looked at Rhona. The Lady had no love for her, that was something Rhona knew very well even at the age of ten.

"My Lady," one of the lawyers decided to attempt to prod Lady Wilmiton. "It is but a small country house—with all the other holdings you have, it is nothing of significance. The will is very clear, if you do not sign this property over, you will not receive the rest of the estate and holdings."

"As you will!" Lady Wilmiton hissed at Rhona.

She grabbed the quill, jabbed its silver point into the ink well, and put it on the paper. Her son looked down at the document, his eyes moving back and forth while he read.

"There," Lady Wilmiton declared. She sent Rhona's mother a scathing look. "Take your whore's earnings. You will freeze up there on the borderland. I promise you the dowry promised to your daughter will go to the Church! For no man

should have to suffer your bastard daughter for a wife! Put them out!”

Put them out...

Rhona had heard the words being whispered in the kitchen and back rooms since the night the Lord took the last sacrament. A hush had fallen over the house in the days that followed, only the whispers growing in volume.

They will be put out...

Rhona knew the whispers were about her mother and herself. And now, the silent footmen behind them came forward. Their gazes were averted, and tight expressions appeared on their faces. They began to herd her and her mother much in the same way that they might deal with geese, with their arms spread out wide.

Rhona’s mother darted around one of the men, dipping low to avoid his outstretched arms. There was a crinkle of paper when she grabbed the newly signed and sealed sheet of parchment. The lawyer’s assistant tossed a large bag to her.

“Put them out at once!” Lady Wilmiton’s voice became shrill. “Go to the border and die there!”

“Mother...Rhona is my sister,” the new Lord Wilmiton spoke up.

“You are never to say such a thing again.” Lady Wilmiton turned on her son. “She is the spawn of lust. A product of adultery. She is to take the veil, lest she follows her mother’s path.”

Whatever else Lady Wilmiton said, Rhona didn’t hear it because the footmen pushed them past the doors which were closed tightly behind them.

It was a relief to be out of the room and yet, Rhona shivered because she had known no other home.

*“Psst...psst...”*

Rhona looked over to see one of the kitchen maids hiding in the passageway. She looked fearfully toward the closed doors before waving at them.

Rhona's mother grabbed her wrist and ran toward the woman. The footmen were left behind.

"I had the tinker wait."

The tinker came around every month or so with items to trade. Rhona had always liked going to see what his wagon had collected on his journeys.

The kitchen maid took them through the storerooms. She stopped and looked behind them to make sure no one was following them.

"Here now," the maid said. "Take these bundles. It's not much. You understand I can't have the lady notice anything missing, or I might lose my place."

"I am grateful for your kindness," Rhona's mother whispered.

The maid nodded. "His Lordship loved you with all his heart. Here..." She pulled a little pouch from her bodice. "His Lordship wanted you to have this."

There was a jingle of coins when her mother grasped it.

"Hurry...the tinker will be leaving soon." The maid encouraged Rhona's mother toward the door.

Rhona's mother tugged her out into the yard beyond the kitchen. The tinker was there with his wagon. Instead of flashing Rhona a smile and bringing her something he hoped her father might purchase for her, today, the tinker pointed at an open place in his wagon. Her mother climbed up and pulled her along with her.

The tinker took his place at the front of the wagon. He made a clicking sound that the horses recognized. The wagon lumbered forward, Rhona and her mother swaying along with the rest of the cargo. Rhona looked back at the house.

“Look forward Rhona,” her mother advised her. “Always choose life. Never look back at death for it will catch us all soon enough.”





## **Every Challenge Presents an Opportunity...**

LADY WILMITON HADN'T lied about the borderland being cold.

Rhona shivered, hugging a tattered length of wool closer against her body. She'd lost count of how many days they had traveled. At times, they had needed to wait for another merchant who was heading north before they could continue their journey. Now, Rhona looked up to see a sky full of black, swollen clouds. The wind was whipping, and the trees had lost their leaves, so the thin branches slapped together making an eerie sound like bones dancing.

“Up that road.”

This man who had most recently traded them a spot on his cart for a few bits of silver pointed at what might have once been a road, but it was overgrown now. The plants were as high as Rhona's chest because no cart or wagon had used it all summer. Still, there were ruts in the ground, proving that there was something—or had been something—up ahead of them.

“I can't recall ever seeing any light up there.” The merchant dashed any further hopes of finding something welcoming at the end of the path. “For a few more shillings, I could take ye into the village.”

“No thank you.” Rhona's mother was quick to turn his offer down.

The merchant shrugged. His feet made squishing sounds in the mud on his way back to the front of his cart. A little click of his tongue and his horse started forward.

Overhead there came the ominous rumble of thunder.

It was definitely not a cheery welcome to their new home.

Her mother squared her shoulders and began walking in the direction the merchant had pointed them. Not wanting to be a coward, Rhona lifted her chin and followed. She instantly felt better, like she had achieved something by refusing to give in to her fear. Even if that was her pride talking, it was certainly better than standing on the side of the road just waiting for the rain to begin drenching her.

The reeds which had grown up on the road swayed and danced with the wind. Rhona decided she liked the idea of them dancing, for that was a merry word. They followed the ruts and then went around a bend. The light was fading, and again, the thunder cracked above them.

And then, lightning zigzagged through the mass of black clouds. Rhona blinked, blinded temporarily by the white-hot light. When she could see again, there was a house in front of her.

She gasped.

And she heard her mother sucking in her breath.

The house was blackened by moss and the stone structure was dark and foreboding. The yard was overgrown. Once there had been a road in front of the steps but now there were broken tree limbs and a tangle of vines and brambles for them to weave through before they managed to make it to the bottom step.

As they made it, her mother muttered, “At last.” There was a hint of gratitude in her mother’s tone, but Rhona couldn’t see anything even remotely worthy of about which they should be pleased.

“Oh, Mother...will we freeze here? Did Lady Wilmiton curse us?” Rhona asked in a thin voice. “Or...is this Divine Retribution because Father was not wed to you?”

Her mother turned to face her. “Listen to me, Rhona. Lady Wilmiton drinks bitterness by choice. She has that entire, fine manor home, a healthy son, and rents to collect. Yet she rises each day to only see the things she does not have.”

Rhona felt her fear dissipating but even as she began to smile, the sky split open with another bolt of lightning. It illuminated the house with its closed shutters and dark stone. The thunder boomed and rumbled as though a demon was clawing its way out of the dark mass of clouds.

“Rhona,” her mother spoke again once the thunder had passed. “We shall be so very happy, for your father is watching us from Heaven.” With that, her mother opened the bag the lawyer had tossed to her during their hurried eviction. Inside there was a ring of at least twenty or more keys. That meant there were things of value inside the house.

“We have a place to call home, Rhona. Each morning we will smile and see all the goodness around us.”

“But it is dark and ominous, Mother.” Rhona was ashamed of how fearful she sounded, but she just couldn’t help it.

“It is strong, and will shelter us from the storm!” Her mother offered another way to see their circumstances.

“But this is the borderland...are there not savages and witches?” Every forbidden thing Rhona had ever heard while hiding near the kitchen door just began to bubble right out of her.

“Listen, my precious daughter.” Rhona’s mother smoothed the hair back from her face with gentle hands. “This is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies. Our hearts will be brimming full of merriment. And before you know it, you will fall in love with a fine man here on the borderland, far, far away from those nobles who lust to own every last thing that they see. Here, we shall have a full life where there is enough for everyone. We will brighten everything with our determination to live well so that your father need not worry about us.”

After the long trip north with naught but fear chilling her heart, Rhona was happy to see the light of hope shimmering in her mother’s eyes. Her mother shook the keys, so they jingled. It was a happy sound, for the most precious things in every

house were always locked away and the ring of keys was always on the belt of the most senior staff member.

Now the keys were in her mother's hand.

Rhona followed her mother up the steps of the house. The first key would be the one to the front door. Her mother pushed it in and gave the lock a turn. The wind howled behind them, but the door opened. A crack of lightning gave them a brief look at the room beyond the door and a boom of thunder sent them both across the threshold in a hurry to be inside no matter how ominous and thick the blackness was inside the house.

Her mother closed the door against the rain. It pelted the closed shutters, rather like it was frustrated over not being able to soak them.

They would brighten everything with their determination...

Rhona forced a smile onto her lips and followed her mother's instructions.



## **In a Blink of an Eye...a Child is Grown...and the Season has Passed...**

“**W**HAT WILL YOU do now?” Norla asked.

Rhona looked over at her friend. Norla had blue eyes which reminded her of a summer sky.

Brighten your day with cheerful thoughts...

Rhona knew the words for she lived by them, even if some days tested her more than others.

But Norla was waiting for a response to her question. Rhona pulled her gaze away from the newly disturbed earth where her mother had been laid to rest. The men who had come up from the village to help dig the grave had pulled their hats back on now that the prayers were finished. It was hard work, so Rhona filled a small basket with some of the food that the villagers had brought with them and offered it to the men in exchange for their efforts.

“You really don’t have to worry,” Norla said. “You have a fine house which will make a good dowry.”

Norla looked up the way to where Samuel Birkins was standing in front of the house. He was rubbing his hands together like a child anticipating a treat. Rhona wanted to feel something kind toward him, but the truth was, she didn’t want to wed him.

And Samuel appeared more enamored with the house than her.

“I don’t have to get married,” Rhona muttered.

Norla shrugged. “Everyone gets married.” She thought for a moment. “I don’t know anyone who didn’t get married at least one time.”

“Rhona has been promised to the Church.”

Both girls turned to see the priest. He stood near them, his hands tucked beneath his chasuble. There was a satisfied smile on his lips, and he looked at Rhona very much in the same way that Samuel looked at the house.

“Your mother refused to honor your father’s wish that you take the veil.” He glanced over at the new grave, his insinuation clear.

There was a hint of tightness in her throat, but Rhona swallowed it.

“It was Lady Wilmiton who wanted me to take the veil,” Rhona recalled the day they’d been put out of her father’s house.

“I am pleased you remember,” the priest said. “It is time for you to take your place.”

Samuel Birkins had walked toward them. “What’s this?”

The priest turned to look at him. “Rhona has been promised to the Church. This house will pass—along with her—into service of the Church.”

Rhona felt as though she was being strangled. Drawing breath felt nearly impossible. But she had to protest. She had only herself now.

“I am sorry Father, but I have no calling to take the holy veil.” The words came out in a tone that was far from confident. She gulped down some more air in an attempt to steady herself.

The priest still had a smile on his lips but the look in his eyes was cold. “To serve the Church is your path to redemption. Your parents’ sins must be accounted for.”

“Those aren’t her sins,” Norla argued. “Rhona is a kind, good soul.”

“Right,” Samuel added his opinion to the debate. “Rhona can marry me. Become a wife and mother. We will take the Sacrament of Marriage and raise our family with respect for the holy scriptures.”

“Without a dowry or the house and land?” the priest asked Samuel pointedly.

Samuel’s complexion darkened. “The house was her mother’s. I saw the deed myself. It had the seal on it. Right and proper.”

The priest withdrew another document, and he opened it to show another seal. Samuel leaned forward to inspect it. A few other men had joined him.

“The young Lord Wilmiton has reached his maturity. He has decided to honor his mother’s wish to see Rhona take the holy veil as a Bride of Christ.”

“You mean he’s decided to save himself from having to give up any portion of his estate to a half-sister,” Samuel argued.

“He would not be the first to take that path,” Clement, the assistant to the mayor, mumbled. He was a literate man of learning. He leaned to look at the document once more, pursing his lips together while he scrutinized it.

“Come now.” Samuel’s tone changed in an effort to persuade the priest. “This house is all the way up here in the marshes. It was for sale for a decade before Rhona and her mother came. It’s only useful to those of us who live here.”

“Its placement will help the Church to establish a presence here...” The priest looked at the hills behind the stone house. “The bonfires and witchery will at last be tamed with a holy presence, like a beacon of light.”

The priest’s tone was full of zeal. Rhona lost the battle to maintain her composure. Suddenly she was once more a half-

grown child being put out into the cold. Only this time, it was far worse, for she was going to be stuffed into a cold cell at a convent.

Samuel gave her a last look before he turned and walked away, his feet clearly heavy. Clement reached to pat him on the shoulder as he followed.

Neither of them looked back at her.

“You will be joined by the other sisters soon,” the priest informed her. “I will return to hear your vows and see you cut your hair.”





## **By the Moon's Light, New Beginnings Stir**

*“THIS IS A land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies. Our hearts will be brimming full of merriment. And before you know it, you will fall in love with a fine man here on the borderland...”*

Rhona awoke to her mother's voice.

She sat up, looking around the chamber but there was no one there. The small tin lantern hung by the door still had a candle flickering inside of it. The light scattered across the floor in a hundred crescent moons of yellow light, beating back the pitch-blackness of night.

Fall in love?

How was she to accomplish that with the Church coming to claim her?

The window shutters rattled again.

Harder.

Rhona looked toward them before she climbed from the bed. Anything was better than sitting in her rumpled bedding feeling defeated.

Far better to look for a sign of hope, even in the rattling of window shutters.

The floor was cool against her bare feet now. Autumn was in the air. The shutters were being moved by the cooler air that was coming down from the north to push the warm air of summer away. But she liked the idea of the shutters rattling because her mother was speaking to her.

She lifted the little bar of wood that held the twin sides of shutters closed. They opened wide and a gust of wind blew in. She laughed and leaned out of the window; the moon was almost full. Its brightness was like the smile on a treasured friend's face.

And in the distance, there was a flicker of light.

Rhona gasped.

It wasn't the sort of gasp one made when they were frightened. No, this was the sound of excitement. The dread that had twisted her during her slumber melted beneath the rush of anticipation flooding her as surely as the bank of a river eroded during a spring snowmelt.

Someone was up in the pasture.

The light danced and the wind moved the clouds so that more of the starlight shone down to illuminate the spot.

She saw him.

Cast in the silver light of the stars, there was an unmistakable outline of a man. A man in a kilt. The strangest sensation took over her, as though the man had reached out and touched her, igniting a trail of chaff inside of her. The flame caught in an instant, flaring up like a tinder bowl did after you struck a flint stone above it. For a moment, everything was bright and hot, just waiting for her to hold a wick over the flames. But what caught fire was something inside of her. She'd never realized there was darkness deep inside her, but now, there was a new flame, even if she didn't know what it was intended for.

*You are desperate...*

Her little inner voice was not wrong.

Rhona sat back on her haunches and tried to rekindle the excitement that had made her open the window shutters, but reality had arrived to extinguish her hopes. The wind blew and the clouds covered the sky, darkening the spot where the man had stood.

Like the light had been pinched out.

Suddenly, the wind blew again, hard, and the shutters slammed shut in her face. Rhona ended up on her backside in the middle of the floor. The room was pitch black and far colder than she'd noticed before. Sitting in her shift, she felt exposed and vulnerable.

*Your mother never gave up...*

Her inner voice was reprimanding her, but Rhona liked what it said. She thought back to the night they'd arrived at the house and her mother's words: "*This is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies.*"

Rhona felt her self-confidence strengthening. She grabbed her stockings and shoes before reaching for her simple wardrobe, which consisted of two long garments that closed at the waist to make her a dress. And then the last thing she grabbed was a length of wool she used as a shawl. She wrapped it over her head once before crisscrossing it across her chest and using the single button at its tip to close it behind her back.

She was not afraid of the night, especially under a full moon, and she was going to find out who else found it a silvery place of wonder and delight.



## **Sometimes, Duty Places You Where You are Meant to Be...**

“I TOLD YE that she saw the lantern.”

Hamish glared at Peadair. “Now what are we going to do?”

Peadair offered his friend a shrug. Hamish opened his hands.

“She’s on her way up here!” Hamish exclaimed.

“It is but one wee little lass,” Peadair tried to shame his friend into settling down. “Hardly a threat. Are ye no’ just a bit impressed with the fact that she’s not afraid of the night? I am.”

Hamish grunted. “Are ye daft? We have a well to dig. The Chief made his wishes clear. Dig this well and make sure no one sees us doing it.”

“Aye, I remember what he said,” Peadair muttered. “And we’re here in the dead of night to keep our word.”

Hamish pointed at Rhona. “She is not going to help us keep this project a secret.”

“I am still fascinated by her,” Peadair remarked. “She has courage, that is for certain.”

“The only thing certain is that we will be getting no more work done tonight,” Hamish said with disgust. He snorted before turning and grabbing his shovel from the ground. “Let’s go. We cannot be spreading rumors of this being a magical place if anyone sees us digging the well.”

“I suppose ye are correct.” Peadair picked up his own shovel.

Hamish didn't wait for Peadair. The other man turned and began hiking back into the forest. Peadair paused at the edge of the meadow, unable to resist the urge to see the girl from a little closer.



## **Curiosity Always Leads the Way to Adventure...and Danger...**

RHONA KNEW THE upper meadow.

She knew it well from early springs spent enjoying the flowers after a long, cold winter. She also knew it from warm summer nights when the moon was bright, and her mother had made good on her promise to frolic and dance so Rhona's father saw them happy.

They had lived a good life. And the meadow was a treasured place. Tears prickled her eyes, but Rhona smiled because the air was so warm. The wind blew and the clouds parted once more. She stopped, staring at something she had never seen before. Illuminated by the silvery light was a hole in the ground. Rhona expected to see the dirt piled nearby, yet there was nothing but the dried-out flowers.

Was it an illusion?

She hunkered down next to the edge of it, reaching out to touch the place where the dried-out stalks of summer's plants were and the dark, exposed earth. She felt the moistness on her fingertips, proving that it wasn't an illusion.

So the man had been real.

Rhona stood. The wind whipped her clothing around, flattening it against her body. She turned in a circle, looking at the edge of the forest.

And there he was.

Watching her.

That same jolt of sensation went through her like a bolt of lightning cracking open the sky during a storm just as it had

when she'd first arrived here. And inside, she felt as though she was just as turbulent as that thunderstorm.

She should dismiss it as illogical but returning to reality with its harsh edges wasn't appealing. So she continued to look at him while her heart pounded hard, and the wind pressed the fabric of her clothing against her body again.

He was watching her, and she discovered it felt very different from the way other men had looked at her.

"Are ye not afraid of the darkness, lassie?" His voice was deep and paired well with the night.

"What is to fear?" She replied. "There is nothing here now that was not here in the light of day."

"I am here," he answered seriously. There was a soft crunch as he stepped out from the edge of the forest toward her. "I know ye saw me."

Should she confess that she'd come just to meet him? Rhona pondered doing precisely that.

"You will not harm me." Rhona wasn't sure where her confidence came from, only that she was firm in her thinking.

"Lassie, ye should not take such chances." His voice had turned into a stern sound of warning. "Some men would take advantage of ye."

"Not you." Rhona decided to simply say what she felt.

He tilted his head to one side. "How can ye be certain of that?"

Rhona looked around the meadow. "This is a place I have always come to for merriment and adventure." When she brought her attention back to him, it was to discover that he'd emerged from the edge of the thicket.

Her heart accelerated.

"My name is Rhona. Why are you digging a well at night?" she asked.

Rhona sounded nervous. No, that wasn't quite the correct word. She pondered for a moment before she realized that she sounded like she was breathless.

"It would be best for ye not to ask about it."

Rhona offered him a soft sound of amusement. "You can hardly expect to have a well go unnoticed."

He smiled in response. "Aye, well, as to that...ye are correct."

"So why do you dig at night?" Rhona pressed him for an answer.

"My countrymen need the well, for we cross this land, as our ancestors have for centuries, and we need the English to stay away from it," he answered her.

"What a clever idea," Rhona remarked.

"Me Chief and the woman who owns that house there." He pointed back down the meadow. "They have an understanding. She will tell one and all that the well just appeared and is enchanted."

Rhona felt her joy dissipate. Reality came crashing down on her like a landslide. "My mother has died."

"Yer mother, lass?"

Rhona nodded. "We buried her today and the Church says my half-brother has promised the house—and me—to them. I am sorry, but you will have to dig your well in another spot."

It was a terrible ending to her adventure. Reality with its sharp claws shredded the bubble in which she'd been encased. The wind was suddenly too cold to endure, and the sky crowded with clouds so that no moonlight illuminated their encounter. Above her, there was a rumble. Rhona could smell the rain coming.

"Goodbye, lass."

Whoever he was, he left her without even giving her his name. The first fat drops of rain began to hit her back while



she watched him disappear into the thicket, leaving her with nothing to do but return to the house, and the harsh reality her half-brother had planned for her.



## **A Scotsman Never Surrenders...**

HAMISH GRUNTED AND grinned. “Well then, we can go home.”

The rest of the men smiled, clearly liking the way Hamish viewed their situation.

“The well is nae finished,” Peadair stated firmly.

Hamish turned a harsh look Peadair’s way. “Ye just said the woman is dead and the house is passing into the holdings of the Church. The priests will not be allowing us to spread rumors of enchantments. Best to just go home.”

“I do not intend to tell our Chief that we failed,” Peadair told them all.

Hamish narrowed his eyes. “Well, I would like to know just how ye are planning to deal with this matter.”

Peadair heard the frustration in Hamish’s tone. But he also recognized the challenge.

“I’ll think of something,” Peadair said.

Hamish mused his lips together. “Ye want to see that lass again.”

The rest of the men looked at Peadair, trying to decide if Hamish was correct.

“She is a fair lass.” Peadair decided not to deny it.

“Ye just said she is promised to the Church,” Hamish grumbled. He shook his head before he pointed at Peadair. “Ye’ll bring a curse upon us if ye trifle with a lass promised to the Church.”

“Well now...that is one way to get the rumors the Chief wanted going, is it nae?”

Around him, his men's eyes widened. Peadair had intended to shock them, but what he felt was a lot more like shame. Rhona had trusted him, and it seemed a very poor way to repay her faith in him. In fact, the idea of disappointing her bothered him a great deal.

The problem was, he wanted to see her again. So much so, that he didn't really care how he managed to do it. Just so long as she wasn't lost to him forever.



## **Reality Knows No Mercy...**

“**Y**OU ARE NOT the first to feel being given into the keeping of the cloister hard to accept.”

The Mother Superior used a kind tone. What filled Rhona’s mouth with bitterness was the knowing look in the woman’s eyes.

She was speaking from experience.

“In time, you will be grateful someone thought to make certain you had a place,” the nun continued. “Many in this world do not enjoy such circumstances.”

The nun wore the simplest of clothing. Her wimple was worn and yet, still serviceable. She sent Rhona a kind smile before she joined the line of nuns walking into the house.

Rhona didn’t have to leave.

She looked at the house. It was her home. So she walked back up the steps.

The nuns were quiet while they went about their work. Bundles were taken up to the upper floor while someone started working in the kitchen. The scent of warm food began to fill the lower floor, striking Rhona with an unexpected softening toward the idea of living with the nuns as one of their numbers. Even hushed as the nuns were, they drove away the silence that had been lingering since her mother died.

A soft bell chimed. Rhona watched the nuns appear from where they had been, lining up before kneeling before a statue of the Holy Virgin which they had brought with them. Like them, it was a simple wooden carving. Serviceable and yet artfully crafted.

After making their obedience, they began to sing. The soft tones of worship were lyrical and while not precisely cheerful, they did banish the last of the lingering shadows from the house.

When they finished, they filed past the mother superior on their way to the supper table. Rhona stood still but the mother superior did not forget her.

“Come Child,” she said softly. “Break bread with your sisters. We are your family now.”



## ***A Restless Spirit Finds Companionship in the Night...***

**W**OULD THE WELL be further along than it had been?

Rhona opened her eyes with the question on her mind. Even in the dark of night, slumber refused to claim her. Instead, her mind churned. She heard the soft sounds of the other nuns who were in the room with her now.

She couldn't go to the window to open the shutters.

It seemed such a harsh restriction. Every window was shut tight against the night now and Rhona was almost sure that she felt the house being stifled.

There was no rain tonight.

In fact, the moon would be full, with no clouds to cover it.

How could she lie in a dark room while there was bright moonlight to frolic in? One of the nuns began to snore, proving that she was alone in thinking the room was stifling.

If the man was out digging the well, she would not be alone.

Just thinking of him made her heart start thumping harder. A sense of adventure came along with that acceleration of her heart. Her blood went racing through her body, making climbing out from beneath her bedding no trouble at all.

She took her shoes with her to the door and set off down the steps. The kitchen door was the easiest to open and the hinges didn't even squeak.

It was worth the effort.

Outside, as she'd known it would be, the moon was full. Bright light filled the air in a unique way so that the night

delighted the senses. There was enough light to see and yet, not enough to overpower her other senses.

She heard the crickets and the sound of an owl. There was the crunch of dried leaves beneath her feet and the crunching of dry stalks. Each season had its own sounds and scents. Now she smelled the musty scent of old leaves and dried-out seed pods. The pinecones were brown, and the oak trees had dropped their acorns.

In another week it would be Samhain, the beginning of the darker half of the year. The hills would be dotted with bonfires to celebrate the end of the harvest.

*Will it mark the beginning of your life as a nun?*

Rhona walked faster, trying to outrun her own thoughts. The real difficulty was the fact that the nuns had improved the feeling inside of her house and that made it impossible to reject the idea of joining them.

It was a quandary.

One she didn't want to try to solve.

So she climbed up to the meadow, smiling when she found the cover over the spot where the well was being dug. Now there was the scent of water. Kneeling down, Rhona struggled to move the thick logs covering the open hole.

“Are ye going to make me worry about ye falling in, lass?”

Rhona gasped. She started to jump forward, heading right into the hole. A strong arm caught her around the waist and lifted her up and away from it.

He spun her loose but stood between her and the well.

“You startled me.” Rhona defended herself.

He grunted. “Ye know it is a well.”

She did, and it was beginning to fill with water. She could smell it. Rhona rubbed her waist while she tried to get her mind to start working. It seemed as though the concept of speaking had just become impossible for her.

“Did I hurt ye, lass?” he asked.

Rhona shook her head. But he looked at her, rubbing her waist. She forced herself to stop.

“It...tingles...where we touched,” she muttered.

His lips twitched, and then his lips parted in a wide smile. “Is that so, lass?”

His tone was warm and hinted at something she didn’t quite understand. Some forbidden thing that she was insanely curious to discover more about.

And she liked it. For there was a sensation brewing inside her that made her want to encourage him to continue to smile at her.

“It is,” she confirmed.

She heard him draw in a breath almost as though she’d impressed him. That sensation inside of her heated up some more, approaching the boiling point.

“Ye are toying with me, lass,” he admonished her.

Rhona shook her head. “I am speaking truthfully, sir... Um...What is your name?”

He crossed his arms over his chest indecisively. “It might be best if I do nae tell ye who I am, lass.”

“Oh, did you see the nuns arrive today?” Rhona asked. Her elation vanished as quickly as a bunny darting into the thicket at the sign of a predator, leaving her feeling at the mercy of her circumstances. “Do you also feel I should accept my half-brother’s decree to take the veil?”

Speaking the words out loud made her miserable. “They have claimed the house and every last item inside right down to the grain in the storage,” Rhona continued. “The priest says I must atone for my parents’ sins.”

He snorted. “Ye can live yer own life.” It helped banish the helplessness that had been tightening around her. Rhona looked up at him, but she was frustrated.



“You shouldn’t offer me solace,” she rebuked. “Not when you refuse to tell me your name.” She was being emotional.

Rhona drew in a deep breath. “It’s my fault, coming up here without an invitation from you.” She tipped her head back, looking up at the moon. “My mother and I had happy times here. I wanted to bid them farewell.”

His warning wasn’t misplaced. It had been a long time, but she still recalled the whispers in the kitchens of the Wilmiton house. Tales of girls who had been attacked because they strayed from the protection of their families.

It was time to run back to her burrow before she was plucked from the meadow by a hungry owl.

Rhona turned then to start back down the meadow.

But he caught her wrist.

This time, she gasped. The connection between their flesh did more than tingle. A ripple of intensity went up her arm and through her body. It was as though she’d only been half-awake for her entire life because now, she was so aware of him that the contact was like the difference between night and day.

Except the darkness around them seemed to suit the strange sensations growing inside of her far better than sunlight would have. There was a whisper in the wind, teasing her with a promise of more delight should she allow him to pull her back toward him.

“My name is Peadair. I should let ye go back to a safe life, but the truth is...I do nae want to.”

The wind gusted.

All around them, the trees swayed, their limbs rustling like some sort of applause.

Was her mother speaking to her? Or was it the evil spirits of the night trying to encourage her to stray into their clutches?

“What do you want to do, Peadair?” Rhona shouldn’t have asked the question and yet, she was certain it would torment

her for the rest of her days if she didn't find the courage to speak.

"I want to tempt ye to kiss me beneath the moonlight, lass," he muttered. "But that is a selfish thing since ye are to take the veil."

The wind blew again. This time it came from behind her. The fabric of her skirts billowed toward him.

Did he tug her towards him?

Or did the wind push her?

Rhona didn't care. He enfolded her in his embrace and lifted her chin so he might press that promised kiss against her lips. There was no thought, only reaction. She couldn't ever have imagined how intense the kiss would be.

Her belly twisted and her head felt light. There in the place where she'd lived her happiest times, Rhona discovered there were in fact greater heights for her to experience. A far deeper form of companionship.

But the wind gusted again. This time a branch in the forest cracked and fell. The sound startled them both. Peadair broke away from her, pushing her behind him while he faced the threat head-on.

When nothing materialized from the edge of the forest, he relaxed.

"I suppose the wind has the right idea...interrupting us," Peadair muttered when he turned back to face her.

Rhona didn't know what came next, only that she'd lost all will to resist. So yes, it was wise that the wind had interceded.

He reached out and smoothed some hair back from her face. "Go back to yer bed, lass."

"But—"

Peadair pressed his thumb over her lips. "Ye tempt me almost beyond me discipline Rhona. And the way ye kissed me back tells me ye feel the same."

She did.

Even so, Rhona stepped away from him. It felt as though she ripped her skin off in doing it too. The wind blew again, this time full on her front, as if to tell her to go now.

So she went but the moment would live inside her heart for the rest of her life. What bothered her about that was knowing that taking the veil would mean pledging herself to no more adventures. No moonlight dances. No kisses. She wasn't sure she could do it.

But reality wasn't going to allow her to refuse.



## **Honor is a Gift a Man gives to Himself...**

“**S**HE’S A FAIR lassie...” Hamish was trying to tread lightly with his words.

But Peadair knew his clansman had witnessed him kissing Rhona.

“I should have thought of the lass’s reputation.” Peadair decided to name his own crime.

“Aye, that’s what I was getting at.” Hamish was quick to agree. “She lives in a small village. No man wants a wife who is known to be giving away her kisses to others.” Hamish squirmed. “And seeing as how she’s promised to the Church... ye cannae be wedding her yerself.”

Hamish shook his head. He reached out and patted Peadair on the shoulder. Clearly, his friend thought the matter finished.

He just wished he could resign himself to never seeing Rhona again.

But he could not.



## **At the Cross Roads of Life...There is No Perfect Choice...**

FATHER ISSAC RETURNED in the morning.

He was clearly pleased with the changes the nuns had made in the house. He took a long time inspecting the tiny chapel they had made of the front sitting room.

“Excellent.” The priest spoke after a silent prayer. “Here, you shall do the work of the Church. So close to the border, fleece can be gathered easily. Your sisters will card, spin, and knit during the winter, and work the land in the spring and summer.”

The mother superior had her hands tucked beneath the long tabard which was worn over her underrobe. She stood silently, listening attentively.

Father Issac finished. He paused for a moment before he caught sight of Rhona. There was a look of satisfaction in his gaze that made Rhona slightly guilty about resenting him. There were a full dozen nuns in the house now, and there was plenty of room for twice that number. Wasn't it selfish of her to want to keep it all for herself?

“Your name will be Sister Rebekah, in remembrance of the fact that you honor the call to service that was sent to you.”

Father Issac looked at the floor in front of him. When Rhona continued to stand, he cleared his throat and looked at the floor once more.

“Kneel,” Mother Superior whispered.

“I cannot take a vow I do not feel a passion for,” Rhona objected. She tried to temper her tone but there was still a hint of rebellion edging her words.

“Just as with marriage, passion grows after the ceremony,” Father Issac instructed her. He locked gazes with her and this time he pointed at the floor in front of him.

“As you serve, your devotion will yield contentment,” Mother Superior added.

Such an act would benefit more than just herself. Rhona tried to think of the supper she’d shared with the other nuns and the feeling of family she had noticed.

Family was so great a blessing, one she longed for.

But there was a price...

She would never be free to feel Peadair’s kiss again.

Rhona shook her head, earning a frown from the priest. “If that is your choice, you should not share in the warmth of this house. You shall be put out.”

“The girl should be granted time to adjust,” Mother Superior suggested.

Father Issac didn’t agree. His eyes narrowed and a pinched look appeared around his mouth. “She shall not join in Communion with the members of this house who have all pledged their lives to the service of the Church. To sit at the table with them would be to belittle the faith they have in taking their own vows.”

Several of the nuns had gathered. They began to point at the spot in front of the priest, silently urging her to bend to his demand.

Yet her knees felt as solid as the oak trees surrounding the meadow.

“There is a small work shed at the top of the meadow.” Mother Superior’s voice was compassionate. “There is no hearth for warmth or light. The structure will afford her a view of the house and all that might be hers once she bends. We shall have the comfort of knowing we have followed our Lord’s example of not forgetting to bring the straying sheep back into the fold.”

Father Issac wasn't content with the idea. But he swallowed his response and nodded. "Send her to the shed. Nothing in this house is to be spared for her comfort. If she is to have bread, she must trade linen fiber or carded wool for it. There shall be neither conversation nor kind expressions, for those things are reserved for the members of this house." Father Issac sent Rhona a stern look of disapproval. "Only after you bend shall you earn mercy."



## **Longing Makes the Heart Feel Empty...**

**T**HE NIGHT HAD always held such magic before.

Rhona longed to folic beneath the stars but by each day's end, she fell into an exhausted slumber. In keeping with the decree of Father Issac, she had to produce something of value or suffer starvation.

She'd never realized how long a week could last.

The weather didn't offer her any cheer either. Dark clouds crowded the sky, peppering the little shed with cold rain. Beyond the threshold of her shelter was a sea of mud that swallowed up the summer meadow, transforming it into a bog.

A second week crawled by, and Rhona found herself looking toward the house with a hunger she feared would transform into a longing. Being alone suited her not at all.

*Does taking the veil suit you?*

Her inner voice wanted to help her persevere, but the truth was, she was bending. It wasn't the endless work that made her think of kneeling before Father Issac; it was the solitude.

"I did not want to be a nun either."

Rhona looked up from carding wool. The Mother Superior was standing in the doorway of the little shed. She smiled warmly at Rhona.

"You think it a harsh life," Mother Superior continued. She withdrew a bundle from beneath her tabard. "Yet there are others which offer fewer comforts or dignity."

She placed a bundle on the window ledge.



“Come back to the house, Child. I do not wish to know our newfound comfort comes from your suffering.”

Rhona tightened her grip on the handles of the carding paddles. Mother Superior was watching her.

“Is there a man in your heart?” Mother asked. “If so... where is he?”

Rhona longed to know where Peadair was as well.

She'd tested him. Was that the reason for his absence?

He owed her nothing.

“So that is what stands between you and taking vows.” Mother Superior read the expression on Rhona's face correctly. She tucked her hands back beneath her tabard while she contemplated Rhona. “I will see you next week, Child, if you do not come to me first.”

The nun was gone as silently as she had appeared. It wasn't until Rhona noticed the sound of the rain hitting the thatch on the roof that she realized how solitary her life was now.

But she still didn't want to take vows she wasn't sincere in taking.

You won't be the first to make do with what you can get...

Her inner voice was correct, but it frustrated her. So she began to pull the paddles again to straighten out the fibers of wool. Swish-swish. Back and forth. Simple, repetitive work. She didn't loathe it, but she wasn't ready to give up on there being some moments of excitement in her life as well.

Like Peadair's kiss.

Two weeks really wasn't all that long.

Not when she was thinking about doing something that would last for the rest of her life.



## **When Fate and Whimsy Combine...**

SAMHAIN WAS THE day when the veil between the living and the dead was at its thinnest.

Such was a pagan belief and Father Issac would disapprove for certain. Well, he already found little about her to praise.

Rhona awoke in the middle of the night. It was a sudden ending of her slumber, like an interruption. She blinked, trying to decide if she'd heard something, or if it was just her longing for company.

Whatever the cause, she was wide awake. So much so, that she felt like something was waiting for her outside the little shed. Wishful thinking or not, Rhona crawled out from beneath the bed she'd made of her surcoat. She listened for a moment but couldn't detect any sound of rain. So she opened the door, just a tiny amount.

She gasped at the sight in front of her. The sky, which had been covered in dark clouds, was suddenly free of them. It was nearly magical, for the stars were bright and the crescent moon looked like a smile waiting to greet anyone willing to venture out into the night.

And there in the middle of the meadow, was the well.

Its smooth stone exterior stood there where it had not been the last time Rhona looked out of the door. A thick branch had grown over it with a rope was wound onto it.

And there were candles. At least a dozen of them were set around the new well. Their wicks were lit, and the yellow flames danced in the night breeze.

Peadair was there too.

He stood tall and perfect, just the way she remembered him. Tonight, the candles illuminated his face, showing her that he was looking at her.

The wind blew from behind her like it was urging her up the hill to where the well was and where Peadair stood.

Rhona didn't intend to argue. She'd never felt so confident, never wanted to walk somewhere more in her life. Never really understood the word destiny until that very moment for she felt as though things beyond the mortal world were urging her along.

She didn't know what awaited her, but she knew it was the only path to walk. By the time she made it to him, she was breathless, but she knew it wasn't the walk that had taxed her. Her heart was hammering because somehow, Peadair was her future.

"We have finished the well, lass," he muttered when she'd reached him. "It is time for us to go home."

Her breath caught. The idea of him leaving made it feel like her heart was being torn in half.

He lifted his hand, offering it palm up. "Will ye wed me, lass? Come away with me with no more than my promise that ye shall have a good life."

Rhona was already placing her hand into his before he finished asking. She blinked in surprise when she heard him, though. "Wed?"

Peadair tilted his head to one side. "Aye. I would not care to curse this well by behaving dishonorably and stealing ye away without marrying."

"You have stolen my heart," Rhona declared.

There was a chuckle from behind Peadair.

Or maybe it was Peadair who rumbled with amusement. From the darkness beyond the circle of light the lanterns cast, men moved forward. They made a half circle behind Peadair.

“Do ye mind, lass?” Peadair asked. “Will it bother ye that ye will not respect yer father’s wishes for ye to take the veil?”

Rhona shook her head. “My mother promised me that someday I would fall in love. My father gave us this house to live in, happily. It was his widow who decreed I should take the veil, and later my half-brother out of spite and greed.”

Rhona discovered she was holding her breath by the time she finished. There was a tension in the air, even if she didn’t quite know the cause of it. Peadair smiled at her before he turned his head to look across the new well at something still concealed within the darkness.

A shadow shifted and formed into a man. He moved forward, his hands tucked into the wide sleeves of his religious robe. He looked for a long time at Rhona. She stared straight back, for she’d spoken truthfully.

“I will wed you,” the priest stated firmly.

The men behind Peadair nodded and made sounds of approval.

But Rhona made a small sound of protest. Peadair’s grip tightened around her fingers. As long as she lived, she knew she would recall that little squeeze, for it was an impulse and something that couldn’t be faked.

He longed for her, just as much as she wanted their union.

Like they were two parts of a whole.

“Speak, Child,” the priest urged. “Is there guilt stirring inside of you? If so, you cannot take a holy sacrament.”

“I do not have a dowry,” Rhona muttered, fighting back the urge to cry. “My house has been given to the Church. Even this clothing I wear has been given to them.”

“If the dowry has been given, you should take the veil,” Father Isaac declared.

The pain Rhona had felt before was nothing compared to the agony that stabbed through her at that moment. She

clasped Peadair's hand tightly, earning a reassuring squeeze in return.

"As to that, Father, what has value to me is this well," Peadair said. "If we can keep the English away from it, that is dowry enough. I have the blessing from me Chief."

"You do?" Rhona asked.

Peadair returned his gaze to hers. "Aye, lass. I would not dishonor ye with anything less. I half-feared ye'd not be waiting for me, but I needed to return home to speak directly to me Chief before returning with a bride."

Rhona felt her cheeks warming. Even in the dim light, Peadair's gaze shifted to her face, making it clear that he saw the blush.

"Is there a witness to this agreement?" the priest asked.

Hamish cleared his throat. "Aye."

The priest nodded. He turned back to Rhona and Peadair and lifted his hands out from beneath his chasuble to begin the ceremony.

The wind blew around them, teasing her ankles while the priest intoned the words that would bind them together. The concept of unity suddenly blossomed into something altogether more encompassing than Rhona had ever understood before. It was beyond her imagination, and she happily gave herself completely to it.

Now and forever.



## **And the End is, in Fact, a Beginning....**

FATHER ISSAC HUFFED and puffed on his way up from the house. The little circle of nuns heard him groan before he managed to meet them.

“Yes?” Father Issac muttered in an irritated tone. “Has the girl bent at last? Bring her down to take her vows.”

“Look at the well, Father.”

The voice was so meek that Father Issac wasn’t certain which one of the nuns spoke. Not that it mattered. He cleared his throat and took a few steps toward the well.

“I do not recall a well being here,” Father Issac muttered.

“It was not there yesterday,” a nun insisted with wide eyes.

The rest of the sisters shook their heads to confirm that they had not seen the well before.

Father Issac cleared his throat. “A well...does not appear overnight.”

“Unless it’s enchanted.”

Father Issac turned his head to see Norla standing at the edge of the thicket. Samuel and Clement had come with her. All three of them were on the edge of the forest, not even a toe in the meadow.

“There are stories Father,” Samuel began. “Tales of this meadow being enchanted.”

“Aye,” Clement added. “That’s why the house could never be sold. No one wanted to risk their little ones being lured away by the Fae folk.”

“This is why the Church needs to have a presence here,” Father Issac declared. “It is time for these tales to stop being repeated.”

“They have taken the girl,” Clement said. His old voice crackled with too many years to count, lending credence to his words. He pointed a gnarled finger at the well.

Father Issac turned and squinted.

There on the edge of the well sat Rhona’s clothing. On top of them lay a head wreath of autumn leaves, all scarlet and gold, along with a barley stalk bridal crown, the stems carefully crafted into a headpiece that dated further back in time than anyone recalled. It was the traditional—although pagan—adornment for an autumn bride.

“Do you think she drank from the well at midnight?” Norla asked in a husked tone. “She must have seen the face of her groom.”

“If she drank the water, the Fae would think it a binding commitment,” Clement answered.

“Such a sweet, tender lass,” Samuel muttered. “Little wonder she was enchanted by the well...left in a cold, dark shed by herself.”

Father Issac made the sign of the cross over his chest. His complexion had turned pasty.

“I only intended to have the girl see the blessing of joining the cloister,” the priest defended himself. “I wouldn’t have left her there much longer.”

“Do nae be too hard on yourself, Father,” Clement spoke up. “The girl’s mother often danced upon the green beneath the moonlight.”

“The cloister’s life would have saved her,” Father Issac muttered with a shake of his head. “It is too late now.”

Everyone was silent for a long moment. A gust of wind howled down from the north, bringing the bite of winter.

“Return to your prayers,” Father Issac instructed the nuns.

One of their numbers started toward the clothing. Norla drew a huge gasp. Her eyes were wide with alarm when the nun and Father Issic looked toward her.

“Are you not worried the enchantment will spread to you?” Norla asked in a hushed tone.

The nun jumped back and hid her hands beneath her tabard.

“Leave the clothing,” Father Issac decreed. “It is like the thirty pieces of silver paid to betray Christ...it will only bring a curse to anyone foolish enough to use it.”

He muttered a soft prayer and made another sign of the cross before he headed back for the house.





## **When, at Last, a Prophecy Comes to Pass....**

“**D**ID YE DANCE upon the green in the moonlight lass?”  
Peadair asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

Rhona was busy dressing, but she flashed him a smile that was full of joy. She was nearly bursting because she was so happy.

“The night we arrived here, it was cold and dark. I was a child and frightened. This is what my mother said to me...”  
Rhona reached out to take his hands in hers.

“This is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies. Our hearts will be brimming full of merriment. And before you know it, you will fall in love with a fine man here on the borderland.”

Peadair threw his head back and laughed. When he lowered his chin, his eyes were sparkling. She wanted to remember that look, for it was her future there in his eyes. One she was eager to begin.

“Come lass, it’s time to go home where I shall remain happily enchanted by ye forever.”

Peadair clasped her hand and turned so that he was facing north. He began to walk, and Rhona followed him without looking back.

*Do you see me, Mother? I shall be so very happy...so you do not need to worry.*

The End

# **Additional Dragonblade books by Author Mary Wine**

## **The Enchanted Well Series**

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[The Highlander's Captive \(Book 3\)](#)

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[Midnight Flame \(Novella\)](#)

## **About Mary Wine**

Mary Wine has written over twenty novels that take her readers from the pages of history to the far reaches of space. Recent winner of a 2008 EPPIE Award for erotic western romance, her book LET ME LOVE YOU was quoted “Not to be missed...” by Lora Leigh, New York Times best-selling author.

When she’s not abusing a laptop, she spends time with her sewing machines...all of them! Making historical garments is her second passion. From corsets and knickers to court dresses of Elizabeth I, the most expensive clothes she owns are hundreds of years out of date. She’s also an active student of martial arts, having earned the rank of second degree black belt.

# **Once Upon a Haunted Haven**

Lexi Post

## **Acknowledgments**

For my wonderful husband, Bob Fabich, Sr., who came into my life at just the right time.

For my sister, Paige Wood, who's up for reading whatever I write, no matter how unusual.

Lastly, I need to thank Marie Patrick, my critique partner, for listening to my ideas for this story and to all my groaning about how to fit everything in. She is the best!

*Inspired by William Wordsworth's poem "She was a Phantom  
of Delight."*



# Chapter One

*Northampton*

*September, 1817*

*HIS WARM HANDS covered her shoulders from behind as he nuzzled her neck. Letting her head fall back against his shoulder, Lady Juliet Hastings of Abercorn shivered with anticipation. She knew his hands, his lips, his body, and soon he would take her to the stars. Her light shift was too much for her heated body and she itched to have it off, to feel him touch her, kiss her in places that made her feel alive.*

*Even at the thought, her shift was gone and she faced him, his hard nakedness touching hers. He pulled her tight against him as his mouth took hers in a kiss that made her bare toes curl. She felt loved, beautiful, and worthy all at once. His kiss moved from her lips to her neck and lower still. She held her breath to what she knew came next. His mouth—*

A sharp bump to her temple woke her as her head banged against the side of the coach. Blinking, it took her a moment to recognize her surroundings as the usual wave of cold after the dream flowed over her, making her pull her cloak tightly about her. With no one in the coach, there was no need to blush, but she did. He had followed her!

Pushing aside the curtain over the window, she looked out at a tree-lined road lit by the coach lanterns in the night. When she'd left Thorndale Manor, she'd assured herself the dreams would stop, but if anything they seemed more real, as if she were in a waking dream. It was far too unsettling, and too intimate to confide to anyone.

She let the curtain fall. The dreams had been her only solace after her husband died. It had been barely half a day before his brother had descended upon Thorndale Manor and

made it clear she must leave. He cared not that she had no family left and nowhere to go, or rather almost nowhere. With only her clothes, a few books, some private items, and her horse, she was to take up residence in her only inheritance, a haunted cottage.

She shivered at the thought of her dire straits. The home had been passed down from her great-aunt, to her grandmother, then to her mother, neither of the past two generations having ever dared venture to it. She'd been told tales of the haunting since a young child. And now, with no servants and but a basket of food, she was about to be the first to spend a night at Brambling Cottage in generations.

She'd sent a letter to the caretaker, not knowing exactly when she'd be arriving, having postponed her departure as long as possible. She hoped Mr. Kingman had at least thought to set wood for a fire and maybe a lantern.

The coach slowed. Moving aside the curtain again, she found the trees barely discernable. Were they being robbed? She held her breath as the coach came to a halt. She jumped when the door opened, but it was only her coachman, or rather the man who *used* to be her coachman.

“Why are we stopping?” Her voice barely made a dent in the silence of the night.

“We have arrived, my lady.” The coachman held out his hand to help her to descend.

Beyond his figure was nothing but darkness. No owl hooted nor horse neighed, as if they knew better than to disturb the air with their sound. She swallowed hard, gathering her courage. Finally, she took his hand and stepped to the ground.

Before her were only thick woods, and she frowned.

“This way, my lady.” Holding a lantern with one hand, he held the other out toward the front of the coach.

Picking up the skirts of her black traveling dress, she moved forward on stiff limbs, the chill of the air making her



thankful she wore her wool cloak. Once past the horses, she looked up to find a large cottage, the lower floor's windows and two above lit with cheery light. Her eyes itched with tears at the welcome sight.

“There looks to be a small stable around the side. If you'd like, I can settle your mare into her new home?”

She nodded, grateful for the man's thoughtfulness and whoever had prepared her home. Feeling a little better, she moved forward and opened the gate, which was also whisper quiet, reminding her that despite the look, she was about to enter her ancestor's domain.

No sooner had she closed the little gate and taken a step upon the narrow flagstone walkway, then the front door opened.

She froze, her hand to her chest as her breath stopped.

A large, tall figure moved into the doorway, backlit by the deceptively warm environs behind him. “Welcome to the nest.”

At the sound of his deep bass voice, her heart skittered, and the little hairs on her arms rose. She knew that voice! It was the man in her dreams. The one who kept her company at night and distracted her from her ogre-in-law for four long months. How could she have dreamed of a real person? Avid curiosity at what he looked like fought with her fear. Forcing courage into her stance that she didn't truly have, she lifted her chin slightly. “The nest?”

A low chuckle issued from him, causing tiny ripples of pleasure to flow through her body. “That's what your great-aunt called it.”

That he knew how her ancestor had referred to the cottage had her fear overriding every other emotion, and she took an instinctive step back. Was he a ghost?

“I apologize. I should perhaps introduce myself. I'm Noah Kingman, the latest in my line to take care of Brambling

Cottage, and the only one honored to have a Finch come home.”

Home? Honored? Though she couldn't see his face, it was as if he smiled as he spoke. Relieved he was not a ghost, she forced her legs to move forward. “I'm Lady Juliet Hastings of Abercorn.” Despite her intent to draw close enough to see his face, she slowed to a stop after three steps.

“No need to introduce yourself, my lady. I would recognize you as a Finch if I were to notice you across the Burlington Arcade in London.”

Her heart raced at his words. Surely, he could not have actually been in her dreams! She felt her cheeks heat. “You... you could?”

This time he laughed. “Oh, yes.” He stepped to the side and opened his arm toward the beckoning warmth inside. “Come see why.”

Her curiosity overrode her fear, and she started forward again. As she neared him, his face, illuminated by the light, became clear, and she stumbled upon the walkway.

His hand shot out and grabbed her arm to keep her upright. “It appears we have a rogue stone. I will be sure to get that fixed on the morrow.”

She should say something, but her throat had closed. Mr. Kingman's face surpassed any other man's. He had a high forehead with dark brows that framed the most brilliant green eyes she'd ever seen. High cheekbones gave him an aristocratic appearance, but the shoulder length black hair and slightly stubbled square jaw made it clear he was a commoner. No peer would be seen with such a roughened jawline. Unfortunately, it somehow made him more stunning, and his very broad shoulders just added to the pure maleness radiating from him through his rough white shirt.

“Lady Juliet, are you injured?” His brows lowered and concern filled his eyes.

She wrested her gaze from his face and shook her head, forcing herself to look toward the doorway and not at him. Still, his scent, that of a deep wooded forest, perhaps pine, wafted over her, calming her nerves. “No. It’s just difficult to see out here.”

He recognized her hint immediately. “Please come inside. I know it’s not what you’re used to, but I hope I made it comfortable.”

She opened her mouth to ask if he had actually readied her new home himself, but thought better of it and instead stepped across the threshold.



NOAH COULDN’T STOP gazing at Lady Juliet Finch. Though that wasn’t her name anymore, that’s who she would always be to him. As soon as he’d opened the door and she’d turned toward him, the light from the windows spilling over her, he knew her. She looked exactly like her ancestor, Orinda Finch.

Though her mahogany tresses were pulled back, many had escaped on her journey and framed her delicate heart-shaped face. Her lips were full, lightly pink, her nose aquiline and her eyes almond shaped. He’d anxiously awaited her approach to discover their color, laughing inside to see they were a unique combination of blue and green, just like Orinda’s. Her figure was petite, the thick cloak looking too heavy for her small frame to bear.

He didn’t understand her hesitancy, which concerned him as it may be himself she feared. But as he’d grasped her arm, he could feel how small she truly was. Determinedly, he kept silent as he stepped inside after her and allowed her to view the parlor.

Her head swiveled from left to right, her shoulders relaxing.

He’d been right to have everything ready, despite what his brother had said. Directly across from them, a fire crackled in the fireplace.

She turned to look at him. “This was not what I expected.” Her smile was faint, but relief shone in her gaze.

Grinning, he stepped farther into the main room. “Did you expect larger or smaller?”

“Neither. I had surmised it would be...” she tilted her head, “darker.”

He found the comment odd. Brambling Cottage sat nestled among the trees, yes, but the grounds were filled with flowers, birds, and sunshine during the day. “Well, it is night.”

She looked askance at him, her lip quirking up slightly. “I meant inside. For a haunted cottage, it feels warm and cozy.”

As understanding dawned, he held back his smile. “Allow me to show you the rest.” He strode past the fireplace where Orinda’s portrait hung.

“Thank you, that would be—”

When she didn’t continue, he turned back to find her staring at her great-aunt. Her mouth open and her eyes round as she stood in shock.

Had no one told her she resembled, no, not resembled, had the exact appearance of her ancestor? He walked back to where she stood and looked at the woman in the portrait. It was Orinda, yet it was now Juliet, only in different clothing. He’d fallen in love with the painting since his father had first allowed him to care for the inside of the cottage. As a very young man, he’d felt as if she gazed at him like a grandson. To be fair, he’d been in love with the stories his mother told of her long before he’d seen the portrait.

Lady Juliet raised her hand and pointed at the painting. “That’s me.” Her voice could barely be heard above the crackling of the fire.

“I suppose, in some way, it is. That’s Lady Orinda, your ancestor. She was the last Finch to live here before you arrived. I’m sure she’s quite pleased you’re here.”

She turned a very pale face toward him. “You talk as if she’s still alive.”

Part of him wanted to tell her Orinda’s spirit was very much present, but she was obviously quite scared. “Of course she’s not alive.” He held his arm out toward his right where an open doorway led to the kitchen. “Come, let me show you the rest of the rooms. I’m sure you’re tired and would like to rest after your long journey.”

Bravely, she nodded, keeping her gaze from the portrait.

More than a little confused by Juliet’s fearful reactions, he kept his dialogue to information regarding the physical home. After showing her the kitchen behind the fireplace and the small dining room adjacent to the parlor, he took a lantern from the hook by the stairs and led her up to the next level and the single bedroom with a small private sitting room. He’d started fires in both rooms as well.

Her silence as he explained where all the supplies were told him she was too tired to truly understand. After leading her back downstairs, they found two trunks and a small bag had been placed inside the now closed door. “Would you like me to bring any of these upstairs?”

She ignored him and instead ran to the door and opened it. “Thank you!”

“You take care of yourself, my lady.”

Though he heard the coachman click his tongue and the harness jingle as he headed for home, Juliet remained at the doorway.

Not waiting for an answer, he hefted one of the large trunks on his shoulder and brought it upstairs, setting it down on the floor of the sitting room.

When he returned downstairs, Juliet had closed the door, but remained standing next to it staring at the fire across the room.

“Would you like this one in your bedroom or the upstairs sitting room?”

She finally moved her gaze and looked at him, the loneliness in her eyes making his stomach clench. “The sitting room will be fine.” She touched the small bag the coachman had set on the straight back chair by the door. “I can carry this up myself.”

“Then I will put this upstairs and leave you to settle in.” Hefting the second, lighter trunk on his shoulder, he climbed the stairs, pleased that the third step from the bottom no longer squeaked. He’d fixed it as soon as he’d received her letter.

Placing the trunk next to the other, he stood gazing at the lighter trunk idly wondering what was inside. “Perhaps that one is her unmentionables, while the first is her gowns.”

No sooner had he said the words than the small trunk lock clicked and the lid lifted a crack.

“No, Orinda. I will not disturb her privacy.” He folded his arms and waited.

Finally, the lid closed and the click of the lock sounded in the silence. He dropped his arms. “She’s had a long journey and is very tired. Don’t send her dreams tonight. Allow her to rest.”

He didn’t wait for a response nor expect one, but turned around and strode back down the stairs. It had been a long time since Orinda had a guest. He just hoped she could refrain from scaring her great-niece away.

Striding into the parlor, he found Juliet asleep on the settee, no doubt tired from her travels. Quietly, he laid the cloak she’d draped on a chair over her and left, closing the door behind him.

He took the short path to the stable where he found her animal well cared for. Untying his horse, he walked him out before mounting. Looking back at the windows, he couldn’t see her, but in his mind he did. “Orinda, I think she needs a lot of tender care.” With that, he headed for home, taking the

winding path through the woods, looking forward to his nightly dreams.



## Chapter Two

JULIET RETRIEVED THE teapot from the hook in the kitchen fireplace and poured the steaming brew into the Wedgewood cup. Returning the pot to its hanger, she added sugar to her cup, then sat at the simple table in the room, adjusting the skirts of her pale gray day dress. The light from the long window dappled the room as it filtered past the ivy growing around its edges.

After a wonderful night's rest with no dreams and no worries, she'd woken in much better spirits. She was sure the fear of the unknown had her imagining the worst and in the light of day, she could see the cottage was but a cottage, and though small, it was a home.

She took a sip of tea, grateful that Mr. Kingman had stocked a few necessities in the small larder. To think, a commoner had been in her dreams, in her bed! That had truly been a shock. Then to discover she looked exactly like her great-aunt had been another surprise.

Taking a bite of a scone from the dozen Cook had insisted she take on her trip, she wondered how the staff were getting along back at Thorndale Manor. They had all been kind to her, and she worried about them under their new lord. At least her brother-in-law had let them keep their positions.

Now, she'd have to manage her own household, which should not be difficult, since she couldn't afford even one servant. Unfortunately, beyond making tea, she had no cooking skills. She hadn't even known how to add wood to the fire since they used coal at Thorndale, and she'd almost caught her dress on fire when sparks sprayed after she threw a log in.

Despite the morning sunshine, her true situation began to weigh on her spirit. On the verge of tears, she started as a



warmth passed over her as if she'd been hugged. It didn't frighten her and actually made her feel better. "I imagine I should take this new existence one moment at a time."

As if the world agreed with her plan, a finch landed on the vine outside the window. She smiled as she watched it inspect itself in the reflection before flying off. She took the last bite of scone, happy that at least she'd been able to dress herself thanks to her forward-thinking lady's maid who'd suggested she purchase front-tying stays. She'd have never thought of that, which made her appreciate the skills of her staff far too late.

Needing a distraction, she pulled closer the little book that she'd brought down with her from her sitting area. She hadn't remembered seeing it the night before, but as she passed through the room, the pretty illustration of a finch on the cover had caught her eye. Opening it, she read, "The diary of one Orinda Finch, formerly of Portsmouth and now of North Hampton."

Her heart leapt at the words. This was her great-aunt's diary! The very one who was talked about in whispers and touted as a depraved woman. While her mind told her to close the book immediately, her fingers itched to turn the page. Not truly willing to face her new life yet, she turned the page.

*I, Orinda Finch, start my exciting new life today. Just two days past I was dreading my marriage so much, I lost the contents of my stomach on the flagstone pathway to the church. But today I am free and in love. I have no doubt my parents dismissed every last manservant in their employ, and I wish I could give them all a letter of reference, but Ambrose says we must not contact them until we return from Gretna Green. I'm so happy to be journeying there that I fairly floated out of bed this morning. I am wearing my rose embroidered pink dress. I cannot express enough how happy I am to become Mrs. Miller. I'm not sure Ambrose's good friend will be pleased. He tells me Mr.*

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Turning the page, she stared at it surprised. “Mr. who?” Flipping more pages, she found them all to be blank. Disappointment filled her. Had something horrid happened? Had the friend stopped the marriage? Had the parents? Or had Ambrose simply arrived? Closing the little book, she couldn’t seem to take her hand from it. It was as if the very happiness inside radiated outward.

A knock sounded on the door, and she idly wondered who it could be. When it sounded again, she remembered no butler would be answering. She rose and quickly walked into the parlor. As she opened the door, her breath caught. Mr. Kingman stood there in the bright sunlight, appearing more striking than he had the night before.

Admiration shone in his eyes before he gave her a nod. “Good morning, Lady Juliet. I trust you slept well?”

She looked askance at him. “I’m Lady Abercorn. Yes, I slept very well, Mr. Kingman. Do you wish to come in?” She backed up to allow him to enter, though it was barely half-past nine. Not even close to calling hours. Then again, he wouldn’t be calling. He wasn’t a peer.

“Please, I’m Noah.”

She couldn’t imagine calling him by his given name. It just wasn’t done.

“I came to see how you fared last eve.” He strode past her and the scent of fresh rain upon pine floated by on the crisp morning air.

“Good morning, Orinda. I imagine you’re happy to have company other than my own.”

She turned as he spoke to see him talking to her great-aunt’s portrait. About to remark on his odd behavior, her attention was diverted by the old-fashioned queue of his hair. Having his midnight strands pulled back must have been what caused her to think his features were more pronounced in the daylight. Despite that reasoning, her gaze drifted to his backside which was clearly defined by his tan trousers. As he

turned, she quickly lifted her gaze, her cheeks heating at almost being caught ogling him. “I must thank you again for readying the cottage. I had no hint as to what to expect.”

He frowned. “Did you not know about Brambling Cottage?”

She grimaced. “Yes, I knew of it, but not the dimensions. Truthfully, I expected but a single room. I was much relieved to see such comfortable living arrangements.” She hesitated, glancing toward the opening next to the fireplace which led to the kitchen behind it. “Yet even expecting such limited accommodations, I fear I have arrived ill-prepared.”

He smiled at her, his white teeth beaming and his stunning eyes crinkling. “Then it’s fortuitous I’m here.”

She smiled back, unable to help herself. He was so quick to smile that she was quite sure he did so often. “And how might your presence be of help to my predicament?”

His brows lifted in surprise though his lips still showed hints of his smile. “It’s a predicament we have, do we? Then I must come to your aid at once. First, tell me, have you broken your fast?”

At the seriousness of his tone, she couldn’t help a small chuckle. “Yes, I have managed to make a pot of tea and ingest a scone that traveled with me.”

He gave her an exaggerated sigh of relief. “That’s an excellent first step.” He leaned forward as if to impart a great secret. “Tell me. Would you perhaps have a bit of tea left for a guest?”

At his suggestion, her cheeks heated once again. “Oh, my. I haven’t offered you tea.” She looked about, not sure if she’d seen a tea tray on which to serve.

“Then shall we remove to the kitchen to quench our thirst and make plans for your comfort?”

At his offer, she realized he meant for them to drink in the kitchen. It had been odd to do so by herself, but it felt much

more so with Mr. Noah Kingman, despite the fact she did understand he knew much more about these things. “I would appreciate that.” She moved forward to lead the way, but her foot caught on something and she started to fall.

He caught her to him, effectively saving her. But the strength of his arms and the hardness of his body had her own reacting in very inappropriate ways as memories of her dreams flooded her mind. Heat filled her with embarrassment, and she quickly straightened herself, stepping back. “I apologize. I’m normally more graceful.”

He grinned as his knowing gaze scanned her face. “I have no doubt of that. This is a new abode for you after all.” Still, he stepped to the side and waited for her to precede him like any gentleman.

In the kitchen, he stood behind the chair opposite her plate of crumbs and now cold tea, making the room smaller by his presence.

She quickly distracted herself with setting out another cup and lifting the teapot from where she’d left it over the fire.

“I see you found Orinda’s diary.”

She looked over her shoulder to see him pick up the tiny book and page through it as if it held great secrets. “Yes. I was very disappointed she stopped writing after the first page. Do you know if she made it to Gretna Green?”

She brought the teapot over and poured for them both before setting it on the trivet located in the middle of the sideboard.

He waited until she’d taken her seat, then sat himself, placing the book reverently on the table between them. “Yes, she did.”

She felt an odd sense of relief at the news, but refocused her attention on her guest, who watched her avidly. “I have sugar which I found in the cupboard and can only assume you provided. Thank you. But I have no cream.” Again,

embarrassment filled her and her hand shook as she offered the bowl.

His hand grasped hers as his other took the bowl. “Lady Abercorn, though these surroundings are new to you, I promise you can be happy here if you welcome these changes in your life.”

The warmth of his hand holding hers sent a fission of desire so strong that she pulled hers away and stood. Confused, uncomfortable, and besieged by uncertainty, she fought back tears. “I know not how to cook, but even if I did, I have nothing but pin money and a few jewels. I don’t have any family or friends.” She sniffed, refusing to cry in front of him, instead spinning around so he wouldn’t see.

Taking deep breaths, she attempted to stop her tears, horrified she had confessed all her troubles. She froze as she heard his chair push back from the table. Hopefully, he’d be a gentleman and simply leave.

He was not. His footsteps drew closer before she felt his hands gently cover her shoulders. She remained absolutely still, her tears drying up as her body focused on where he touched her. He truly shouldn’t be touching her.

“Do not be afraid, Juliet.” His breath whispered past her ear, causing tingles of excitement to spark throughout her body. “I promise you, all will be well. You’re safe here.”

How could he be so sure? She turned around to ask, dislodging his hands, only to find herself inches from him, looking up into mesmerizing green eyes.

He cupped her cheek. “Trust me.”

His words were but a breath, and she found herself leaning toward him, her gaze slipping to his lips, which drew closer.



NOAH STOPPED HIMSELF just in time and pulled back. Juliet was hardly ready to be kissed when she had yet to understand the full change her life had taken. Silently, he admonished Orinda

for causing Juliet to trip and for the dreams in their heads. Obviously, Juliet was uncomfortable with her passion for him, and he kept forgetting he'd just met her. That the diary pages were blank proved even Orinda didn't believe Juliet ready for her future yet. He would have to have a talk with that spirit.

He removed his hand from Juliet's cheek and held it out to the side. "I suggest we conquer one problem at a time."

Her hands were buried in her skirts and her teeth worried her bottom lip. She cocked her head before she spoke. "I am grateful for all you have provided, but I'm afraid there is no easy remedy for the fact I do not know how to cook."

"Neither do I." He chuckled. "However, I do have someone who cooks for me and her mother would be most interested in coming to your aid a few days a week."

Her eyes lit with hope, the green dominating any blue tints at all. Then her shoulders slumped and her chin lowered. "I fear I would not have enough to pay her."

There were so many burdens he could relieve her of, but not yet. His gaze strayed to Orinda's diary, something he'd read cover to cover at least twenty times as he'd gone from awkward youth to adult man. Thinking about Orinda's transition to Northampton gave him an idea. "Do you have any skills?"

Her brow furrowed. "You mean such as embroidery, writing invitations, and being passingly good at the pianoforte?"

"Yes, exactly." Suddenly, he remembered the new school that had opened last autumn. "There's a new ladies' school that has only been in existence a year. Perhaps you could teach there."

Her eyes widened in shock. "You mean work...for money?"

Now he understood why Orinda's diary was so blank. "Your great-aunt did." He said the words loudly and strode over to the table to pick up the diary. He turned over a few

blank pages and was pleased to find the ones he sought. “Yes, here it is.” He opened the book wider. *“I’m so pleased with myself. I have secured a position as the governess of two adorable little girls at a nearby estate called Ravenridge. Viscountess Blackmore was very kind and since the girls are of an age where I need not live there, the lady was happy to employ me. My husband is proud of me too. I don’t think he believed me when I said I would do whatever was necessary for us to be happy.”*

Juliet sidled up to him as he read and stared at the page. “But I didn’t see that there this morning.”

He closed the book, avoiding her gaze. “The pages often stick together.”

She gave a short nod as if his explanation sufficed. How long before she realized Orinda was only allowing her to see what she could accept?

“I must suppose that if my great-aunt, who I was told was most obstinate, was willing to work so she could be happy, I could do the same.”

Orinda had been happy in love, but he withheld his comment. He’d been half in love with Juliet before she’d ever arrived, but he was no more than a stranger to her. Or rather, almost a stranger. He had no doubt she’d had the same dreams he did. “Then would you like me to saddle your horse and accompany you to Silver Meadows?”

Her gaze flew to the long window. “It is far too early for calling.”

He held back a grimace, not sure how to gently nudge her in the direction her new life needed to go. Unable to do so gently, he simply stated it. “This wouldn’t be a social call, but a request for employment. I don’t know if the duchess would actually meet with you or have you leave a card.”

Juliet’s face paled and her hand grabbed the back of the chair next to her. “Duchess?”

He barely kept from letting out a sigh of frustration. Whether it was a duchess, a marchioness, or a viscountess, they were all the same to him. It appeared Juliet wouldn't be the only one learning new values. *He* needed to learn more patience. "Yes, the Duchess of Northwick. Do you know her?"

She shook her head.

"Then all the better. She can see you for who you are and not have any preconceived views about your person."

"That's true." The tension left her face, but her eyes looked away as she pondered her options. "I will go. Today. I wish to make a good life if for nothing more than to spite my husband's brother, who refused me any dispensation."

A shock of anger flew through him at her statement and an unreasonable urge to lay the errant relative out flat with a knuckle punch had him balling his fists. He forced himself to release his hands. "Then I shall ready your mount."

"Oh, wait." She laid her hand on his arm as she said it and immediate heat filled him. As if she felt it too, she pulled her hand back and buried it in her skirts. "I must change if I'm going before a duchess. I shall be ready in an hour." With that, she twirled about and exited the kitchen.

An hour? He shook his head as he lifted the diary once again. "Orinda, I sincerely hope you're right." He dropped the book on the table and it flipped over, the back cover open. The last line on the middle of the page stood out in stark relief.

*No sacrifice is too great for love.*

"Even my patience?"

The little book slammed closed.

He held up his hands. "I'm trying." Dropping them again, he strode from the room and out the door. He entered the stable, pleased he had fed Juliet's horse before knocking on her door. No doubt she hadn't thought as to how the Thoroughbred would survive. Did the Juliet in his dreams really exist, or was she merely what he'd hoped she would be?



From the morning he first woke from a dream of her, he'd known she would come, despite three generations of Kingmans being born with no sign of a Finch returning to Northampton.

He busied himself getting the horse ready. His brother expected him back to go over the books from *The Majestic's* latest cargo, but that would have to wait. Juliet needed his help. He hoped her reception at the ladies' school would go well. If not, he'd find her other employment. His mother might have suggestions. He'd introduce Juliet to his mother eventually, but he wondered if she'd dress as nicely as she did for the duchess. Not liking his own answer, he focused on his task.

Finally, with nothing else to take his time, he walked his own horse and Juliet's outside into the bright sunshine. Hearing the door to the cottage close, he stepped around the side to find her coming toward him in a deep purple dress that made the dark highlights in her hair stand out.

She caught him watching her and gave a timid smile. "This is my best day dress. I hope it will do."

It took him a moment to respond. It wasn't the dress that caught him off guard, but the mixture of boldness and nervousness she exuded. He could tell she was trying to embrace her new circumstances with a positive attitude, and it humbled him. "I believe the duchess will think you an admirable role model."

Her relieved smile was his reward, and it caused his heart to race. Swallowing hard, he cupped his hands and assisted her in mounting. Once gaining his own horse, he led them down the road toward the estate.

After a while, he had them slow to a walk again, so they could enjoy the crisp day.

"You know more about my great-aunt than I do. How is that?"

Her sudden question surprised him. “Why, what do you know of her?”

She shrugged. “Not enough, I’m discovering. I was told she’d run off with a footman, married, and bemoaned her poor judgement the rest of her life, haunting Brambling Cottage with her unhappiness as she paid for her sin.”

Shocked by her statement, he was grateful Orinda didn’t hear it. “What do you mean by sin?”

“By marrying a common footman. At least that’s what my grandmother said. My mother said she married a footman in protest against the earl her father chose for her husband. Mother said he was quite a bit older than she was and had unusual habits.” She waved in the air with one hand. “I have no idea what that means. It could mean he liked to eat his dinner while bathing.”

At her chuckle, he glanced at her, unable to reckon her humor with the terrible aspersions she cast on Orinda’s character. Or rather, her mother and grandmother had cast.

Her smile faded and she became thoughtful. “But that’s not what I read in the first page of her diary.” She turned her head to look at him. “She said she was in love and she couldn’t wait to marry. The page ended with her saying she was to be Mrs. Miller, but his best friend might be against it. I guess she actually married her footman after all.”

“Tradesman.” He looked forward again. “She married a tradesman. He and his partner owned a shop in London. They were very successful. When he moved out here, he bought Brambling Cottage and the surrounding land. He sold much of the timber and eventually farmed.”

She didn’t say anything at first, and he gave her time to ponder the facts. As they came to a fork in the rode, he pointed to the right.

Finally, she spoke. “I’m glad my great-aunt was happy and comfortable. I think I see now why my mother and grandmother told such horrible stories about the cottage being

haunted. They wanted their version of the story to be a warning.”

He raised his brows and stared at her. “A warning about what?”

“Never to shirk your duty to your family. That was very important to my elders. They were to marry the man chosen for them.” She met his gaze. “But that was a different time. Now we are able to marry for love.”

He couldn’t quite keep a smirk from forming. “And did you marry for love?”

“No. After two seasons, I did not happen upon that tender emotion, so I settled. I married for companionship and children. I suppose it may have been better to become a spinster because when I didn’t produce the required heir within the first year, the companionship drifted away as well.” She turned her head to focus on the road, but not before he noticed the moisture in her eyes.

His chest tightened at the experiences she already had, but he admonished himself, recognizing she wouldn’t be riding beside him if she hadn’t made the choices she had.

As the trees gave way to the open fields of Silver Meadows, he sensed her stiffening. But once they rode through the stone columns at the entrance to the drive, she looked about to break. He pulled his mount next to hers and laid his hand over both of hers.

She halted, but didn’t take her gaze from the sprawling home with two large wings rising four stories at least. “It’s very large.”

“It must be. It’s a school after all.”

She didn’t move, not even a blink.

“Juliet, look at me.”

Finally, she pulled her gaze from the house, her eyes a true mixture of blue and green and her brows lowered. “I’ve never requested work before. I don’t know what to do.”

He wished he could give her the courage she needed, but if his dreams were correct, then she already had it within her. She simply hadn't needed to use it. "You never spent the night in a haunted cottage before, but you did it. You never had to make your own morning meal, but you did it."

Her lips quirked up. "I never had to dress myself before, but I did."

He gritted his teeth to keep from offering to help her undress, the words flying to his lips with supernatural speed. Instead, he nodded.

She glanced back at the house, then met his gaze again. "You said I needed to be accepting of new experiences. I think I understand now. So far, none have been terribly taxing."

He choked back a laugh and coughed. "Then shall we see if the Duchess of Northwick will welcome you as a teacher?"

She gave a confident nod and turned forward. "We shall."

Lifting his hand from hers, he allowed her to start forward first, proud of her though not sure why. It wasn't as if *he'd* raised her to have such a stalwart backbone. He couldn't imagine Juliet not being an asset to the school. She had all the refinement of a typical aristocratic lady.

As they came to a halt before the front stairs, he had to admit the impression of the home was definitely made to intimidate. He felt five steps, ten feet wide, were plenty large enough, but this one had at least twice that. Quickly, he dismounted, worried Juliet would again question her own worth.

He helped her dismount, not unaware of how small she was. He forced himself to drop his hands, but she didn't move.

Instead, she took his hand in her gloved one. "Do not worry. I may not be granted a position, but I promise you, I will return."

At her words, he realized he'd lowered his brows in his concern over her disposition. Forcing his face to relax, he gave

her a lopsided smile. “That is reassuring. I shall wait here.”

She squeezed his hand then turned and floated up the steps to be let inside.

For the first time since seeing her in his dreams, doubts assailed him. As much as he didn't want to acknowledge it, she was born in a class above his own. Could he truly make her happy when she was used to grandeur like Silver Meadows?



## Chapter Three

JULIET SAT, WATCHING her hostess pace across the parlor before the fireplace, which had a painting of what appeared to be the kindest woman on earth. She wouldn't admit it to anyone, but upon being escorted into the parlor and seeing Lady Belinda Mabry's portrait, whom the school was named after, she'd immediately felt comfortable. The duchess had explained the school's name and purpose and was now attempting to find a position for her.

She was quite glad Noah had mentioned the need to welcome new ideas and possibilities because she'd never met a duchess like Lady Northwick. Despite being every bit a lady, her black hair done up except for a single long curl and her bearing that of a true duchess, her ideas were quite unconventional.

The lady in question stopped in midstride. "What about horticulture? Do you know anything regarding plants?"

It was the third such question in the last fifteen minutes, and though she was anxious to answer in the positive, she shook her head, beginning to lose hope.

"No bother. I will think of something." And the woman continued on her journey, her jewel green skirts swishing as she walked.

The school didn't teach young women such skills as the pianoforte or writing letters or any of the usual subjects. It was a rather odd school and one Juliet was quite sure she would have enjoyed when she was younger.

As if the duchess had read her mind, she stopped. "If you could study any subject, what would it be?"

"I'm not sure."

The duchess waved off her comment and sat in the chair opposite her. “Come, think. What did you most like to learn about as young child? There must have been something your governess taught you that you enjoyed.”

Thinking back, she remembered liking all her lessons. All but painting. She’d been terrible at painting, preferring to read instead. “I did enjoy reading very much.”

The duchess leaned forward, her hazel gaze almost gray in its intensity. “Tell me. What did you like most to read? Philosophy, history, literature, foreign—”

At the mention of literature, her heart leapt. “Literature.” She’d so loved reading stories and poems and deciphering what they meant.

The duchess jumped up, actually jumped. “That’s it! I need a literature teacher. One of our young ladies far exceeds my own knowledge on the subject.” She winked. “I prefer arithmetic, myself. Now, do you live near or would you like to live here? We have plenty of rooms available. Though we’ve expanded to a dozen girls, that hardly fills this place.”

Her joy at hearing she had a position was tempered by the question. While living in such a grand house would be much like what she was used to, her instinct told her both Noah and Orinda would be very disappointed in her. She wasn’t sure why the opinion of a dead ancestor and a commoner should matter, but it did. “I think to begin, I’d prefer to ride over, if that is acceptable.”

The duchess smiled warmly. “Of course. Since you have just moved to our corner of the world, I’m sure there’s much for you to do to settle in. I’m so pleased you will be one of our teachers. The ladies work on their studies in the mornings, which is why we haven’t been interrupted, but the afternoons are for physical activity. If you can return tomorrow, I will introduce you to Lady Sophie and explain our process here. I believe three days a week would do nicely.”

Her heart beat hard in excitement and she rose. “Thank you, Your Grace. I’m pleased I can be of some help.”

The duchess linked arms with her and walked her to the door. “I shall see you tomorrow morning, then. You have no idea what a relief it will be to have you here.”

Within moments, she had said farewell and was fairly running down the steps to tell Noah. Her heart said he’d be proud of her, and she couldn’t wait to hear him say it. As she reached the bottom step, he approached, a wide smile on his face.

“From your gay demeanor, I can only surmise you have a new position.”

She barely held herself back from embracing him. “I do. I will be teaching literature!”

His brows rose. “Literature? Not writing invitations or the playing the pianoforte?”

She shook her head, laughing at his surprise. “No. It’s a very different kind of ladies’ school and the duchess is just wonderful.”

Noah cupped her face. “You’re wonderful. I’m very proud of you.”

At his words her heart melted. Suddenly, in that moment, all she wanted was to make him happy.

He dropped his hands and moved to her horse. “Why don’t you tell me about your visit as we ride back.”

Her heart flipped over. No male relative or acquaintance had ever asked her to tell them everything. She volunteered information, but more often than not, they clearly listened out of politeness only. “I will. There is so much to tell.” She strode forward, and he helped her get her seat.

After he was mounted, they walked the horses back to Brambling Cottage, which barely gave her enough time to relate all that occurred. He asked questions, wanting to know



everything about her new experience and position. She found herself honored by his attention.

But once there, he took his leave, saying he had to confer with his brother about business and she found herself disappointed he couldn't stay for tea. It was silly. The man obviously had many responsibilities. After watching him ride into the wooded path across the road, she entered Brambling Cottage.

Closing the door, she took off her gloves and started for the stairs, but still filled with such happiness over her accomplishment, she moved to the fireplace instead and stood before the portrait. "I know you can't hear me, Aunt Orinda, but I'm fairly bursting. I think you'd be proud. I have just obtained a position as a literature teacher at the new Belinda School for Curious Ladies, which is at Silver Meadows. I imagine you would know of the estate as I understand it's quite old. I hope you're pleased. Noah read that you had been a governess, so I decided since I'm of your blood, I must have at least a little of your courage."

She stared at the face so similar to her own, wishing the smile could widen, though it didn't. "If only I could have known you when I was small. I know I would have loved you. Though we never met, I feel your love in this happy haunted haven. Thank you."

Wanting to connect with her aunt, she kissed two fingers then laid them on the cheek of the portrait. "Now, I'd best unpack the few books I brought with me. If I'm to be a teacher of literature, I'll need to reread a few stories." She paused. Was it silly that she spoke to a portrait? Was that normal for people who lived by themselves?

A creak sounded in the far corner of what was the small dining room, freezing her to the spot. Slowly, she turned her head in the direction of the sound to discover a cabinet door had opened. Surely, it was just a loose latch that had finally let go. Still, she approached the cabinet with caution. She didn't touch the oak furniture at first, instead staring at the latch on

the door. Finally, she peeked inside to discover it filled with books.

A chill raced down her spine, and she looked back at the portrait. "Did you open this?" Of course, there was no answer, so she turned back to examine the cabinet. It was an old bookpress with its number still engraved on the top. Gathering her courage, she opened the other door and pulled out a book. "*Robinson Crusoe*. Now this is one I have not read." She set it on the table and pulled another. "Ah, this one I have read." Setting the book titled *Pamela* to the side of the other, she continued until she had two piles.

Pleased with how many there were, she closed the cabinet, then addressed the portrait from across the room. "It seems, Aunt, that we have a love of reading in common." Picking up *Robinson Crusoe*, she moved into the parlor and settled herself on the settee.

A few hours later, she was visited by an older lady, sent by Noah, who prepared a few meals and taught her how to cook them when needed. After finishing the one that she made, she rose from the table to go back to her reading when her gaze landed on the diary. She picked up the book. Maybe there were more pages stuck together that she could read.

Walking into the parlor, she reclined upon the settee. Carefully, she turned each page, pleased when she found another written passage. Orinda was settling in as a wife and a governess. She must have loved Ambrose very much to leave her family and life behind, but there was no longing for her past comforts.

The passage ended, and she slowly turned more pages. Pleased to find writing on yet another one.

*I've had a feeling, but the cook confirmed my suspicions. I'm to bear a child. I cannot wait to tell Ambrose. I know he will be as happy as I am. I admit to being apprehensive about the birth, but Cook assures me there is an excellent midwife nearby. I am going to start sewing clothes immediately.*

She looked up at the portrait over the fireplace. She had distant cousins in the area! She'd have to ask Noah if he knew them. It would be so lovely to meet them. She would feel far less alone.

The next page explained Ambrose's reaction and their discussion over names. At the end of the page Orinda had written, *I'm so pleased we finally agreed. If it's a girl we will name her...*

Turning the page, she found it blank. She groaned, whining aloud, "Orinda." She couldn't help her disappointment. She glanced at the portrait. "Are you teasing me or is there something I'm not supposed to see?"

Turning her attention back to the page, she froze. It was filled with words. She swallowed hard and looked at the portrait. Orinda remained as she was... smiling, happy in her life... and in death?

Returning her gaze to the diary, she found the name Agnes. A warmth flowed over her like stepping into the sun and she closed her eyes. "Thank you, Aunt." When she opened her eyes, she smiled. She could no longer ignore the fact that Orinda's spirit was still in the cottage. It was a happy haunting in her opinion, and one she was grateful for. Comfortable with her conclusion, she continued reading.



A FORTNIGHT LATER, sitting at her dressing table, Juliet readied herself for Noah's arrival. She found herself in a pleasant routine. He escorted her to Silver Meadows where she enjoyed coaxing the shy young woman named Sophie Dowling to look beyond the story being told. Afterward, she and Noah conversed all the way home, mostly regarding her day. She often asked him about his, but he said he preferred to talk about what she had done.

In the evenings, she read books and Orinda's diary. There were many more pages with writing on them now. It had become obvious the diary was haunted as well as the cottage,

though she still didn't understand why certain passages appeared and others didn't. Noah said it was Orinda's doing. She half believed it, but didn't dare question it, since she was thoroughly enjoying learning about her great-aunt's happy marriage and the birth of her two children, one boy and one girl. Orinda's husband continued to be very successful and built a large house nearby, but as they grew older, they left it in the hands of their son and moved back into their cottage.

She had a feeling there was a reason for the missing information. From Noah, she'd learned his family had been the caretakers of Brambling Cottage since Orinda had passed, having outlived her husband by a couple of months. According to him, the oldest male Kingman took on the responsibility.

Surprisingly, she was quite content at Brambling Cottage, yet there was a yearning for more, and she was well aware of why.

Noah.

She dreamed of him every night before he came to escort her to Silver Meadows. The dreams always included amorous congress in many different ways and places. While very pleasurable, they left her frustrated when she woke, no doubt because they would never be fulfilled. What would he think if he knew she had such dreams of him even before she'd met him?

Ignoring the useless question, she rose from the small dressing table and descended the stairs. She would focus on only the day, something her great-aunt said was the best way to be happy.



## Chapter Four

A FEW DAYS later, a darkening sky in the late afternoon portended a harsh storm, which was why Noah fetched Juliet early from Silver Meadows. He kept his horse behind hers as they raced back to Brambling Cottage.

The wind had blown Juliet's bonnet from her head, hanging on by its lavender ribbons as her long hair whipped behind her, the pins she'd used to hold it up lost to nature's forces. But as thunder rumbled, the first large drops hit his bare head, and he wished they'd left sooner.

They galloped around the last bend and up to the cottage's stable. Jumping from his mount, he ran to Juliet and pulled her from hers as thunder sounded close. "Go inside. I'll take care of the horses!"

A crack of lightning made her jump before she ran for the cottage door. The boom of thunder that followed spooked her horse, and he held onto the reins to keep it from bolting. Quickly, he led the animals into the little stable and brushed them down before giving them food. Despite his speed, by the time he finished, the rain came down so hard he could barely see the front of the cottage. Without hesitation, he ran out, glad he knew the way so well, since the outdoor temperatures had plummeted with the clouds and wind, and the rain felt like icy darts hitting his skin.

He opened the door without knocking and entered the warm, dry parlor. As he slammed it shut against the wind and water that came in with him, Juliet entered from the kitchen. Her laughter froze him to the spot as it flowed over his body, warming him from the inside out.

"Aren't we a pair?" She lifted her disheveled hair with one hand. "I look like the hounds of hell were upon my heels, and

you look like a nearly drowned sailor.”

He grinned as he wiped water from his face with his wet sleeve. “I feel like one.” A shiver ran through him, his soaked clothing quickly chilling him.

Her face sobered and her brow knit. “You need to get dry. I’ll find you a towel.” She left the room, running upstairs.

The last thing he wished for was an early death, so he reached behind his head and pulled up his soaked shirt, letting it slip from his cold fingers to plop on the floor. Pulling his boots off while wet was difficult, but he managed to do so without sitting on the settee and soaking it through. He gathered his hair together and wrung out what he could, careful to keep the drops from touching his bare skin.

Juliet’s steps as she raced down the stairs had him looking up as she strode in.

“I brought a towel and a—” Her eyes widened as she stumbled to a halt. Her gaze was riveted on his wet chest and his body heated at her focused look. When she lifted her gaze, her eyes appeared a deeper blue, all trace of green having vanished.

His pulse thudded hard as desire burned low in his abdomen.

She stepped forward and wordlessly held out the towel.

He took it and dried his torso despite her avid attention. As he brought it to his face, her scent filled his nostrils. Unable to remain so far from her, he held out the white cotton cloth. “Could you dry my back?”

Her teeth worried her bottom lip for a moment, drawing his attention to her mouth, but she moved forward and took the towel.

He turned around, facing the door. Moments went by and he wondered if she would do as he asked. Then he felt the cloth touch his back. She stroked it over him as if she were touching him, not drying him, making his desire for her grow.

It was pure torture to resist until he finally didn't want to resist anymore.

He turned about, his intent to take her in his arms, but his hands filled with the towel.

She scurried to the fireplace, bent over, and dropped another log in. "You need to warm yourself or you might take a chill."

He dropped the towel on the back of a chair as he walked toward her, enjoying the view of her backside. All he needed was her.

She straightened and faced him. "Oh. Of course, you need to get close to the fire." Stepping aside, she moved toward the kitchen.

He followed. "Juliet." He took her hands and placed them on his chest then dropped his own. "Do you want me?"

Her eyes widened at the question, even as her fingers moved on his flesh. "I..." Her hands caressed him and she stepped closer to press a hesitant kiss upon his chest.

He loosely wrapped his arms around her, allowing her to leave if she wished, but hoping she wouldn't.

She lifted her hands upward and looped them around his neck. Finally, she lifted her gaze to his. "Kiss me, Noah."

Relief, excitement, and triumph filled him as he lowered his lips to hers and gently coaxed her to open for him. As soon as she opened her mouth, she surprised him by slipping her tongue between his lips to meet his own. He tightened his hold on her, deepening the kiss, tasting her sweetness, and reveling in her small breasts pressing against him. She was so delicate, but filled with fire.

He loved her. He had since the day they met, though perhaps before that. He needed to show her, even if she wasn't ready to know. He broke away from her lips and trailed kisses down her neck.

Suddenly, she pulled away. “Off.” She turned her back to him.

He stilled. “Juliet?”

She bent over and lifted her skirts until they were over her head.

He grinned as understanding dawned, and he helped lift the dress from her.

She faced him in her boots, stockings, shift, and stays. That last item pulled in the folds of linen outlining her small waist and raising her breasts, as their taut peaks strained against the material. A soft smile played about her lips. “You too.”

Not willing to let her change her mind, he quickly unbuttoned his soaked trousers and struggled to push them down to the floor to step out of them. As he looked up, he found Juliet had backed away to watch him. He swallowed hard at the memory of making love to her in his dreams on the kitchen table just behind her.

Her gaze was fixed upon his erection, her teeth worrying her lips. But then she looked at him and smiled warmly. “Yes, I want you.”

At her belated answer, all doubts slipped away.

As if she were as anxious as him, she bent her head and began to unlace her stays.

Naked, he stepped forward. “Allow me.” His voice had deepened with his desire, and she snapped her head up.

Without a word, she lifted her hands and held them out to the sides.

Swallowing a moan, he accepted her invitation and slowly pulled the lacing from each eyelet, his large fingers purposefully brushing her breasts with every pull. As the stays fell, he moved the chair away from the table with his foot, then grasped her about the waist.



She grabbed his shoulders as he lifted her to a sitting position on the table. Once seated, her hands began to roam over his shoulders, down his chest, over his stomach until without hesitation, she grasped him.

He locked his hand over hers, and she looked at him through her lashes. "I want to know you. Don't you wish to know me?"

It wasn't her words so much as her tone of voice that had his sac tightening. Her boldness pleased him, but also made it difficult to proceed slowly. "Then we will need to rid you of this." He tugged the neckline of her shift with his free hand.

Immediately, she let him go and pulled the cloth out from under her backside, then held her arms aloft and simply stared at him.

He chuckled before lifting the linen over her head to reveal her natural beauty. His mouth went dry at the sight. She was petite, yet rounded in the right places and the dark hair between her legs beckoned him like a bee to a flower. A full-bloom flower.

A flash of lightning filled the room at the same time a loud crack sounded above them. Juliet jumped, grabbing onto him. He thought her afraid, but as her gaze met his, he could see it wasn't fear in her eyes, but excitement.

A stab of need shot through him, and he stepped between her legs to take her mouth with his own.

Thunder rumbled, and she moaned as their tongues tangled, pressing herself against him.

He buried his hands in her hair, bending her backward as he left her mouth to kiss her breasts. Teasing the taut peaks, he gave each equal attention, loving the taste of her.

Another flash of lightning lit the room for what seemed like minutes only to be followed by a loud crash of thunder that vibrated the little house. The wildness of nature outside stoked Juliet's fervor.

Her hand grabbed him and squeezed, even as she rubbed her thumb along him. It was too much. The storm, the dreams, the woman he loved, conspired against him savoring the moment. He removed her hand and held it over her head on the table. Catching her other, he raised it and held both within one of his.

Now with her somewhat controlled, he took advantage to touch her as she had him. With his free hand, he explored the folds between her legs, his erection hardening at her moist readiness. She remained deceptively still until he touched the one spot he knew would please her most.

Small whimpers issued from her as he pleased her, wanting her to be near the brink as his own control slowly slipped.

Positioning himself at her entrance, he tried to wait. But when another flash and thunder clap filled the room, he slid inside to his hilt.



JULIET GASPED WITH pleasure as Noah entered her, filling her in every way, more than she'd ever been. Pinned to the table by his hand and his shaft, she revealed in the excitement skipping through her like the lightning flashes outside.

His damp, dark hair hung loose about his face as he remained motionless, eyes closed, one hand pressed lightly on her abdomen. In the muted light, he became her dream, yet he was her reality, a flesh and blood man. His eyes slowly opened and he stared into hers as he pulled away before filling her once again. His nostrils flared and his hand ran over her stomach, then upward to catch her breast.

Lightening flashed and thunder rumbled, echoing how her body felt at his entrance and she wrapped her legs around him. But as he pulled away again, the feel of him inside her had her eyes closing as every nerve searched for the release she knew he could give her.

His rhythm increased and her body spiraled out of control, grasping at him even as she lay helpless to control anything, giving herself up to his expert ministrations. Just when she thought she would go mad with her need, the thunder boomed once again and he grasped her waist, pushing into her with a force that filled her with such exquisite pleasure, her world shattered.

His own shout barely penetrated the happiness that filled her as she grasped his hand with both of hers, tightened her legs about him, and rode the wave of bliss. She floated on a cloud of purest satisfaction, smiling in the darkness that was so like her dreams and yet not. Finally, she opened her eyes to look at him and sucked in her breath. Naked love shone in his eyes, their green intensity piercing the darkness.

Then just as suddenly, he blinked and what she thought she saw was gone. His mouth lifted in a satisfied grin. “Best storm we’ve ever had.”

She managed a small smile, still stunned by what she’d seen.

He pulled her up to a sitting position against him, his hands cradling her backside, which sent off a new volley of sparks, redirecting her thoughts. She looped her arms around his neck. “I like this.”

“So do I.” He walked with her to the chair he’d kicked aside, sending tiny volts of pleasure through her. Then he sat. “You can uncross your legs.”

She did as he suggested, and he sat back on the chair with her on his lap. She tested their new position, rocking her hips forward a little, then hissed at the pleasure it caused. Her gaze flew to his.

He grinned. “Since I obviously have no control with you. You can have control this time.”

She’d never been in such a unique position. Burying her hands in his hair, she kissed the side of his neck, pleased at the slight jump she felt inside. Oh, the pleasure they could find.

And they did.



## Chapter Five

THREE WEEKS LATER as they rode from Silver Meadows to Brambling Cottage, Noah only half-listened to Juliet. He needed to pay more attention, but he kept thinking of the surprise he had planned. He had no doubt she'd be pleased.

He'd spent the last weeks truly wooing her. They talked about Orinda's life and her own adjustments. They'd taken walks through the forest enjoying the colors of the leaves as they blanketed the ground, and rejoiced when she made her first pie. They'd made love and woken in the morning together, taking turns making hot chocolate to ward off the coolness of the cottage until the fires in the fireplaces warmed it once again. They'd even helped each other dress.

His only concern was there were still a few pages in the diary that remained blank. He wasn't sure why Orinda di—

“Oh look. It's a hawk.” Juliet slowed her horse and pointed to the sky.

He shaded his eyes from the autumn sun to see the large black bird that floated in the air high above them. “No, that's a raven. There are many that live at Ravenridge. I'm surprised you haven't see one before now.”

She inclined her head as she examined the bird. Now that she was out of mourning, her pale pink bonnet reflected the color in her cheeks from the cold. “It looks smaller than I remember. It must be very high. I believe there is a young lady at the school who is fascinated by birds. I'll have to tell her to look for the ravens.”

He couldn't imagine being fascinated by anything but her, so he kept silent.

As they rode to the stable, he jumped down and helped her to dismount, unable to resist kissing her right there.

Her arms circled his neck as their tongues battled for dominance. It was one of the many qualities he loved about her. She may be diminutive in stature but her assertiveness in bed, or out of it for that matter, knew no bounds.

Finally, she broke the kiss and looked about her. "It would not do for us to be caught in such a compromising position." She gave him a sly smile. "Not that many come down this road. Still, I'm thinking there's much more we can do inside."

He grinned, deciding he needed to introduce her to lovemaking out of doors as soon as it warmed. "I'll be in as soon as I finish here."

She spun and sashayed into the house, looking back to make sure he watched before she disappeared inside.

Quickly, he took care of the horses, anxious to reveal his heart. As soon as he'd finished, he strode inside and divested himself of his greatcoat, the additional wood Juliet had added to the fire warming the house nicely. Now that the moment was upon him, doubts assailed him, but he refused to listen. He knew what was in his heart.

Juliet entered from the kitchen, her pink dress making her appear younger, happier. "Cook left us mincemeat pie. It's nice and warm."

He couldn't wait another moment. He strode forward and took her hands, leading her to the settee. "I wish to talk with you a moment."

She smiled, settling onto her seat. "Of course. I do adore conversing with you."

He sat next to her, still holding one hand. "And I with you. In fact, I have found everything I do is much more enjoyable with you."

"I feel so as well."

His heart raced at her words and he cupped her cheek. “I’m very pleased to hear this because I have fallen in love with you. Would you honor me by becoming my wife?”

“Wife?” Her eyes rounded in shock, and she rose abruptly. “How can I be your wife?”

Confused, he stood as well. “It’s not difficult. I can obtain the license and the parish church will read the banns for three weeks. We can be married well before All Saints Day.”

She stepped away from him, her eyes appearing a bright green. “No, I mean I’m a lady.”

“Yes. And I’m a man. That’s not unusual.”

She shook her head as she buried her hands in her skirts. “No, what I mean is I’m of the peerage.”

A knot started in his stomach. “Yes, that’s true. But there’s no law to keep us from marrying. Orinda and Ambrose married. We would be following in their footsteps.”

Her eyes narrowed. “But I’m not Orinda. I’m Juliet Hastings, Lady Abercorn. And you are Noah Kingman, not Ambrose. This is not 1727.”

Still trying to fathom why any of it mattered if she loved him, he folded his arms. “But you have no family to keep you from marrying, like Orinda did. From what you told me, your brother-in-law would be greatly relieved if he didn’t have to send you your pin money.”

“Yes, but unlike Orinda, I didn’t run away from my life because I was in love. I was tossed out like kitchen slops. I only came here because I had nowhere else to go.”

“So you wish you’d never come here?” The knot in his stomach turned rock hard.

“No. I mean that I didn’t come here seeking love.” Her brows furrowed. “Are you sure you love me and not simply love Orinda’s story?”

An icy thought entered his head that he couldn't ignore. "Do you not love *me*?"

Her gaze left his as she folded her arms across her stomach, but she didn't answer.

He dropped his arms and turned on his heel, heading for the door. The pain in his chest was too much to suffer in front of her.

"Where are you going?"

He turned the knob and pulled, but the door remained shut. Trying again, he yanked hard, but it didn't move. Anger overshadowed the pain.

"Noah, please. I need to understand. Can't we talk about this? We're very good at talking."

He turned to face her. "No. Love is something you feel. You can't be talked into it. I do not want you if you can't feel it." He raised his gaze to the portrait over the fireplace. "Orinda, you cannot make someone love you. Open this door now or I will break it down."

Behind him, the door squeaked and he turned to find it unlatched. Without another word, he yanked it open and slammed it shut behind him.



JULIET STARED AT the closed door, feeling as if a part of herself left with Noah. Did she love him? She didn't know. She'd never been in love. She hadn't even considered marrying again. She faced the portrait and walked to it. "I'm not you. I wasn't in love before arriving."

She pressed her hand to her chest as she remembered the look on Noah's face when she said he was in love with Orinda's story. The hurt in his eyes made her stomach turn over. That he hurt upset her, but that she caused it was heartbreaking. She felt like the monster in *Beowulf*. How could she have hurt the one person she cared about most?



Tears filled her eyes. Never had she felt so cruel. “Surely I must love him if it hurts this much.” She slumped into the small chair near the fireplace. “But does he truly love me? Am I to marry him simply because you married once arriving here?”

A noise near the settee caught her attention and she rose to see what it was. The diary, that had been closed, was open to the last page, which had been blank the other day. She looked down at it on the small table and anxiously read it aloud. “No sacrifice is too great for love.”

Her heart raced at the words, knowing they were Orinda’s advice. She turned from the diary and looked at the portrait. “But am I in love? And is he?”

The diary flew across the room and into the fire.

“No!” Her heart constricted as she raced to the fireplace. Knocking the book from the flames onto the floor, she beat them out with the nearby broom, tears now streaming down her face.

The feeling of loss doubled. “Don’t do that. Please don’t. Just because I’m confused doesn’t make your love story less beautiful. I’m not you, but I wish I’d known you so I could be like you. I wish....”

She sunk to the floor, gently cradling the diary that had become her greatest treasure. She didn’t know what she wished.



SHE’D DRUDGED THROUGH each day for the next fortnight. What had been her haunted haven was now just a cottage. No new words appeared in the diary and nothing creaked open when she needed it. The only vestige of Orinda that remained were the dreams, and they had turned frustrating, never allowing her any satisfaction even in sleep.

And Noah had not returned. He’d sent friends to escort her to Silver Meadows, which made the cold ride even colder. She

constantly fought tears and she missed him terribly, the cottage now a reminder of the joy she'd shared with him.

Today, she had planned to tell Lady Northwick she would move to the school since there was nothing left for her at Brambling Cottage.

But last night changed everything. She was going to find Noah.

After buttoning her blue spencer, she tied on her hat then pulled on her gloves. She looked out the window, waiting for the strange man who was saddling her horse to finish. Her heart raced, and a feeling of dread filled her.

Her dreams changed last night. Noah lay in her bed, not moving, barely breathing. She'd held his cold hand, desperately trying to encourage him to live, but the physician shook his head. She held out hope as Noah squeezed her hand, but then Orinda, floating nearby, held her hand out to him and he took it.

His hand went limp in hers and her heart broke apart, waking her up to find herself crying. In that moment, she knew. She loved Noah and she had to see him, to tell him, and convince him to live. She didn't doubt her dream. She just hoped it was a warning of what might be and was not what had already occurred.

Finally, the man came out from the stables, and she left the cottage.

"Good morning, my lady. I've come to escort you to Silver Meadows." The gray-haired man had to be as old as her grandmother before she died.

"I'm not going to Silver Meadows today. Would you be so good as to escort me to Noah Kingman's house?"

The man lifted his cap and scratched his head. "Well, I don't know about that, my lady. I had very particular instructions. I don't think Mr. Kingman would be happy with me."

She wanted to rail at the man that Mr. Kingman was not in any condition to be unhappy with him, but she bit her tongue. Every moment that was wasted could be better spent caring for Noah. “Then if you would be so kind as to help me mount.”

“Yes, my lady.”

The man gave her a lift, and she settled in her sidesaddle. “Now, if I’m not mistaken, Mr. Kingman’s house is down that path, correct?” She pointed to the narrow, wooded path opposite her gate. Only Noah took that path while all her escorts had come by the road.

The old man frowned. “I don’t rightly know, my lady.”

Frustrated and not a little peeved at the man constantly referring to her as “my lady,” she simply nodded. “I do believe that’s the way. Let us find out.” Without another word, she set her horse in that direction. Once on the path, she could see it was well worn and urged her horse on faster, not knowing or caring where her escort was.

The ride through the dark wood was not long, but she had a bit of a chill by the time she emerged onto a great lawn on the side of a house the size of her late husband’s. Could this be where Noah labored? No doubt her errand would be looked upon as odd by whichever lord owned the place, but she no longer cared.

Though it was very early, she rode up to the front steps and managed to dismount onto the middle one. Quickly, she tied her horse’s reins around a concrete knob at the bottom, picked up her skirts, and ascended the five steps. She knocked on the door. If Noah used the path to this estate, then someone was bound to know where he was. She heard a male voice before the door opened.

A young man who looked very much like Noah stood there gaping at her, his skin growing disturbingly pale. But he wasn’t Noah, as he was a bit shorter, thinner, his hair lighter, and his eyes were hazel.

“I’m looking for Mr. Noah Kingman. Could you tell me where he is? I believe he lives nearby?”

“Orinda?” The man’s voice came out in a choked whisper.

Wanting to stamp her foot in frustration, she settled for tapping it. “No, I’m not Orinda. I’m Lady Juliet Finch.” She used her aunt’s name, wanting the man to know she was a neighbor. “Now can you help me?”

“Who is it, Jacob?”

At the sound of Noah’s voice, her heart leapt. She brushed by the stunned man and crossed into what was a large parlor. At the other end, striding toward her through an archway was Noah.

Tears of relief filled her eyes as she ran to him. She grasped him about the waist, manners be damned. This was the man she loved, and he was alive!



NOAH WRAPPED HIS arms around Juliet. No matter how hurt he was, he couldn’t resist. His younger brother closed the door and arched a brow at him. He lifted his shoulders. He had no idea why Juliet was at Royalwood or why she was crying. As much as he didn’t want to care, his heart squeezed at her need for him.

Moving his hands up to her shoulders, he gently pushed her back to look at her. “Why have you come here?”

She sniffed. “I was so worried, I couldn’t arrive fast enough.”

“Would you like to sit and explain?”

She nodded, a tremulous smile on her lips.

He led her over to a chair, but when he started to move away, she wouldn’t release his hand. Hooking the closest chair leg with his foot, he pulled it over and sat. With his free hand, he retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her.

“Thank you.” She released his hand to blow her nose.

The noise sounded so much like a mouse squeak that he had to bite his lip to keep from smiling. “Perhaps you should start at the beginning.”

Immediately, her hand shot out and grabbed his, her blue-green gaze trained on his own. “Tell me you are healthy. Have you been ill?”

“I haven’t been ill. I am healthy.”

She released him again and dabbed at her eyes. “I had a dream. No, it was a nightmare. You were in bed, dying. I tried to keep you with me, but Orinda was there. She was a ghost and she held out her hand to you and you...you took it.” She dabbed at her eyes, new tears springing forth.

Orinda? Why would she send... understanding dawned and his admiration for the lady spirit, which was already high, rose even more. She had made Juliet understand what she felt for him. Though he didn’t entirely approve, he appreciated the nudge. “So you wished to see if I was well?”

“Yes, no, yes. I couldn’t bear to lose you. I’m sorry that I said what I said. I’ve never been in love before. I didn’t understand.”

His heart tripped at her words and his entire body grew tense. “What is it you understand?”

The frantic look in her eyes vanished as they softened, appearing far more green. She smiled. “I love you, Noah. I didn’t know this is how love felt, but I know now. I would be honored to be your wife if you’ll still have me.”

Elation filled him. Embracing her, he captured her lips in a gentle kiss of acceptance. He brushed back the tendrils of hair from her face and let his love show in his gaze. “I will. You have made me the happiest of men.”

“And now, I’m the happiest of women.”

“Then may I be the first to congratulate you both.”

At Jacob's voice, he released Juliet and frowned at his younger brother. "You do know eavesdropping is quite rude."

Jacob, who leaned against the doorway with his legs crossed, uncrossed them and bowed. "True, but I wasn't asked to leave either."

Before he could reprimand his brother further, Juliet tensed, pulling out of his arms. "Oh, I must apologize. Will your employer be upset I came here? I had to see you and didn't care what anyone thought. I took your path through the woods to find you."

That she'd searched him out no matter the social consequences confirmed for him she truly did put him above all else. But he was puzzled. "What do you mean by my employer?"

She glanced over at Jacob and then at him. "I mean this house. You and your brother have positions here?"

He grinned, but his brother laughed. "Noah, you had best tell this songbird the whole truth before any banns are read." With that, he disappeared around the corner.

"What does he mean by the truth?" Her back came up straighter and her brows knit.

He took her hand in his, though she let him grudgingly. "I haven't lied to you. I have only withheld information based on what Orinda allowed you to see in the diary."

Though her hand softened within his, she still frowned. "There were only a few blank pages left."

"Yes, and I'm sure even as we speak, they will be complete. Do you remember reading how Orinda's husband built a large house?"

She nodded.

"His good friend, Mr. Kingman, his partner in trade, also built a large house. This is his house, or rather the part we're sitting in was his house. Then his son added on, and then my father added to it. I thought it was plenty large enough."

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened.

Quickly, before she could grow angry, he finished. “The man Orinda married was the business partner of my great-grandfather. My family continued the trade portion of the business and now have many ships. I believe our ancestors’ close relationship is why Orinda can send us dreams.”

Her mouth snapped shut, and she pulled her hand from his and crossed her arms. “Orinda sent the dreams?”

He nodded, then stopped, questioning his own assumption. “I believe she did. It could be her husband since he and my great-grandfather were such good friends. I cannot be completely sure.”

She appeared to think seriously about his explanation. “I did dream of you before having ever met you.” Her brows suddenly lowered. “Did you and Orinda conspire to make me fall in love with you?”

His face heated. “It’s not that way. I believe Orinda wants you to be happy, and she knew I had half fallen in love with her portrait as a youth. You were right. I was in love with her story. But I’m not so addled as to confuse that with my deep love for you.”

Juliet’s eyes misted once again. “Then I’m very happy I had the guidance of my great-aunt. I’m looking forward to a life filled with love and happiness thanks to you both.”

He rose and pulled her up with him. “Would you like to see your future home?”

She shook her head. “No. Wherever you are, I know I’ll be happy.”



## Epilogue

*Brambling Cottage*

*All Hallows Eve*

JULIET STARED AT the flames in the fireplace, happy that it would be her last night in her haunted haven for a while. Tomorrow, she would take on a common name like Orinda did almost a hundred years earlier – Mrs. Kingman.

“Are you warm enough?” Noah joined her on the settee, lifting the blanket to cover both of them.

She linked her fingers with his. “I am now. Do you think she’ll come?”

“I think she will. I believe she wants to share in our happiness and perhaps gloat that she was right that we needed each other.”

“Oh, I did need you. Even more than I knew. But you always knew.”

“Not quite.” He squeezed her hand. “Oh, I thought I knew, but it wasn’t until your coach pulled up to the cottage and I saw you for the first time. Something inside me shifted.”

“Are you sure that wasn’t Orinda whispering in your ear?”

He chuckled. “I’m positive. I’ve never heard a sound from her. I’ve only felt her presence and accepted the dreams as from her.”

She desperately wanted to thank her great-aunt for bringing Noah to her. “It must be getting close to—look!” She pointed as an apparition of Orinda floated toward them from the fireplace. Her heart pounded with love for the woman before her. “Aunt Orinda.”



Noah stood, bringing her to her feet as well. “Thank you for coming.”

She held his hand tight, afraid to move. “Thank you, Aunt, for bringing me here and telling me your story.”

Orinda smiled and gave them a nod.

“We will continue to care for your home here.” Noah’s assurance seemed to please her.

Juliet couldn’t resist and blurted out her excitement. “We’re getting married tomorrow.”

Orinda nodded again, giving them a knowing look.

Noah laughed. “Yes, we will get started on a family right away, just for you.”

Her great-aunt winked. Then two hands appeared on her shoulders and a man’s visage grew clear next to hers as he floated behind her. His hair appeared dark and pulled back in a queue. His lips lifted under a thick beard and his eyes crinkled as he smiled at them.

Orinda leaned her head back against Ambrose, then she looked at them and made a kiss in the air before fading into nothingness.

Juliet’s heart filled with joy as a single tear tracked down her face.

“What is it, love?”

She smiled as she looped her arms around Noah’s neck. “Just a tear of joy for all of us.”

As his lips descended upon hers, laughter filled the cottage with warmth, love, and promises for the future... from the past.

The End?

**Additional Dragonblade books by  
Author Lexi Post**

**Marrying a Mabry Series**

[Stealing the Duke \(Book 1\)](#),

[Painting the Earl \(Book 2\)](#),

[Revealing the Viscount \(Book 3\)](#),

## **About Lexi Post**

Lexi Post is a New York Times and USA Today best-selling author of romance inspired by the classics. She spent years in higher education taking and teaching courses about the classical literature she loved. From Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death" to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, she's read, studied, and taught wonderful classics.

But Lexi's first love is romance novels so she married her two first loves, romance and the classics. Whether it's dashing dukes, hot immortals, sizzling cowboys, or hunks from out of this world, Lexi provides a sensuous experience with a "whole lotta story."

Lexi is living her own happily ever after with her husband and her two cats in Florida. She makes her own ice cream every weekend, loves bright colors, and you'll never see her without a hat.

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# **Once Upon a Haunted Romance**

*Mary Lancaster*



## Chapter One

GEORGE'S HIRED CHAISE lost a wheel some three miles from the next posting inn. Since the sky was already beginning to darken with both storm clouds and dusk, he chose not to shelter in the wrecked carriage, but to take his bag and walk on to the inn, from where he would send help back to the postilions and the horses.

Tired as he was, George enjoyed the walk. Since deciding to come home from his travels, he seemed to have spent far too much of his time cooped up in carriages, and his body appreciated the opportunity to stretch. However, he doubted he would appreciate the soaking once the storm clouds broke, so he strode on at a cracking pace.

Even so, he could hear thunder rumbling away in the distance, and the rain came on before he could have been more than halfway there.

The posting inn was on the edge of a village. It was not hard to find in the dark, since the racket of voices, music, and laughter penetrated the battering of the rain on his hat, and even the louder rumbles of thunder.

The inn was so packed that at first no one noticed his quiet entrance. The taproom seemed to have overflowed into the coffee room. A fiddler was scraping away in one corner. A few young women were screaming with laughter from the laps of young gentlemen. A cockfight appeared to be taking place in the middle of the room, surrounded by raucous gentlemen yelling encouragement to the birds and waving money around. In fact, for such a large crowd, it seemed to have a disproportionate number of gentlemen to more ordinary country folk and travelers of other classes.

George did not care for crowds, particularly of the unexpected and disorganized variety. The flying feathers and blood made him feel sick. He had to hold on to his purpose quite hard to force himself to stay. He took off his hat, gripping it far too hard. The sea of noise was overwhelming enough to drown him.

From the depths of the heaving masses, a harassed-looking man in an apron, a feather clinging to his hair, squeezed through to him.

“Evening, sir. Can I help you?”

“My post-chaise lost a wheel three miles back on the Dover Road. The postillions need help to get the horses and the vehicle to the inn. I require a room for the night and dinner.”

If anything, the innkeeper looked even more harassed. “I’ll send a couple of ostlers to do what they can. Your postillions can bed down in the stables with the grooms. But as for a private bedchamber, sir, I couldn’t do it if my life depended on it.” He flapped one hand around the chaos. “There’s a prizefight in the neighborhood tomorrow, and it’s brought all the quality down from London and God knows where else. To say nothing of the hordes of lesser men. I like business as much as the next innkeeper, but this is ridiculous! My wife will be after blood—*more* blood, and probably mine!—when she finds they’re holding cockfights in here...”

It was a long time since anything had panicked George, but he could feel it rising up from his toes now.

“When will they go to bed?”

“Half of them ain’t got beds,” the innkeeper said. “They’ll have to sleep here, which I admit I wouldn’t care for myself.”

“Neither would I,” George said, desperation clamoring. “Can you offer me nothing else? Discomfort I will live with, but it has to be private.”

“I got nothing like that, sir. Even my own servants are bunking in together, and my whole family’s in one room. I can

ask if anyone will give up their chamber for a gentleman, but I tell you now, I wouldn't hold my breath." Perhaps he read the panic in George's face, for he turned hastily to the nearest table. "Here, anyone like to give this poor, soaked gentleman their bed and sleep down here?"

"Not me, I'm going home to my Jenny," rumbled a countryman.

A traveler of indeterminate rank shook his head furiously. "Sorry, friend, not for the king himself! I was here first, and here I stay."

"Perhaps there is another hostelry in the area?" George said, trying to think through the noise.

"Not round here, no," the innkeeper said. "And to be honest, I doubt anyone in the village will open their doors to a stranger. But you're welcome to kip down here for nothing—dinner and breakfast half price."

"I'd rather sleep outside in the rain." It was truth, if vaguely insulting to the innkeeper, so George hoped he hadn't said it aloud.

"Oh, I don't know," the countryman said with a grin George didn't quite like. "There's Hazel House. Loads of space up there. I'm sure the widow'd be happy to look after a gentleman."

"Ain't no call for that, Jack," the innkeeper scolded, though George had no idea why.

"What?" Jack demanded innocently.

George didn't care. "A lodging house? Where do I find it?"

"Straight through the village and take the right fork," Jack said helpfully. A man on his other side grinned and nudged him. George saw it but was too upset to analyze the meaning.

"Good half-hour's walk or more, though," the innkeeper warned, glaring at Jack and his friend. "You'll get soaked in

this weather. If the lightning doesn't get you. And she'll likely not let you stay, anyway."

But George, eager to be away from the inn, was already making for the door, calling over his shoulder, "You won't forget to send someone to help with the post-chaise and horses?"

"No, it's in hand, sir, but..."

George waited for no more. He almost crashed through the inn's front door in his haste to leave. For an instant, the pleasure of having the barrier of stone and wood between him and the noise and the sea of raucous strangers was intense. Rain pattered on his head. He put his hat back on, and water ran off the brim and down the back of his neck. He shivered and set off through the village.

The thunder rumbled closer. The rain was about to get heavier.



THUNDER CRASHED JUST as Francesca parted the curtains to let Mark see out the window. The boy jumped with excitement and climbed on to the window seat to peer into the darkness.

"I can't see anything!" he said, disappointed, while the thunderclap rumbled away into silence. "Just rain on the glass."

"In a few moments, you'll probably see some lightning in the sky, like a flash, and then you have to count until the thunder sounds to tell how far away the storm is." Francesca tried to keep her voice calm, since she didn't want to communicate her own foolish fear of thunderstorms to her son. What she really wanted to do was hide them both under a thick blanket and stick her fingers in her ears.

But she forced herself to sit on the window seat while Mark stood beside her, avidly waiting. It wasn't long. Lightning flashed, sudden and ominous, illuminating the figure of a man near the window.



Francesca gasped and leapt up, whisking Mark off the seat.

“Did you see the man?” he asked, wriggling excitedly. “Was it Papa?”

The clatter of thunder prevented her having to answer. *Of course it was not Papa. Papa has been dead for more than two years, half of your life.* She never wanted him to forget his father, but nor did she want him to imagine him in every shadow or stranger lurking in the garden...

Why was a stranger in the garden in the midst of a storm? On foot, shoulders hunched against the battering rain, moving quickly and purposefully...

The thunder quietened again into a much closer, insistent knocking.

Her breath caught. Mark realized it at the same time.

“Someone’s at the door!” He broke free of her, rushing across the room. “It *is* Papa!”

“Marco, it isn’t.” The words stuck in her throat as she started after him.

Lightning flashed again, followed by an almost immediate bang of thunder that made her jump almost out of her skin. By the time she could move, Mark was out of the room. She hurried after him into the hall, snatching up the nearest candlestick on her way.

At once, a blast of cold air hit her, along with the too-loud pelting of the rain on the ground outside. The candles flickered crazily.

In front of Mark’s tiny figure, the front door stood open and the dark, threatening figure of a man stepped into the house. He slammed the door behind him.

Francesca flew forward to grasp Mark by the shoulder. Just touching him felt like a massive relief, but she still had the stranger to deal with. He turned, dripping, to face her. She raised the candle higher to glare at him.

He *was* a stranger, too tall, too masculine, and far too much in her house. He stood still, a large, wet bag and beaver hat grasped in one hand, gazing from Mark to her. Rain streamed off the capes of his greatcoat like a small waterfall. In the candlelight, the hair at his temples glinted silver. His face was unreadable but did not appear immediately threatening.

“You’re not Papa,” Mark said.

“No, I’m not anyone’s papa,” the man agreed. His voice was a little hoarse, perhaps from the weather, or from surprise, and yet gave an impression of vagueness. But his eyes, lifting to Francesca’s once more, were remarkably clear and direct.

“You have no business here,” Francesca said icily. Where the devil was Martin? Not that he would strike fear into anyone’s heart.

“No. Forgive me,” the stranger said. At least he sounded like a gentleman. “The boy let me in, and I’m afraid I was so wet I didn’t wait for further invitation.”

Words stuck in her throat. Should she betray vulnerability by saying, *My son and I are alone, apart from two ancient servants, so you have to go?* Or simply, rudely, command him to leave?

One should not send a dog out in such weather. And the stranger was already soaked to the skin.

“You cannot stay here,” she said, more annoyed with the situation than with him.

Besides, even as she said the words, she realized how powerless she was to enforce them. He was bigger, stronger, and all of her haughtiness could not compensate for the fact that behind her stood only a doddering elderly couple. And even they must be asleep.

An expression of resignation crossed the man’s face. He inclined his head, picked up his sodden bag from the floor where he had dropped it, and turned to the front door, reaching

for the latch. Water spilled off his hair, down his neck, over his gloves. He was shivering with cold.

“He *could* be Papa,” Mark said doubtfully.

He could not, of course, and he wasn't. But Percival had been a traveler in his time, too, caught in many a storm. And this man clearly was about to go as she bade him.

“Wait,” she said, before she could think, let alone talk herself out of it. “Why did you come *here*?”

“They said in the village you might have room. The inn is packed to the gunnels, and I could not face spending the night in the coffee room with hordes of strange drunks.”

She swallowed, keeping her gaze on his face and hoping she wasn't about to make the worst mistake of her life. “Mark, go and fetch Martin. He won't have heard the door for the noise of the thunder.”

Mark grinned and ran off. He was too starved of company not to welcome a stranger. There was guilt in that, but mostly she was concerned with the traveler.

She glanced at his sodden bag. At least it appeared to be made of leather. “Have you dry clothes in there?”

“I hope so.”

“If they are damp, Martin will bring you something of my husband's. He will show you to a room to change, and then you had better come to the drawing room. There is at least a fire there. Martin will show you the way,” she added, to make sure he understood he would not be left alone to wander the house.

“Thank you.” He slid his hand off the latch with unmistakable relief.

“Give me your hat and your coat,” she commanded.

Obediently, he peeled them off, but hung them on the empty hooks on the coat stand instead.

Mark bounced back through the baize door with Martin wheezing behind him. They had come so quickly that she knew Martin must already have been halfway up the stairs when Mark found him.

“Martin, be so good as to show this gentleman to the spare room. Lend him anything of Mr. Hazel’s that he might need. Then bring him to the drawing room.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Martin replied, scowling at her, though whether because of the effort required or her admission of a strange man to the house, she could not tell.

The stranger meekly followed the old man upstairs, carrying his own bag. Thunder rumbled into the distance.

Francesca took the dripping beaver hat from its hook and passed it to Mark before lifting the overcoat, heavy with moisture. “We’ll take these to the kitchen to dry,” she said, and Mark happily followed her back down again.

There, she asked Ada to make tea while she hung the overcoat close to the kitchen stove. Hastily, she made a few sandwiches under Ada Martin’s glower and carried the tray up to the drawing room herself.

She was only just in time. She heard Martin’s slow tread on the stairs, and then a murmur of voices before quick, sure footsteps across the hall floor. A knock sounded on the drawing room door.

“Come in!” Mark called cheerfully.

The stranger entered with a somehow endearing lack of certainty. Too much arrogance, or even self-confidence, would have appalled her just then and probably sent her from the room, dragging Mark in her wake. But despite the man’s gentlemanly posture and clearly excellent clothing, his expression was apologetic and wary.

In fact, it came to her that he was anxious.

“Forgive me. I was mistaken,” he said.

His hasty speech calmed her further. “Sit down and tell me how, over tea. Take the chair nearest the fire—you must be chilled to the bone. Do you like your tea with cream and sugar?”

“Just sugar, thank you.” He took the cup from her with a nod that was almost a bow and took himself off to the opposite chair. Mark gazed at him with an interest that did not appear to disconcert him—at least not any further.

The stranger said, “I thought from the way the men spoke at the inn that this was some kind of rooming house. It is clearly no such thing. I can only beg your pardon for disturbing you. Is it improper for me to stay here?”

Francesca sighed. “I think you were misled rather than mistaken, sir.”

His eyebrows flew up. “Deliberately? Why?”

“I am foreign. I have no husband to protect me, and they choose to think the worst. I believe you were not meant to believe me the landlady of a rooming house, but rather a merry widow who welcomes the company of single gentlemen.”

The stranger blushed, which enchanted her.

“I am glad the possibility did not cross your mind,” she said frankly. “Or I really would throw you out in the storm.”

“Perhaps you should anyway. It is already lessening, and if you are alone here apart from servants...”

Mark laughed. “Don’t be silly. She has me!”

“That must be a great comfort to her,” the stranger said gravely.

“What’s your name?” Mark asked him. “I’m Mark, though Mama calls me Marco sometimes.”

“George.” The stranger set his cup and saucer on the table beside him and delved into his pocket. Holding a visiting card between his fingers, he leaned over to offer it to Francesca. “I meant to give you this when I came in.”

*Sir Arthur Astley*, she read. *Denholm Hall, St. Bride's, Lincolnshire.*

Slowly, she lifted her gaze from the card to his face. "You just told my son your name is George."

"George is my middle name. My friends use it. But I am officially Sir Arthur."

This time it was she who blushed, at being over suspicious. "Francesca Hazel," she murmured, and inhaled too quickly as a clap of thunder sounded closer once more. At least she did not jump or spill her tea. Sir Arthur's brows twitched as though he had noticed her reaction, but he said nothing.

"My papa is Percival Hazel," Mark informed him proudly. "He was a great violinist and composer, but he died."

"I'm very sorry," Sir Arthur said sincerely, although in truth, Mark hadn't sounded remotely sad. He didn't, as a rule. "I have heard of him, of course."

"Perhaps you heard him play?" Francesca said.

"Sadly not." He seemed to feel something more was called for, because he added, "I have been away a good deal."

"Abroad?" Francesca asked, hoping he had been to Italy.

"Some of the time."

"Of course it was difficult for him to play in Europe during the war, but with the peace of 1814, he played in Paris and Vienna, and all over Italy. But he felt obliged to take us home when Bonaparte escaped."

"I did not go abroad until 1815," Sir Arthur said. "Just before Waterloo."

Curious timing. She did not say so aloud.

"I am returning home from Africa," he offered.

Her eyes widened. "What took you there?"

"Curiosity. I went to Egypt, originally, to see the tombs. I would have stayed longer, but I have responsibilities at home."

“Of course. Have a sandwich. Tell me about Egypt.”

He began a little hesitantly, as if unsure what, if anything, she actually wanted to hear, but after she asked a couple of questions, and Mark expressed amazement, his natural enthusiasm seemed to carry him away. He spoke well, with considerable knowledge, a deep understanding, and occasional subtle humor that she almost missed. She found herself transported under the burning sun, among people of wildly different customs and beliefs, swept back into a past that was both fascinating and frightening.

Because she was so spellbound, it was some time before she noticed that Mark had apparently lost interest. He had wandered off to the sofa nearer the window and was sitting smiling, as though at something or someone she could not see.

Her stomach gave one of its uneasy twinges.

Mark laughed. “No, I like him. He’s funny.”

Sir Arthur stopped talking and glanced at Marco, then back to Francesca, who smiled faintly.

“He’s playing,” she said, hoping it was true.

Mark slid off the sofa and ran up to Sir Arthur. Taking him by the hand, he tugged. “Come and meet my papa!”



## Chapter Two

GEORGE HAD JUST got comfortable. Warm and dry, in quiet, pleasant surroundings, with warm tea and food in his belly and the company of a gentle, beautiful young woman. She seemed so interested in his stories that he had almost forgotten they were strangers. He liked to make her smile, to watch the array of expressions cross her face and know she understood. He liked her voice too, low and musical and intriguingly accented.

And then the boy seized his hand. “Come and meet my papa!”

George kept his gaze on the boy, holding on to her words, *He’s playing*, that he did not quite believe. They had all said “Papa” was dead. The men at the inn who had called her a widow, Mark, Mrs. Hazel herself. Was he being fooled in some way again?

It did not happen often, and he had taught himself to recognize the flim-flam men and women, the liars and the cheats. There weren’t many of them, and he had felt no such alarm bells with her.

The boy was smiling, but his eyes were serious. He really wanted George to meet someone. Without looking at Mrs. Hazel, he rose and let Mark lead him to the sofa.

“This is my papa,” the boy said proudly. “Papa, this is George, who was caught in the storm. We’re letting him stay because he is kind.”

George looked where the boy was looking—at the back of the sofa—and felt a little frisson of memory, one deeply buried in his own childhood. Showing a very different adult someone no one else in the room could see. And just for a moment, he imagined he *did* see a man sitting on the sofa—a misty,



insubstantial figure with wild, merry eyes and a sensitive mouth. He shivered, and the illusion vanished.

Mark laughed. “Papa says you had better be, but he is only joking. I can tell he likes you.”

“Enough, Marco,” his mother interrupted, as though she were trying not to speak too sharply. “It is past time for bed, and the storm is quieter. Say goodnight to Sir George.”

For some reason, the name surprised him. People either called him Sir Arthur, or just George, depending on when and how they knew him. He wasn’t quite sure why he had told the boy he was called George, except that there was an honesty in such young children, and George was more closely related to who he was. Sir Arthur was who he had become, the miracle that enabled him to travel where he willed, meet interesting people, learn from more than just books, make decisions. But at heart, he was still George.

“Good night, Sir George!” Mark said enthusiastically.

George smiled. “I feel I should be slaying dragons when you call me that. Good night.”

“Can I help slay the dragons?” Mark asked over his shoulder as his mother led him from the room.

“Of course. You shall be my apprentice.”

Mark grinned at him, in clear expectation of an exciting new game. But it was Francesca’s smile that stunned him. Part amused, part grateful, it softened her watchful, anxious eyes and made them sparkle. Her whole being lit up with a beauty that deprived him of breath.

Fortunately, she turned away from him, so she couldn’t have begun to suspect the effect of her mere smile upon him.

*Mere?* There was nothing mere about it.

George liked to look at beauty. Beautiful women were no exception, but they did not usually tongue-tie him. Some of his closest friends were beautiful women—Lady Hera, for

example, his first true friend who had shown him the way to freedom and truth.

But this girl, this mother, was nothing like Hera. Nor any of the women who had moved him since. She was a widow, the wife of a great musician, yet someone the villagers had felt free to play unkind tricks on. He should not be here, threatening her already precarious reputation, and yet the many layers and facets of her character fascinated him.

Of course, he was given to obsessions. Once he had solved the puzzle or revealed everything to his own satisfaction, he was usually prepared to move on to the next. For this woman's safety, he should move on *now*.

He was pacing between the shuttered window and a large, beautiful pianoforte that he had barely noticed before. He used it now as a quite deliberate distraction, running his hand over the smooth, polished curves, depressing the occasional key to appreciate the tone and timbre of a single note, perfectly in tune.

“Do you play, Sir Arthur?”

Her voice from the doorway took him by surprise. He realized he was sorry not to be Sir George to her still.

“No.” He straightened. “I never learned. The pianoforte was always in the drawing room. But I like to listen.”

She looked slightly confused by that but did not ask anything, for which he was grateful. He did not want to say to her, *I was an odd child who embarrassed my parents in front of guests, so they kept me hidden, pretending I was ill and then dead*. “Do you play?” he asked hastily.

“Sometimes.” Another flash of lightning penetrated the room, and her breath caught. Her shoulders tensed as she waited for the crash of thunder. “I used to be quite good.”

“Used to be?” He frowned. The rumble of thunder was quite distant, and she relaxed visibly.

“Yes. I used to play all the time. Now, I need to be in a certain mood. One has to practice constantly to keep the skill honed.”

Something slotted into place in his mind. “You were a player, like your husband.”

She tilted her head with a hint of defiance, daring him to criticize. “It was how I met him. We performed at the same theatre in Naples, and then played together many times.”

“But his death changed everything for you,” he guessed.

“Of course. But playing was already difficult by then.”

“Why?” he asked.

Her body jerked, very slightly, as though she would turn away from him, and he knew he had been too blunt. But before he could apologize, she said in a rush, “War. Guns and panic that cleared the concert hall. Soldiers on the rampage, shooting everywhere. Now I need peace in order to play.” She stared at him, clearly appalled by her own words. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that, and you didn’t wish to hear it. Your honesty is catching.”

She snatched her hand off the piano, as though afraid it would shake, and from impulse he caught it, holding it lightly but firmly, wishing only to comfort, because he too had been lonely and frightened in his life. Her fingers were soft and slender. They jumped in his, and then, before he could release her and apologize, they gripped his hand hard while thunder rumbled off into the distance.

“I have met soldiers who can no longer bear the sound of guns,” he said. “Or thunder. What happened to you?”

“Nothing. I hid beneath a harpsicord in a store cupboard until they were gone. Percival found me there. But I never forgot the fear, or the grief, because I thought I would never see him again. And now I never will.”

“Does Mark see him? Or is he really just playing?”

Her eyes widened. She seemed to have forgotten her hand resting in his. Her mouth, curiously vulnerable, opened to speak and then closed again.

Slowly, she drew her hand free. “He imagines he does. As though wishing would make it true.” She moved toward the sofa and sat down, almost exactly where Mark had been staring.

“Can he still remember what he looks like?” George asked.

“He seems to. He knew you were not Percival as soon as he saw you clearly, but he hopes. He is lonely.”

He was not, George thought sadly, the only one. “Because the villagers are cruel?”

She nodded once.

“What is their problem with you? Just because you are *different* to them?”

“That and...the vicar’s wife cut me when she realized I had played in public for money. *On the stage like a common actress*, I believe were her precise words.” She shrugged. “Often, the ordinary people take their cues from those they imagine are their betters. While Percival was alive, it was not so bad, but after his death, their hostility grew more open. Now I hear words like *foreign whore* spoken quite openly when I walk into the village. For myself, I don’t really care, but what if Mark hears and understands?”

George was appalled. “Intolerable!” He threw himself down on the sofa beside her. “Who is the magistrate?”

“I will not involve the law and allow such accusations to be official.”

He closed his mouth, swallowing down his objections. He saw her dilemma, whatever the injustice. “So what *will* you do?”

“Pretend I do not hear or care. Show that they will never frighten me.”

He met her gaze. “Do they?”

“Not when I do not care. I do not want to care.”

“Not to care is not to be alive.”

A frown flickered across her face and vanished, but he thought he had irritated her. “What or who do you care about, Sir Arthur, called George?”

He could not help smiling. “Many things now—many people that I once did not even know about.”

She studied him until his eyes slid away. He liked her too much already to be comfortable with her displeasure.

But she did not sound displeased, just curious. “You are a little unworldly, are you not?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I am only just discovering it. In reality, I mean. I feel like a very well-educated child.”

“Why? What is your story, Sir George? What dragons have you slain?”

“Internal ones, largely.”

“You don’t want to tell me,” she said shrewdly. “Even though I have told you my secrets.”

“Not all of them. But you are right. I am wary of contempt.”

She looked gratifyingly startled. “Do you deserve it?”

“My friends would say not.” From the corner of his eye, some movement distracted him, but when he glanced around, there was nothing there but the flickering candles. He felt again the shiver of memory, of an old, long-buried sensitivity.

“Someone walked over your grave,” she observed. “A peculiar English saying.”

“It is,” he agreed, and began a humorous debate on the derivation of the phrase. It made her laugh, as he intended, and for a little they happily compared English, Latin, and modern Italian oddities.

Inevitably, the conversation broadened and led down unexpected paths that were both intriguing and fun. Until he realized there had been no thunder for an hour and the rain had receded. He rose with strange reluctance and bowed.

“Once again, my thanks for your kindness and for your company this evening. I will bid you goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” she responded, standing with him. “But if there was any kindness on my part, I believe you have repaid it.”

“I wish I could.” He wanted to take her hand and kiss it, but in the circumstances, it would have been highly inappropriate. Even less appropriate than imposing on her hospitality unchaperoned.

Since there was nothing else to do, he walked away and crossed the hall to the stairs, where he lit one of the small candles and found his way back to the bedchamber in which he had changed.

A fire had been lit there, taking the chill off the wet autumn evening, an additional thoughtfulness he had not expected from the ancient manservant. Wondering about her life here, about her son and her talented late husband, he prepared for bed.

Only as he was about to blow out the final candle and lay his head on the pillow did he become aware of the tension within the room.

George was sensitive to what he thought of as “atmosphere,” stemming from his childhood, when he had so often failed to understand people or the expressions behind their words. Instead, he had relied on undercurrents that he could not name, until he had found his way back to the safety of his own comfortable space.

Only much later had he come to understand that the safety lay not in the physical room but in himself. Curiosity had outweighed fear and false duty, enabling him to consider many more thoughts and actions and begin to live as he always

should have. However, some atmospheres were still best avoided—like the raucous inn—because they jangled his nerves in acute discomfort.

There was no noise in the bedchamber except his own breathing, the rustling of the bedclothes, the occasional gentle movement of the glowing coal in the guarded fireplace. And yet there was hostility here. Like his father's when he was disappointed. Like Nurse when she could not get her gin, or his brother Hugh when the numbers did not go as he wanted them to. And yet there was no one but George in the room.

So who was angry with him?

His skin prickled. Was someone else in the room? One of the two servants? Mark?

No. No one had come in—the door creaked, and he would have heard. He was alone.

But he did sense *something*: a presence, an emotion, perhaps? Strong emotion.

A breeze blew over his skin, raising the hair on his arms and his head. He almost leapt out of bed, except that he could see from the glow of the coal there was no one else in the room.

Old houses were drafty.

He closed his eyes and tried to relax. He could hear music. A violin, playing something wild yet elegant. Vivaldi? He smiled because it must have been Francesca, even though her favored instrument was not the violin but the pianoforte.

His eyes flew open. Francesca had gone to her own chamber. He had heard her footsteps on the stairs and the passage, the closing of her bedroom door. The music was not loud, but it did not come from the room below, *or* from a room along the passage. It sounded too close, too intimate, in this very room...

Or perhaps just in his head. Was he as mad as his father had claimed?

The music was beautiful, the playing exquisite, and yet it came with some kind of threat. Anger. A warning. He stared toward the glow in the fireplace.

“Percival,” he murmured.

The fire flared into a single flame that quickly died. And just for an instant, a man’s figure seemed to form in the darkness, wispy and insubstantial.

“I won’t hurt her,” George said. “I won’t hurt either of them.”

Abruptly, the atmosphere eased, and the imagined figure vanished as though it had never been—which it probably hadn’t. George was alone in a warm, comfortable room. Even the wind no longer howled outside, and the rain was gentle, intermittent against the windowpanes.

He felt foolish, talking to an imaginary ghost. And yet in some ways it made sense that something of Percival lingered in this house, watching over his wife and child. It was as if Percival had identified himself to George with the music—however that was even possible—and made his warning plain. If George had intended any action against anyone in the house, he would undoubtedly have dropped it.

As it was, he felt a touch of guilt, because his attraction to Francesca was strong, and shame, because he was in danger of believing in the impossible.





## Chapter Three

FRANCESCA LAY AWAKE for some time, thinking about her strangely appealing guest.

She liked his serious expression and his sudden, sweet smile. She liked his instinctive kindness and the way he focused on what she—or Mark—said. She liked that he never imposed.

And, if she was strictly honest, she liked the way he looked, with his bronzed skin and his distinguished, handsome features. From the slight graying of the hair at his temples, she guessed he was around forty years old, a little older than her, pleasingly mature and yet with an air of almost childlike innocence.

The admiration she read in his eyes had surprised her but not frightened her. And he had taken no liberties apart from holding her hand once, and that had been comfort, not attempted seduction. He seemed very open and blunt, and yet mysterious too. She knew he was hiding something about his past.

Well, everyone was entitled to privacy. She had not needed to tell him about her fear of thunder and its association with the theatre attack... She had never told anyone before. She and Percival had rarely even discussed it because it came so close to separating them forever. Percival expressed himself through music, and he had cared deeply. But he had been too selfish to be very observant.

George had *noticed* her fear, and he had seemed to admire rather than judge, understand rather than pretend. And curiously, it helped. Had he stayed talking to her merely to distract her, out of kindness?

She liked kindness. But for the first time since Percival's death, she wanted to be *liked*. To be admired as a man admired a woman. She wanted George to desire her as, God help her, she desired him. Which was highly dangerous in the circumstances.

But she had been a widow for two years, and she could not help the stirrings of her body or her odd tug of attraction to the intriguing stranger. She savored the feeling, reveling in the secret heat spreading through her body, imagining his kiss, the touch of his hands...the intimate, deliciously physical loving she had known only with Percival.

George would be a different kind of lover, gentler, sweeter, with all the understanding and self-control of maturity. He would seek her pleasure always... Her body began to throb, making her shift restlessly, tangling her limbs in the sheets.

How wonderful would it be to seduce him from that self-discipline, just occasionally?

She gasped at the sudden ferocity of need—and Mark's laughter rang out, instantly dousing the foolish fantasy. She leapt out of bed and felt her way to the connecting door to Mark's room. A night light was always left there, burning very low. In its faint glow, Mark was sitting up against the pillows, grinning at something at the foot of his bed. He laughed again, turning his happy gaze toward Francesca.

“Look, Papa! Mama is here and can answer for herself.”

Pain twisted through her, along with a frisson she could not explain. There was guilt that he needed his father so much that he imagined his presence, helplessness because she did not know what to do. At first, she had thought it a phase that would pass and had said little to disillusion him. Now, she wondered if she had done the right thing. Should she have nipped it in the bud from the beginning?

“She certainly can,” she said. “And so can you. Why are you not asleep?”

“Papa woke me.”

Deliberately, she sat at the foot of the bed, as close as she could to where he had been gazing when she first entered. For an instant, she imagined the warmth of another presence, familiar and welcome, and old grief mingled with irritation at her own weakness.

“Marco,” she said gently, “Papa is always with us, in our hearts and memories. Wishing he was still alive does not make it so.”

“Oh, I know that, but he is here. Right beside you.”

She blinked, trying to find the right response.

“We were just laughing at how wet poor Sir George was when he arrived,” Mark said cheerfully. “Papa said he looked like a fountain!”

“Well, so would you if you had walked from the village in that deluge. Although you would have been a much smaller one.”

Mark grinned, then his gaze slid to the side of her. “Papa says you can’t hear him.”

“I can’t.” She sat forward, reaching out her hand to him. “Marco—”

“He wants to know if you like Sir George.”

Her hand fell back into her lap. “Why don’t you just ask me yourself, if you want to know?”

“Oh, I know. I can tell you like him. So do I. But Papa worries, because he is a stranger and because of the recent trouble.”

Francesca deliberately smoothed out her forming frown. There had been a series of annoying tricks this last month—mostly people knocking on the door and hiding. She had blamed children, probably put up to it by their parents, either directly or indirectly. They died away when she had not reacted. Though Martin had tottered after someone into the woods.

Had the incidents worried Mark more than she had seen at the time? “Oh, we don’t need to worry about such jokes,” she said lightly. “And I believe Sir George is a perfect gentleman.”

Again, Mark glanced away from her. After a pause, he said, “He had better be—according to Papa.”

“He will be gone tomorrow,” Francesca said. Surprised by the sudden stab of sadness, she focused on Mark’s imagination instead, and tried a different approach. “Why is Papa here and not at rest?”

Mark’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. He glanced away in silence, then back to Francesca. “He says because he didn’t want to leave us. He says he is watching over us.”

“He is not God,” Francesca said, more tartly than she had intended, perhaps because Mark’s answer did not sound like Mark. The words sounded more like...Percival’s.

She shivered. Something soft trailed across her cheek, like a breath or the faintest of caresses, and her breath caught. She had felt this before, in bed, only half awake as she longed for Percival, dreamed, perhaps, that he was not dead. And for those instants, she had believed it, before reality intruded along with the tears.

Her hand flew to her cheek, but of course there was nothing there. Not physically. But her own imagination was playing tricks, for she almost sensed his presence, warm, lively, and once so very necessary...

“You must sleep,” she said to Mark, rearranging the pillows and pushing him gently to lie down. He did not resist, although he smiled beyond her shoulder, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She only just stopped herself from jerking around to look. “Papa would not wake you in the middle of the night.”

Even as she said the words, she remembered that he had done so on several occasions, returning from a tour of concerts or just because he wanted to see his son smile at him. She

wasn't surprised by Mark's skeptical look. Instead, it made her laugh.

She stroked the hair off his forehead and kissed him goodnight. Then she sat and waited for him to close his eyes and fall into the deep, even breathing of sleep. She rose silently and tiptoed from the room, leaving the connecting door slightly ajar.

As she climbed back into bed, she wondered if it was her late husband's presence she felt, or the faint excitement of guilty new interest.



SHE WOKE WITH the realization that today was Hallowe'en. All Hallows' Eve. Not that it made any difference to her life. She suspected it was merely the discussion with Mark about Percival's presence that prompted her to think of it. Though to be sure, Percival was no demon!

For the first time, it seemed, she could smile at his memory, the simple warmth of affection uncontaminated by grief. The grief would never go completely, of course. He had been her first love, and much too young to die. But for her own sake as much as Mark's, she had to return to life. Mark himself was becoming a warning of what could happen to someone too absorbed by the past and what should have been.

Since Mark was still asleep, she went downstairs alone and found Ada in the kitchen.

"Sir Arthur's gone to the village already," Ada informed her. She sniffed. "Seems like a respectable gentleman. Courteous."

"Indeed. Did he take his baggage with him?"

"No, he means to return, whether or not his chaise is repaired, to thank you for your hospitality."

This pleased Francesca far more than it should. She was glad she had chosen to wear the lavender morning gown rather

than the gray, which made her look too much like the ghost she was becoming.

After breakfast, she harnessed the old pony to the trap, and she and Mark made a quick tour of the tenant cottages to make sure none had been damaged by lightning or the excessive rain. Fortunately, they found nothing worse than a couple of minor leaks, which she promised to have dealt with today.

On the way home, they halted, as they sometimes did, for a cup of tea with Mrs. Gates, whose husband rented the nearest farm and cottage. She had a daughter the same age as Mark and a son a couple of years older. They were friendly children, and for the first time, Francesca encouraged Mark to go outside and play with them. Aware of the hostility in the village, she had kept him too much away from other children, but now she realized the harm it was doing.

On impulse, she asked Mrs. Gates about the children coming to Hazel House next week. Mrs. Gates looked genuinely pleased and agreed at once.

Francesca returned to Hazel House feeling better, more hopeful that she had since Percival's death. They enjoyed a light luncheon while Mark chattered away about the Gates children.

When Mark sloped off to play with his toy soldiers in his room, Francesca cleared up and, leaving the used crockery with Ada in the kitchen, went outside through the back door to fetch water from the well in the yard. Ada could no longer manage the heavy jobs. Nor could Martin, really. Francesca needed younger servants, and preferably a few more of them, but the Martins had been with Percival's family forever, and she could not turn them out. Besides, she was fond of them, and they were loyal.

Her thoughts fled with an unpleasant jolt. Two men stood by the well, sniggering. She recognized them as Jack Forest and Bill Kell, two of the most offensive villagers. Bill held a wriggling cat, while Jack pulled up the well bucket and rested it on the wall.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, her voice sharp with both irritation and suspicion.

They were not remotely alarmed. In fact, Jack grinned. Bill seemed too concerned with holding on to the wriggling cat. With another unpleasant jolt, she recognized it as one of the stable cat’s last litter of kittens.

“Afternoon,” Jack said, as though he had every right to be here.

“What are you doing?” she repeated, marching closer, her own large, empty pails in either hand.

Jack looked at the bucket in his grasp. “Fetching water. You don’t grudge us a drink of water, do you?”

“Is something wrong with the village well? Your own taps?”

“Long walk to the village,” Bill observed with blatant insolence.

“Which makes me wonder what brings you here,” she retorted. “Be so good as to release my cat. He clearly does want to be held.”

“Unlike the lady of the house,” Jack said slyly.

Francesca’s face flamed with anger. “You will keep a civil tongue in your head when you address me.”

This was where, in the past, they would laugh, as if it was just a joke, and then they would slouch off, snorting and cackling, making other half-heard comments that she always chose to ignore. But it seemed they had grown bolder.

Bill did not release the cat. Neither of them laughed. Instead, Jack took a step closer, meeting her gaze with open insolence.

“Or what?” he sneered.

Her fingers curled hard on the handles of her pails. She fought the urge to bring them up and crash them into his head, for in doing so, she would lose what was left of her dignity,

admit they could hurt her. In truth, there was nothing she could do, and she could think of nothing to say. She had never felt so helpless in her life.

And they knew it. They saw it.

“Well?” Bill said. He came closer, too, the cat still in his grasp. Jack’s grin broadened. “What *are* you going to do?”

“Ma’am,” said an unexpected male voice, causing Francesca and the men to jerk their heads around in surprise.

Sir Arthur Astley, George to his friends, dismounted from the back of a strange horse at the stable door and, abandoning it, strolled toward the well. Francesca’s heart thudded with relief to have an ally, or at least a distraction.

“What?” Bill said, clearly confused, if not quite frightened.

“What are you going to do, *ma’am*,” George corrected him with apparent patience. “One treats a lady with courtesy.”

He continued toward them, a distinguished figure, although Francesca would never have called him an imposing one—until now. He held the attention of both the other men. The cat, taking advantage of Bill’s distraction, lashed out suddenly with her claws and broke free with a yowl, shooting back toward the safety of the stable.

“A *lady*,” Jack muttered, not quite beneath his breath. Clearly, he did not respect George either, which infuriated Francesca.

“Yes, a *lady*,” George snapped, holding his gaze. “And what the lady does is none of your business unless she chooses to tell you. What you do, on her property, however, *is* Mrs. Hazel’s business. And I believe she requested your immediate absence.”

As he walked past the men, not quite brushing against Jack, Francesca found herself holding her breath. But no one tripped or jostled him. His manner was too authoritative. He stopped beside Francesca, facing them.



Jack and Bill exchanged glances, and seemed to take courage from it, for Jack sneered openly once more. “So the question is for *you*? What are *you* going to do about it? What *can* you do?”

“In the short term, I really don’t advise you to find out. In the longer term, I suspect a consultation with my old friend Mr. Paston will be productive.”

Mr. Paston was the local magistrate, though how George had discovered it was beyond Francesca’s current ability to imagine.

Again, Jack laughed. “What are you going to charge me with? Stealing a bucket of water?”

“How could I?” George replied. “There is no water in the bucket. I was thinking more along the lines of attempted murder.”

Francesca set down her pails. Jack and Bill stared at him open-mouthed.

“What were you planning?” George asked. “To put the poor cat in the bucket and lower it into the well so that it cried and frightened the household for Hallowe’en? And if the creature drowned, the well would be poisoned.”

The idiots had clearly not thought of that. For the first time in their encounters, the fear was on their side, not hers.

“Rot!” Jack said aggressively. “I was just having a drink!”

“From an empty bucket?” George inquired. He turned his gaze on Bill. “And you?”

Bill swallowed. A trickle of blood ran down his cheek where the kitten had scratched him. “I like cats,” he said lamely.

“They clearly don’t like you,” George observed with apparent amusement. “You may go, and do not return without invitation.”

There was a short, surprised silence. Then Jack pushed the bucket off the wall and slouched away, Bill at his side. Jack tried to give a laugh of bravado as he went, but it was a poor effort.



## Chapter Four

WHILE FRANCESCA, DAZED, watched them go, George wound the well bucket down to collect water. He was pouring it into the bucket at her feet before she found her voice.

“Thank you.”

“How long has their harassment been as bad as this?” He didn’t look at her but lowered the bucket into the well once more.

She swallowed. “They have never been so blatantly threatening before.”

“I hope I have not made it worse. I wanted to frighten them a little, shock them back into some semblance of reality.”

She frowned. “How do you know Mr. Paston?”

“Never met him in my life, though I do intend to speak to him. I discovered in the village that he is the magistrate. Have you spoken to him before?”

“About those two and their ilk? And charge them with what? Calling me names?”

“There are suitable laws,” George assured her.

“I would rather it did not come to that. I have to live here. And their families have to live.”

“Not at the expense of yours,” George said, unloading the second bucket and returning it to the well. “They are bullies of the worst kind. But a word of warning from Mr. Paston should be enough. They think you are alone and unprotected.”

*I am.* Worse, she was Mark’s only protection. She shivered. “Perhaps my pride has got in the way. And Mrs. Paston is a friend of the vicar’s wife.”

“Who insulted you in the first place.”

Both her pails were filled now. He covered the well and, as she bent to lift the buckets, he picked them up instead.

She walked beside him with a murmur of thanks. Her hands were shaking. “They were frightened of you.”

“Not at first.” He gave a quick, rueful smile. “Jack was in the inn last night when I asked for a room. I did not cut a brave figure.”

“You certainly made up for it this afternoon,” she said warmly. In fact, she began to see the funny side of the encounter. “I have never seen anyone so haughty, so perfectly, politely, in command.”

“I learned it from a friend of mine who plays the supercilious nobleman to perfection. Of course, he *is* a nobleman, which helps.”

She laughed, and he smiled back. Unexpected happiness surged through her. What a shame he would leave. She would never see him again. But she would never regret knowing him.

“How is your chaise?” she asked.

He wrinkled his nose. “The wheelwright is busy on it. It will not be ready today. Apparently, the inn can supply a replacement vehicle, but not before tomorrow morning. By which time, I hope my own chaise will be ready. But at least the inn is emptying. I can have a room there tonight.”

“Or you may stay here,” she blurted, glad only that he would not leave today. She cleared her throat. “Mark will be glad of your company.”



WAS IT POSSIBLE she would be too? He had been appalled by the threatening behavior of those two louts by the well, and in truth, he was reluctant to leave her without resolving the issue with some certainty.

He had seen how shaken she was, how helpless. The louts had seen it too, unfortunately. He only hoped his own intervention had been enough to convince them she was *not* helpless. Or unprotected.

Accordingly, after a quick cup of tea and detailed directions, he remounted his hired horse and rode up to Paston Hall, where he sent in his card with a request for an immediate interview with the magistrate.

He was shown at once into the study, where Paston welcomed him with every courtesy. He was a distinguished man of middle years, a little self-important in his speech, perhaps, but attentive and clearly concerned that a gentleman traveler should be in need of his services.

“It is not really on my own behalf I have come,” George said, settling into the chair he was offered. “I was merely forced by a carriage accident to stay in the village last night. You may or may not have been aware that a prizefight took place in the vicinity this morning?”

Mr. Paston blushed slightly, and George said at once, “No, no, that is not my complaint. My problem was merely that there were no rooms available at the inn, and some of the locals directed me—maliciously, I now suspect—to Hazel House. In my naiveté, I imagined it to be a lodging house of some kind, not the private residence of a gentleman’s widow and her child.”

“Ah,” Mr. Paston said. “I trust Mrs. Hazel has not caused you offense?”

George felt his jaw drop. “*Mrs. Hazel?* Of course not. Because of the storm and my own semi-drowned condition by the time I got there, she felt obliged to give me shelter. Sir, my concern is that I was sent there as some kind of trick. These tricks seem to have become a habit with certain elements within the village. What is more, those same people subject Mrs. Hazel to insult and inuendo on an almost daily basis. And they are growing bolder.”

“Mrs. Hazel’s reputation—” Paston began apologetically.

“Is being slandered daily,” George interrupted. “I am aware of it. I doubt you can be, sir, for I am aware the lady has made no complaint to you. However, when I returned to the house this afternoon, with the intention of collecting my baggage and removing to the inn, I found two of the same villagers who had sent me there last night, in the midst of some ploy or other. They seemed to be trying to put Mrs. Hazel’s cat down the well in her yard, no doubt with the aim of frightening her. And when she attempted to send them about their business, their manner was undoubtedly threatening. I hate to imagine what might have happened had I not arrived on the scene.”

“I’m sure you are worrying unnecessarily,” Paston said, with just a shade of anxiety. “Who were these men?”

“One Jack Forest and Bill Kell, I believe.”

“Ah. Wastrels, to be honest. But not dangerous, I assure you.”

“I hope you are right,” George said at once. “Because I very much doubt that if your wife was left a widow—God forbid—you would like to think of her being harassed, insulted, and jostled by such apparently non-dangerous wastrels.”

Paston blinked rapidly. George could almost see him weighing what he knew against the gossip of his wife and, hopefully, imagining her in a similar situation. Certainly, he looked alarmed for the first time. George pushed his point home.

“As you know,” he said mildly, “the fact that she once played music on the stage does not deprive her of the protection of the law. My own feeling is that the matter need not progress to formal complaints if informal steps are taken now. If they are not, I fear a genuine tragedy that will affect the whole community.”

Again, Paston looked startled. He licked his lips. “These men *are* bullies,” he replied. “I’ll have a word with them and with a few others tomorrow. It should be enough.”

“Thank you,” George said. “I believe it will be.” He rose to his feet. “Ordinary people often follow the lead of their betters. Perhaps if the local gentlemen’s wives were to call on her and include her occasionally...”

Mr. Paston looked appalled.

“Ah. You have forbidden your wife from calling on Mrs. Hazel?” George said innocently.

“Of course not,” Paston said, looking genuinely shocked. “My wife chooses her own friends, and I have never interfered. In fact, when Hazel was alive, he and his wife dined here more than once.”

And the fact that she had clearly not been invited since would not have been lost on the villagers.

Paston must have realized that, for he cleared his throat. “Thank you for bringing the matter to my attention.”

“I believe Mrs. Hazel was too proud to ask for your help. But I could not in all conscience leave the area without making you aware of her plight.”

“When do you leave us, sir?”

“Tomorrow, when my chaise should be fully repaired. In the circumstances, I shall stay tonight at Hazel House. My faith is in you to quash any unseemly rumors of my reasons.”

“Oh, quite, Sir Arthur. Quite.”

George offered his hand. “Good day!”

Mr. Paston gravely shook his hand.



BY THE TIME George came back, Francesca had pulled herself together, able to concentrate on the humor of the confrontation

at the well rather than on her own terrible feeling of powerlessness.

He came in through the kitchen, as if he had known that was where she would be. It was odd the way her mood instantly brightened, not only with relief but with a curious sense of ease, as if now everything was right. It was not, of course. He would leave tomorrow.

“Paston will have a quiet word in the first instance,” he said at once. “He might even persuade his wife to call upon you later. I doubt you wish to be friends with her, but you should probably accept her for the good of your reputation in the neighborhood. She owes you that much and more.”

Francesca laid down the knife with which she was cutting vegetables and wiped her hands on her apron before pulling it off. “How did you manage that?” she asked cynically.

“I think I got him to consider his own wife in such a situation. I have found that many people lack the empathy to imagine themselves in another’s position. I used to be one of them. I have learned. Others can too. To some, of course, it is an inconvenience because they wish to believe someone *less* than they are. I call it dehumanizing.”

Francesca sank onto the nearest stool, indicating he should sit also. He did, and Ada brought them each a cup of tea before retreating to her stove.

“I have become inhuman?” Francesca asked, wondering if she should be offended.

“To people like Jack and Bill, yes. Probably also to the vicar’s wife and Mrs. Paston, even Mr. Paston. They will have convinced themselves that because you once played on the stage you are not respectable and are therefore unworthy of normal, human consideration. It is not right, but it happens.”

Something in his voice made her peer more closely. “Did it happen to you?”

His eyes slid away. But he nodded. And then he moved his gaze back to hers, as though with conscious bravery. She



wanted to take his hand and assure him he was one of the finest human beings she had ever met.

He said, "As a child, I did not always understand what was expected of me. And no one seemed to understand me. Except my little brother. My father thought I was stupid, then mad. Then one day he explained to me that Hugh, my brother, would make a better heir to his land and title. I believed him and promised to help Hugh in every way I could. In due time, my father died and Hugh inherited according to plan. I was happy to help him make the land profitable, and to invest wisely and cleverly on the Exchange. It was only gradually that I realized he was taking everything, and I had nothing but two rooms and a garden in the house that should by rights have been mine."

Francesca set down her cup. "But that is monstrous and surely illegal!"

George smiled sadly. "I had become less than human to my brother. I was a tool, a machine, to be guarded but not cared for."

"What happened?"

"I had little to do but read. I longed to see the world I learned of in books, to meet people other than Hugh and his wife and our old nurse. Hugh and Caroline had ambitions too, and to further them, he hired a lady, ostensibly to be a companion to Caroline but really to help look after me so that they could go away together for longer periods of time. That lady, Hera, became my first friend. The man she married, a doctor, was my second. They helped me to see my worth and to understand that *I* was the better man to have the land and the title. So I took them back."

She searched his eyes, aching for the pain of betrayal he must have suffered, admiring the spirit that had made him into the assured, gentle man who sat across the table, quietly drinking his tea in her kitchen.

“Good,” she said. “And you are telling me this because I should take back control of my life, too?”

“The situations are different. But I would like to help you in any small way I can. As Hera helped me.”

“You already have,” she said, through a peculiar tightness in her throat.

He poured some more tea from the pot into both their cups. “I have another confession.”

“You have?”

He cast her a slightly crooked smile. “When I was in the village this morning, I posted a letter to some friends in London. It is possible you will receive a visit from the Duchess of Cuttyingham. She is Hera’s sister-in-law. You should not look surprised if she greets you as though you are old friends.”

After a stunned moment, she began to laugh. “You are like a fairy godmother! Or should I say godfather?”

“Neither, if you please,” he said, and she laughed harder—which might have accounted for the tears she had to wipe from her face.



DINNER WAS A very pleasant meal. They dined early so that Mark could join them, but the autumn nights were drawing in and it was already dark. Ada and Martin both served at a very slow pace and then departed, leaving them to help themselves thereafter.

“I think you need younger servants,” George observed.

“We might be able to afford them this year,” Mark piped up, with no concept of discretion, repeating only what Francesca had once said to him. “Then Ada and Martin can retire with a pension.”

“I see. Very proper,” George said, leaving her to wonder what on earth he made of it in reality. But he changed the

subject, and the rest of the time was spent in lively conversation and laughter.

Afterward, Francesca took Mark upstairs to bed.

“You will write to me, won’t you, sir?” Mark said anxiously from the drawing room door.

George, who was pouring himself a glass of brandy, at Francesca’s invitation, glanced at him. “Of course I will. But we will meet again in in the morning.”

Mark grinned and allowed himself to be led off. “I like Sir George,” he confided on the stairs. “Do you?”

“Yes, very much.”

“That is what I told Papa. He likes him too, now.”

Francesca glanced at him doubtfully, wondering how she should respond. “Why?” she asked at last.

“Because he stood up for you.”

“When?” she asked.

“At the well this afternoon.”

Mark had not seen the incident at the well. She knew from Martin, who had been tending to the bedroom fires at the time, that Mark had been playing in his own room at the other side of the house.

“Who told you about that?” she asked.

“Papa, of course.”

A ripple of unease twisted through her. Could something of Percival really have remained here after all? She wanted him to be resting in peace.

Yet as they entered Mark’s room, it struck her that her late husband’s presence, even if only in memory, had grown stronger in the last few days. In Mark’s imagination and her own. Which was odd when Sir George was here and causing her to think of so many other possibilities in her life.

When she returned to the drawing room, George was seated with his brandy on the table beside him, a book open on his knee. He rose at once, asking if he could fetch anything for her. She smiled and shook her head. The evening would pass all too quickly without addling her wits with more wine. And tomorrow he would go. An ache within her intensified and spread.

Eager to learn all she could of him, she asked him more about his life, his estates in Lincolnshire. She was intrigued to learn he had been in Brussels during the Waterloo campaign and met the Duke of Wellington himself. He did not dwell on the aftermath of the great battle where so many had died, but she gathered he had played his part in transporting the wounded and that the experience still pained him. Having seen something of war herself, she understood.

Deliberately, he lightened the conversation, but she could think of nothing to say except, *"Tomorrow you will be gone and I will be lonely again. It will be so much worse than before, because now I have known you."* And she could not say that. How could she even believe it herself when she had known him barely twenty-four hours?

Silence stretched between them. She wanted to break it yet was afraid of saying something stupid just to keep him here, something that would betray her sudden vulnerability. But somehow, his presence was so comfortable that her tension eased and she simply enjoyed his silence.

"I have to thank you for another delightful evening," he said at last, rising to his feet. "In fact, for all your kindness."

"Nonsense. You have returned any kindness tenfold." She stood also, facing him with too much space between them. "May we not simply be friends?"

She was slightly hurt when he appeared to think about it before answering. "Simply, I doubt," he said. "But friends, most definitely." His sensitive mouth twitched into a half-smile. "I would like us to meet again."

Her heart beat faster. “So would I,” she admitted, and his smile broadened. She caught her breath.

She wanted him to take her hand. She wanted to touch him, kiss his cheek, anything to show friendship, to bring them closer. She knew instinctively that he would not take advantage. And he would not touch her.

Before she could gather her courage, he murmured, “Goodnight.” Then he bowed and walked away, much as he had done last night. It seemed a lifetime ago.

Restlessly, she moved toward the piano, and the urge to play overwhelmed her. She wanted to express this sudden emotion and soothe it at the same time. And it was better than thinking, even with her nerves jangled.

She sat on the stool with something of a bump, instantly spreading her hands across the keys, and began to play, letting her fingers go where they willed. After a little, she fell into Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*, and played her heart out. She knew it was for him, even if he could not hear her.

But someone was listening. She felt the presence, the shadow in the doorway. For an instant, she wondered if it were Percival haunting her for her faithlessness. But of course it was not.

It moved, and she stopped abruptly, stumbling to her feet, staring at George as he crossed the room. Even before he came to a halt right in front of her, she could see the admiration in his eyes, the dancing spark of excitement and knowledge. As though he had read her feelings in the music.

She had always played from the heart.

Her throat constricted. She had not realized quite how beautiful his eyes were, or how expressive. For such a gentle man, his naked feelings were fierce, melting her very bones. And that was before he even touched her.

When would he touch her?

His eyes devoured her, settled on her mouth, and butterflies cascaded through her stomach. She could not breathe for the thrill of hunger, of need. She did not even know if it was his or her own.

Why did he not speak?

Because his eyes said everything. The man had always communicated with his eyes, and she doubted many people ever noticed. She did, and it consumed her.

Very slowly, he lifted one hand and brushed his fingertips across her cheek, a soft, wandering caress. His parted lips quirked into a smile.

What would his kiss feel like? It would be sweet, so sweet, so...*necessary*.

His hand fell away. He took a step backward, turned, and strode out of the room.



## Chapter Five

BY THE TIME she climbed into bed, Francesca realized it was not lack of desire that kept him from her but respect for her situation. George would never take advantage. He was that rare breed, a true gentleman. And in the peace of her own bedchamber, reflecting on the disrespect she had received from the villagers since Percival's death, she was grateful. His care made her feel precious.

And yet her body clamored for love. Even while the rest of her rejoiced at the emotion within her, and within him. She smiled and closed her eyes, meaning to think of him a lot more before sleep claimed her.

However, she fell asleep almost at once, and dreamed not of George but of Percival.

He stood at the foot of her bed, managing to look both sad and excited as he did when he was leaving her for a few days or weeks. She smiled back because she understood he would be happy for her. He would want her to move forward with her life, find renewed happiness. He would have done the same had she been the one to die.

She was content with that, though sad because she had loved him so much, and he was never coming back.

And then everything changed. The curtains of the bed burst into flames, and Percival was no longer smiling but shouting at her.

“Francesca! Fran! Francesca!”

She could not move. She was paralyzed by sleep.

“Francesca! Can't you see the fire? Get *up!*”

She woke with a gasp, her heart hammering. Of course the bed was not on fire, but she could still imagine she smelled smoke, heard the crackling of flames. A quick glance showed her the guard still before the smoldering embers in the fireplace. But the sense of urgency, of panic, remained.

She leapt out of bed, pulled back the curtains, and opened the shutters to peer out of the window. An ominous glow came from the end of the house.

“Dear God,” she whispered.

She bolted across the floor, pausing only to shove her bare feet into slippers and seize a shawl from the end of the bed before dashing through the connecting door to Mark’s room.

She touched his shoulder, forcing herself to shake him gently. A panicked child would be less easy to control. “Marco, wake up, sweetheart. We have to leave the house for a little. Come, out of bed.”

With shaking hands she forced slippers onto his feet and seized him by the hand before snatching the night lamp. “Take your coat,” she said as they passed it hung on the back of a chair. She had no hands free to carry it for him.

*George.* She had to wake George.



GEORGE HAD NOT meant to fall asleep. He had lain down on his bed fully clothed, smiling because he had read the beginnings of love in Francesca’s eyes, and she was a happiness he had never thought possible.

Afterward, he never knew if it was dream or reality, but a man he knew was Percival Hazel was shaking him. “Fire,” he shouted. “It is up to you to save them!”

With a jolt, reality swamped him. The smell of burning, the bright orange glow through the window he had not shuttered, the sound, surely of cracking flames. And not in his hearth. That fire had gone out. He leapt up, seizing the still-burning lamp from his bedside table, and burst out into the



passage. He ran toward the main stairs to bang hard on Francesca's door.

From here, he could see the smoke billowing downstairs. And on this floor, further toward the servants' stairs. He was just about to burst into Francesca's room when she emerged from the next door along, grasping Mark in one hand and a small lamp in the other.

"George!" she cried in relief. "We must get out! I don't know how bad it is..."

"Stay with me," he said grimly, and led the way down the stairs. Increasingly, smoke made him cough, but at least there seemed to be a clear path to the front door.

"Oh, God, Ada and Martin!" she exclaimed.

"Where are they? Where do they sleep?"

"Downstairs, the room to the left of the kitchen—"

"Hopefully they're outside already, but I'll make sure. You take Mark straight out and well away from the house."

To his relief, she did not argue. Mark had to be her first concern. Already starting toward the front door, she cried out over her shoulder, "Be careful, George!"

The desperate concern in her voice spurred him on through the baize door. Here, the smoke almost choked him. No wonder. The kitchen was ablaze, especially to the right, blocking the way to the back door into the yard.

Ignoring that for now, he located the room off the kitchen's left-hand side. Noticing a towel, he dunked it in the pail of water he passed, and burst into the old couple's bedchamber. He peered through the thick smoke, raising his lamp and holding the wet towel over his nose and mouth.

They lay side by side, perfectly still.



FRANCESCA THREW BACK the bolts of the front door. They felt warm, as though the whole house was heated by direct sunshine. She wrenched open the door, still grasping the silent Mark by one hand, and all but staggered into the open.

Even the outside air stank of smoke, and she could see at once that one side of the house was in flames.

“Oh dear God,” she whispered. She grasped Mark’s hand more tightly and ran down the path toward the garden.

“There! Undressed!” a gleeful voice cried out of nowhere.

Startled—could it be help arrived from neighbors?—she halted and peered at the two men on either side of the old oak tree, behind which they had apparently been hiding.

“What d’you expect?” the second man said derisively. “It’s the middle of the night. The question is, is *he* in his nightclothes too? And you must admit, he ain’t with her.”

Francesca stared at them, her jaw dropping. It was Jack Forest and Bill Kell. “You are betting on the fire in my house? Instead of helping?” she said in disbelief. “My son could have died! My servants, whom you have known all your lives, still might.” *George. Oh God, George...*

And then, seeing Jack’s forceful nudge before they backed away, another, even uglier suspicion hit her.

They had started the fire.

As a bet to see if she and George emerged together as lovers. And no doubt as revenge for the thwarting of their well trick this afternoon.

“Dear God,” she whispered with utter contempt.



MARTIN SAT BOLT upright like a stage ghost, without using his hands. And coughed.

Flooded with relief, George could hardly speak. “Fire, Martin. We have to get out. Wake Ada.”

The room was already unbearably hot and the old couple all but overcome. There was no time or strength to search for other exits. George made a swift decision and broke the window, battering the glass out, so that it would not cut them to ribbons.

“Hello!” shouted a voice outside. “Anyone in there?”

“The Martins!” George gasped back as loudly as he could while struggling to breathe. “I’ll pass them out to you!”

Only Ada’s choking sounds told him she was still alive. He picked her bodily from the bed and passed her through the window. Somewhere, he registered that it was the innkeeper from the village who took her at the other side. Martin staggered toward him in his nightshirt, and George hefted him over the sill. Eager hands took the old man from his grip. Hastily, George dragged the covers off the bed and pushed them through, too. They would be needed.

The fire was spreading rapidly toward him, licking under the bedchamber door. From long-ingrained habit, George doused the lamp he had earlier set on the dressing table, and laughed at himself as he jumped and threw himself through the window.

Helping hands caught him, dragging him away from the heat of the building. He could see the old couple, wrapped in blankets, and several local people, including the innkeeper and the blacksmith. Desperately, he sought Francesca and Mark, but he could not speak to ask.

And then, like a whirlwind, she landed in his arms, sobbing, “Oh, thank God, thank God!” And for one blissful moment, her lips pressed to his cheek, his mouth, and his arms closed hard around her.

It was only an instant before he realized the innkeeper and his wife were subtly sheltering them from view. Which at least brought enough sense back to George to draw her away from him.

“Mark?” he said urgently.

“Safe with Mrs. Gates. You brought the Martins out alive, George, thank you!”

And then she fled toward the Martins, who might have been alive but were still struggling to breathe.

George realized that the hands helping him away from the building belonged to Mr. Paston, the magistrate.

“Thank God you’re all safe,” Paston said fervently. “I’ll never forgive myself for not warning those two today as I should! If I had not thought to tell the constables to patrol past the house tonight, it could have been so much worse.”

George wrestled his foggy brain into understanding. He stared at Paston. “You are saying the fire was started deliberately?”

Paston nodded. “By Forest and Kell. Not with intention to injure, I’m sure. They’re just too ignorant to realize how quickly a fire can spread. I believe the aim was to see if you and Mrs. Hazel emerged together. A stupid, dangerous wager. And yet if you hadn’t been there, the Martins would be dead.”

George shivered with memory, gazing toward the burning house. It would never recover from this. All Francesca’s married life, her home and her son’s, were burning to the ground. Had some shade of her husband really warned him? If he had not, would George ever have awakened? Would Francesca or Mark have?

“Where are they?” he asked Paston with rare savagery.

“In custody. They’ll be locked up until charges are brought.”

George swallowed. His throat felt as if was full of hot razors. “Does Mrs. Hazel know?”

“Most of it. You must all come up to Paston Hall. My wife is expecting you, and the doctor has been summoned there.”

Paston was tugging him toward a carriage. But George could not help looking back at the blazing house. Was the

remnant of Percival Hazel still there? Peering hard, he could almost imagine a ghostly figure in the flames.

*Thank you*, he mouthed silently.

And it seemed as if a voice answered directly into his head. Almost an echo. *Thank you*.



## Chapter Six

THE AIR WAS still thick with smoke the following morning when Francesca returned to Hazel House. What was left of it.

That the consequences could have been so much worse did not incline her to forgive Jack and Bill for what they had done. Under no circumstances was it acceptable, whatever the damage or whoever did or did not die. She would have nightmares forever about losing her son, her servants, and her friend to such a horrendous death. And so she had told Mr. Paston, who seemed more than happy to see the pair charged with arson and the attempted murder of five people.

As she gazed at the still-smoldering ruin of her home, she still did not weep. She was too shocked and angry. But she walked inexorably toward it. She guessed nothing could be salvaged, but it hardly mattered beside the hugeness of the saved lives.

She had left Mark warily getting to know one of the Pastons' grandchildren. She had not seen George since last night, when they had met, numbly, in the Pastons' house, before being led away to different baths and clean beds and the ministrations of the local doctor. But she knew George was well enough to go into the village. Perhaps he had left already in his repaired post-chaise. She could hardly blame him. His journey home had gone from bad to worse.

She surveyed the wreckage of her home. Among the blackened rubble she could recognize the odd piece of furniture, a few ivory keys from the piano, a piece of molded plaster from the drawing room, a mantelpiece, a miraculously survived Venetian glass vase.

Something caught her eye, and she climbed over a pile of mostly stable stones to get to it. She picked it up slowly.

Another miraculous survival. The broken neck of Percival's violin, strings hanging loose.

She suspected it had not been burned in the fire but stood on by those who had tried so hard in the beginning to put it out. Which for some reason seemed even sadder.

She sat slowly down on the stones, still holding the piece of instrument in her hand. It grew blurry before her eyes.

"Your poor, beautiful violin," she whispered, and discovered she was weeping after all—for what had happened and what might have, for Percival and her home, for her own loneliness, and the pointless, reasonless hatred that had brought about this whole mess.

Something brushed against her cheek. She knew his touch as she knew her own. "I'm sorry," she gasped. "Percival, I am so sorry."

For an instant, it felt like his arm around her, and she had to look. It might have been swirling smoke, but it looked like him. Her hair might have blown around her lips, or he might have kissed them. But he was not sad. He was glad.

And abruptly, so was she. He was going at last to his rest. Not because fools had burned his home but because she was strong enough to cope. And she was. She knew that. And yet still she wept and wept. She didn't know for how long, until a strong, much more solid arm came around her, and she turned into George's chest with a deep, low sob.

He sat beside her in silence, holding her, stroking her hair until the storm passed.

"He has gone," she said into George's neck. "He woke me last night because of the fire, and now he has gone."

"May he rest in peace. Do you mind?"

The question was asked so carefully that she raised her head, tear stains and all, and searched his face. "You don't think I am mad?"

“I think he woke me, too. He trusted me to help. And Mark has been chatting with him since I arrived.”

“And before,” she admitted. She met his gaze and finally answered the question. “No, I don’t mind. I am glad because he has gone where he should be.”

He nodded. “You loved him very much.”

“I did.” Raising her hand, she touched his cheek. He had shaved recently and did not smell of smoke, just of soap and cleanliness and George. “My life is not over. Even for this—*especially* not for this.”

Somewhere not too far away, birds were singing. She could hear cattle lowing and chickens making a racket. She wondered vaguely what had happened to hers.

George said, “Do you think you might ever love again?”

“Yes,” she said softly. “I think I might.”

His breath caught. “Do you think that you might ever fall in love with *me*?”

Her heart thudded. “You might try to convince me.”

He smiled with his lips and his eyes, and then just with his eyes as he bent his head and finally kissed her mouth.

The kiss was everything she had imagined and more. Gentle and sweet and tender. She clung to his lips, and when it ended, she kissed him back, and this time it was lazily sensual, exploring, arousing.

“Sir George,” she whispered against his lips. “I have not known you two days, but I think I am already half in love with you.”

“Good,” he said. “For I might be wholly in love with you.”

“How will we know?”

“A little more kissing might help.”

It did.





TWO DAYS LATER, Mrs. Paston was “at home” to her gently born neighbors. Whether because of Francesca’s misfortune or Mr. Paston’s influence, she was now distantly kind to Francesca. If not friendly, she was at least hospitable in a condescending sort of a way. Francesca, grateful for the roof over her head and Mark’s, and delighted that it was the same roof that currently harbored George, did not resent the condescension. It was a sort of truce.

Naturally, since the Hazel House fire was the main topic of speculation in the village, the “at home” was well attended. Francesca was there, and the guests were quite avid to see her. She was sure they were disappointed to find that she and George sat on opposite sides of the room, but they asked innumerable questions.

She repeated several times that the hall was completely ruined, that she and Mark had been unharmed in the fire, and that the Martins were slowly recovering, having been rescued by Sir Arthur Astley. And yes, Jack and Bill were bound over to stand trial. The vicar’s wife listened without actually speaking to her. The vicar himself had called on her the day before with his sympathies and good wishes.

A footman entered once more and presented Mrs. Paston with a visiting card on a silver salver. She picked it up, blinked, and blurted, “The Duchess of Cuttyngham! Of course, show Her Grace in at once.”

Francesca’s gaze flew to George’s face, but he was deliberately not looking at her.

“You are acquainted with the duchess?” the vicar’s wife asked with a gasp.

A war waged visibly across Mrs. Paston’s face, but reluctant truth won out. “Why, no, though I suppose Cuttyngs is not so very far away...” She rose to greet her august guest, nervously smoothing out her skirts.

An instant later, two young, fashionably dressed ladies swept into the room. The first lady held out her hand as she approached Mrs. Paston, who curtsayed before taking the hand in a bemused kind of way.

“Your Grace is most welcome. I am Mrs. Paston.”

“Olivia Cuttyngham,” said the duchess informally. “My sister-in-law, Lady Hera Rivers. I hope you will forgive the intrusion, but I have been searching for my friend, Mrs. Hazel, and just learned that her home has burned down! Could you possibly direct me to her?”

Francesca was stunned. She had forgotten George’s plan, which hardly mattered now.

“But of course,” Mrs. Paston said, clearly torn between shock at discovering Francesca’s connection to a duchess, and delight at being able to oblige Her Grace. “Mrs. Hazel is staying with us while she decides the best way to go forward.”

*Now* George was looking at Francesca, his gaze oddly commanding. With an inward shrug she rose and went to Her Grace. “How pleasant to see you, Duchess,” she said. “I should have written to you...”

“Oh, stuff,” said the duchess graciously.

“Lady Hera,” Francesca murmured, curtsying also to George’s first true friend, who was eying her with rather sharp curiosity. Nevertheless, she smiled and shook hands as though they too were old friends. “And Sir Arthur is here, too!”

“George, how delightful!” Hera said, going to him at once. “I didn’t see you, standing there so quietly.”

The duchess caught Francesca’s gaze and, shockingly, closed one eye. “I’ve come to rush you away, my dear! Bring your lovely little boy and come with us to London for a fortnight. After which, Hera wishes to bear you off to Lincolnshire. I might come too, if Cuttyngham is willing. A fresh start, I think?”

The vicar's wife's jaw seemed about to hit the floor. She had publicly and frequently insulted the friend of a duchess. Mrs. Paston began to look smug.

"Perhaps you have an announcement, George?" Lady Hera said clearly.

"Actually, I do. Mrs. Hazel has agreed to be my wife." George smiled directly into Francesca's eyes, and she smiled back with all the love and all the laughter surging inside her.

"You *see* him," Lady Hera said in surprise. "You really do see him for what he is."

"I love him for what he is," Francesca said proudly, and the happiness in George's face dazzled like the sun in winter.

The End

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## **About Mary Lancaster**

Mary Lancaster lives in Scotland with her husband, three mostly grown-up kids and a small, crazy dog.

Her first literary love was historical fiction, a genre which she relishes mixing up with romance and adventure in her own writing. Her most recent books are light, fun Regency romances written for Dragonblade Publishing: *The Imperial Season* series set at the Congress of Vienna; and the popular *Blackhaven Brides* series, which is set in a fashionable English spa town frequented by the great and the bad of Regency society.

Connect with Mary on-line – she loves to hear from readers:

Email Mary:

[Mary@MaryLancaster.com](mailto:Mary@MaryLancaster.com)

Website:

[www.MaryLancaster.com](http://www.MaryLancaster.com)

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# **Once Upon a Highland Mist**

*Maeve Greyson*





# Chapter One

*Castle MacDanua*

*Tarbat Ness Point, Scotland*

*Midsummer 1399*

“CHIEFTAIN, YE MUST come! Lady Aria escaped her rooms. I locked her in, just as ye ordered, but she must have found her key she claimed lost. She’s in the east tower, out on the parapet, and willna come back inside.” Mrs. Tarrel, housekeeper to Castle MacDanua, stood in the doorway of his solar, wringing her hands.

Wolfe MacDanua charged out from behind his desk and stormed through the halls to the east tower’s stairwell. What a fool he was. Why had he not ordered his poor, unsettled wife more securely guarded for her own safety? But dearest Aria had seemed more at peace of late. As if she had finally found the strength to manage the unbearable pain of their precious wee daughter’s death.

He took the tower steps three at a time, loping up them like a beast clawing its way up a mountainside. If he could just make her hear him—pull her into his arms and hold her tight until her terrible demons loosened their hold and allowed her to see reason.

“Aria!” His bellow echoed up into the endless spiral of stone steps. “Aria! Daren’t ye move. I am coming.” He reached the top and shouldered open the door. Every torch in the circular arrow room blazed even though the brilliance of the sun streamed in through the arched windows. A flash of the whitest white caught his eye. “Aria!”

His precious bride stood barefoot in her shift, balanced atop the chest-high wall that bordered the narrow walkway

circling the top of the tower, arms raised as though she were ready to take flight. Her long hair fluttered behind her like great golden wings. She cast a loving smile up into the clouds, reaching for something only she could see. “I must go to her. She calls me. My precious wee lassie cries for me.”

Wolfe eased out onto the walkway just wide enough for a man and his bow. As he sidled his way to her, he ran his hand along the top of the wall. If he could just get close enough to latch on to her and pull her to safety—

Her gaze lowered from the clouds and turned to him, hardening to a flintiness that cut his heart. She bared her teeth like a crazed animal. “I am going to her, Wolfe. Ye canna stop me. She is frightened and needs her mother.”

“She rests in the care of the angels, Aria. Happy and free of this life’s worries.” He edged another step closer. “Stay with me, dear wife. Let me help ye.”

“I will not.” Resentment sharpened the madness in her glare. “The last time ye said ye would help, that witch killed our sweet daughter. Fetch the Morrigan for yerself this time. Go back to her bed, ye unfaithful man. I’ve no need of her or yerself.” Then she stepped off the wall while reaching for the clouds. “Mama is coming, dear one!”

“No!” Wolfe lunged too late, missing his last opportunity to save her. The horror of what she had done sent him barreling back down the steps, cursing his grandsire for building the tower to such a great height.

“Aria!” he bellowed again and again, refusing to accept what he knew he would find when he reached the bottom.

Castle MacDanua perched on a cliff of stone, a tall, proud sentry overlooking the North Sea. The east tower of the fortress watched over a merciless strand of jagged rocks and slabs of squared-off boulders. There, he found her. On her back. Arms outspread. Draped across a weather-bleached shelf of unrelenting hardness. Her eyes remained open in an unholy stare up at the clouds. Blood slowly pooled around her,

staining the light gray of the rock with the darkness of her death.

A ragged cry tore from him as he caught her up and held her. On his knees, he clutched her to his chest, rocking and roaring his regret for his arrogant ways and all he had cost this dear, sweet lass.

“I told ye to wed a stronger woman. Ye should have wed me.” The sultry voice behind him burned like a brand of hot iron sizzling into his flesh.

A furious rage rose from the depths of his soul. He didn’t bother facing the evil woman he knew he would see. “Take care, Morrigan, lest I send ye back to the hell that spat ye out.”

The ebony-haired beauty rounded the stone and smiled up at him. Malicious glee sparkled in her dark eyes. “Such harsh words for yer lover? Shame on ye, my chieftain. After the many nights we enjoyed?” She sauntered closer, her head slowly tilting as she studied his poor, lost wife. “Why so sad? Ye said the dowry was the only good thing about the pairing with this one.” She swiped her fingers through the pooling blood, then rubbed them together as though finding the terrible slickness pleasurable. Her taunting focus returned to him. “Dinna tell me ye grew fond of yer wee pet?”

“She did not deserve this,” he forced through clenched teeth. With an unsteady touch, he gently closed his wife’s eyes. “I think—” He stopped himself and bowed his head, silently begging for his poor, lost Aria to find it in her soul to forgive him. “Before our wee one died, I think—”

“Ye think what?” Morrigan tossed her head, resettling her shimmering tresses down her back like a raven resettling its wings. “Ye think ye *loved* her? Ye think she might have *loved* ye?” She flipped a hand and filled the air with a burst of cruel laughter. “I *think* a more arrogant fool does not exist in all of Scotland.”

“She was precious and good.” He lifted his head and thundered a scowl down at the witch who had been his greatest

mistake. “She was not like *ye*.”

Morrigan smiled even brighter. “Aye, but ye found pleasure in my wickedness, did ye not?” She leaned on the boulder and gave a sad shake of her head as she trailed her fingertips through the blood again. “But I will say ye were always honest about it.” She bared her arm and used the blood to paint strange markings across her pale flesh. “In honor of such rare honesty, I have an offer for ye.” She cut a sly look up at him as she dabbed her fingers in the shimmering puddle again and smeared more bloody symbols across the milk-white swells of her breasts peeping above the neckline of her ragged kirtle. She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Bind your soul to mine and I will bring her back to ye.”

Wolfe swallowed hard and clutched his dead wife tighter. He knew the rumors about Morrigan but had ignored them, even though the deadness in her eyes told him they were true. The wicked woman was a gifted healer and an insatiable lover. But what she suggested now went far beyond every story of witchery told about her. “Begone, Morrigan. And stay gone. I never wish to set eyes on ye again.”

She twitched a shrug. “As ye wish, my chieftain. Although I assumed ye might wish it because of the bairn in her belly. A precious son this time.”

“A son.” The words escaped him before he could catch them back. Their daughter had been naught but two winters old when the fever stole her away. He and Aria had sought comfort in each other’s arms before his lady’s grieving madness gained complete control. She begged him to give her another babe, and they had made love. True love this time, with a passion like never before—not the mere cold coupling for an heir. The witch could be speaking the truth of a new bairn. Or not.

“Ye lie,” he challenged. He pushed himself to his feet, still holding Aria tight.

Morrigan shrugged again and turned to leave. “It matters not to me,” she said without looking back.

“Wait!” A new child. A new beginning. “What happens if I bind my soul to yours? How is it done and what is the cost?”

The witch’s chilling smile made him wish he had never asked. “Ye be mine for eternity, pet.” She dipped a nod at Aria’s limp form. “Yer wife returns, yer son is born, and Clan MacDanua gains an heir.”

“What do ye mean by *I be yers*? How would it be so?” He didn’t trust Morrigan. There had to be a sacrifice. Pain. Something tortuous. Morrigan thrived on such. “Would I know my son? Be able to train him up to be a good chieftain? Watch over him and live as a truly loving husband to my wife?”

“Of course.” Her seductive tone pulled him in, daring him to believe what he wanted so badly to be true. She drew a long, slender dagger from its sheath at her belt, brought forth blood from her palm, then held out her hand. “I need naught but a few drops of yer own lifeblood, my lover. To mix with my own.”

Ever so gently, Wolfe rested Aria back across the rock and stepped down beside Morrigan. He held out his hand. An uneasiness sent a warning tingle down his spine, making him tighten his buttocks and brace himself for whatever was to come.

She nicked his palm, pressed their bleeding hands together, and clasped them tightly. “Ye shouldha been mine, and now ye are,” she warned in a deadly whisper. “Body and soul. Blood and bone. Heart. Spirit. Mind. And especially all yer hopes and dreams.”

Black clouds rolled in, blotting out the sun. The wind roared, hitting Wolfe so hard that he nearly lost his footing. Waves thundered against the shore, and a heavy fog, a blinding mist, rolled in from the sea, cloaking everything in murky grayness.

Morrigan reached up and raked her nails down his face, blinding his left eye with searing pain and sending blood streaming down his cheek. An indescribable weight shoved

down on his shoulders, making his back splinter and twist from the base of his skull to his tailbone. He caught hold of Morrigan by the shoulders and held fast to remain standing through the agonizing torture. “What have ye done to me?”

“Helped ye give birth to a legend, my unfaithful lover. Righted a few personal wrongs.” She jerked away, cackling when he stumbled to the ground. “Ye shouldha chose me as your wife, Wolfe MacDanua. But instead, when ye were not in my bed, ye scorned me. As did those of yer clan. Now ye shall pay. All shall pay. There will be no Lady Aria. No heir for Clan MacDanua. And to complete my revenge, I place this curse upon ye and on all those dwelling in this land. Every mother’s child best heed these words and pass them on to their children and their children’s children.”

She circled him, her unholy chant roaring louder than the wind and the sea. “When nightfall comes and the haar blows in, bar yer doors and cover yer heads. For the vengeful fog of Tarbat Ness comes to coax MacDanua’s pipes to play for the pleasure of she who ye scorned. If ye hear the melody in full, fall to yer knees and bid yer life farewell. For tragedy comes to take yer soul before the toll of the year’s last bell.”

With a cruel laugh, she ran her hand through the fog, then hit Wolfe with the set of bagpipes she pulled from the mist. “Play for me! Now!”

“A blood oath must be honored,” he bellowed, trying to rise from his knees. “Ye canna base a curse upon a falsehood.”

She cackled as she swept the fog away from the boulder and revealed Lady Aria’s body vanished. “Ye obviously know nothing of curses, my pet.” Lightning crackled all around. The air stung with its power. She threw the pipes back into his face. “Now, stand and play.” She stepped close and gently ran her nails through the blood on his face. “And dinna fash yourself, my once handsome lover. While the mist dances to yer mournful song, ye will be made whole again. Strong and virile as always. But once the sun rises and burns my precious

mist away, my lovely curse will return ye to the form of the ill-sighted cripple—the image of yer true soul.”



## Chapter Two

*Tarbat Ness Point, Scotland*

*Midsummer 1599*

“**S**AME BLOOD BUT a pure soul sacrificed for the lie told.”

“I know, Mama.” Ethne tried to coax another spoonful of gruel into her poor, addled mother’s mouth. She had no idea what the old woman’s words meant, and it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that the dear soul needed to eat. Mama was wasting away to nothing. “A bit more, aye? Ye’ve grown so weak with not eating. I shall have to take in yer shift yet again.”

Her mother turned away from the food, then stole a look back at Ethne and lifted a knobby finger. “I be Morrigan-the-least. Daughter of Morrigan-the-lessor. Granddaughter to the vile Morrigan-the-wicked. Hear me, child.”

“I know, Mama,” Ethne patiently agreed, determined to keep her mother calm. With a heavy sigh, she set the wooden bowl aside. Whenever Mama chanted her ancestry, all hope of getting her to eat was lost.

Her mother offered a weak smile. Her weary eyes crinkled at the corners. “But I didna curse ye with the witch’s name.” She lovingly rested her calloused hand on Ethne’s cheek. “Not for ye. My precious Ethne. Much too good for our vile bloodline.”

“Ye saved me, Mama.” Ethne carefully eased her mother back down onto the threadbare pillows of the narrow bed. “Ye are the good one. Taking me in when my own blood abandoned me.” Ethne didn’t know the truth of her ancestry. Superstition and fear had caused her kin to leave her on the fairy mound because of her different-colored eyes, one blue,



one green. Then and the devil's mark on her throat, a jagged red splotch that her dear foster mother had said resembled the North Star—a truer point never to be found. “Now rest, aye? Rhona will be here soon so I can tend to my errands.”

“Ye mean to leave the offering at the ruins?” Ethne's mother offered a hopeful smile. “I am glad for it. Each day ye go. Never shirking the need to right a terrible wrong.” She caught hold of Ethne's hand and gave it a weak squeeze. “Promise ye will go until yer wee legs can carry ye there no more? Ye will never forget, aye?”

“I will never forget, Mama. Today, I'll take a bit of the fried bread left from supper. And the last of the spring herbs.” Ethne pulled the covers higher around the thin woman's shoulders, then gauged the amount of life left in the dwindling fire in the hearth. Perhaps another stick of wood. The tiny dwelling seemed overly warm, but with not an ounce of fat on her bones, her poor mother shivered and complained of being cold on the balmiest of days.

The length of the shadows creeping across the floor concerned Ethne. Rhona had promised she would finish with the man from the village with plenty of time to spare. Bless Rhona's generous soul. If not for her bit of coin for the use of their only other room, Ethne doubted the three of them would survive. Those from Tarbat Ness shirked them because of the wicked one's curse from almost two hundred years ago. Well, the men didn't shirk Rhona because she was the village harlot. But all of them hated Ethne and her mother. And Ethne supposed it was rightly so after so many had fallen to the curse and met their tragic end after hearing the haunted mist's pipes.

Their hatred and threats to stone her forced Ethne to make the long walk to the next settlement to fetch the things they needed with what Rhona earned. It was a hard journey alone. Especially in winter. But with a patch hiding one of her eyes, Ethne made it without complaining. When the angels took Mama away, she would leave Tarbat Ness, but not before. Only because Mama had begged her to stay. Begged her to make the wrong right. Her mother's belief in her made her

smile. Make the wrong right? How in heaven's name could she bring peace to a haunted mist and free Tarbat Ness from the curse?

“Forgive me, Ethne. I know I'm late, love.” Rhona held tight to the tattered curtain covering the doorway, all the while tugging her kirtle back in place. She paused and glanced back, staring at something in the other room. The hinges of the rear door to the cottage creaked, then it rattled shut with a solid thud. Only then did Rhona relax and turn back to Ethne. “His son and brother came too.” She smiled and opened her fist, revealing three shining pieces of silver. “Now ye can buy that wool to make Mama a heavier shawl before winter.”

“Bless ye, Rhona. Ye are as good as gold.” Ethne added the coins to the drawstring bag she kept hidden behind a loose stone in the hearth. She hated that her dear friend had to submit to men who would never treat her the way she deserved, but without Rhona's sacrifice, they would all die a slow death of want. She hurried over to the only table in the meagerly furnished room.

“And there's still plenty of time for me to go.” Ethne glanced back at her sleeping mother. “I can make it to the ruins and give him his supper well before nightfall.” Anticipation at seeing him again lifted her heart, making it flutter.

“Why do ye love that cripple ye discovered living among the ruins?” Rhona gave her a teasing nudge. “Ye nearly fretted yourself sick over him this past winter.”

“I did no such thing.” Ethne placed as much of the fried bread and herbs that she thought they could spare into her errands basket, wishing there was more. His face was so gaunt. He needed a joint of meat, a keg of ale, and a kettle brimming with boiled vegetables and gravy. But that was not to be, and he always seemed so grateful for what she brought. It made her heart ache to have so little for him.

Along with the food, she packed an old blanket she had mended. It wasn't much, but it might shield him from the wind that never stopped roaring through the ruins of Castle

MacDanua. After a moment's hesitation, she tucked another flat of bread inside the folded cloth. She had eaten once today. That was enough. He needed her share more than she did.

"Ye must eat too," Rhona quietly scolded, reading her thoughts as easily as a book.

"He needs it more," Ethne said, tucking everything snug into the basket. "I feel bad for him. He is like us, I think. But worse because he has no one."

"An outcast too, then." Rhona perched on a stool beside the table, propped her elbow on it, and rested her chin in her hand. "If ye want, he could stay in the other room this winter." She nodded faster, as though warming to the idea. "Leastways, he'd be out of the wind that way."

"Ye need the other room," Ethne gently reminded her, wishing it wasn't so.

"Oh, he'd have to come to this side whenever the men came," Rhona said. "Long as he did that, we'd all get along just fine." She perked like a cat after a wee mousie. "Ye said he finally quit hiding whenever ye went there, aye?"

Heartwarming satisfaction at finally winning him over made Ethne smile. "Aye. We even talk now. Some days not much, but we always visit a bit. Seems like more each time." The same warm contentment she felt whenever she was with him filled her. Maybe she did love him because he eased the ache of her loneliness. He was the kindest man she had ever met.

"Then ask him to come and stay," Rhona urged.

Ethne glanced over at her mother again and shook her head. "I fear it would upset Mama worse than ever. She is saying the words more of late."

"Same blood but a pure soul sacrificed for the lie told," Rhona softly repeated while settling a worried look on Ethne's mother. "Poor Mama. What does it mean? Do ye ken?"

Ethne shook her head. “Only Mama knows. She said her mother told it to her right before they hanged her from the same tree where they hanged Morrigan-the-wicked.”

“’Tis a wonder they didna hang Mama,” Rhona whispered.

Ethne fisted her hands atop the table, stricken with the urge to run over and hug Mama against all the evils in the world. Bitterness soured in her soul as she eyed the horrible, puckered scar covering the left side of Mama’s face. “They said she was too simple to be as evil as the others. But they feared the Morrigan bloodline enough to burn their hatred into her face so none would ever forget her ancestry.”

“Cruel bastards thinking themselves so holy.” Rhona stood and jabbed a finger at the next room. “The same ones who sneak to my door and pay for what their wives willna do. ’Tis a wonder they didna burn ye as well.”

Ethne touched the mark on her throat. “They said the devil had already branded me as one of his own with this and my eyes.” She huffed a bitter laugh. “So now they simply threaten to stone me to keep me away from the village.”

“Ye should throw the rocks back at them.”

“Aye, and then we would all be burned alive here inside our wee cottage.” Ethne tucked the handle of the basket into the crook of her arm. “Better to keep our lives and a roof over our heads, ye ken?” She pointed at the bowl of gruel on the floor beside the bed. “If she wakes before I return, try to get her to eat more. She’d had naught but a small sip when her mind wandered.”

Rhona nodded, then cast a concerned glance out the window. “Mind the hour, aye? I dinna want ye out there when the mist comes.”

“I’ll be fine. The days are longer, with it being midsummer.”

“Mind the hour,” Rhona repeated in a sterner tone, then gathered her into a fierce hug. “We canna lose ye, Ethne. Mama and I could never bear it.”

“Ye willna lose me. Keep the fire going for Mama, aye?” Ethne eased her way free, then hurried out the door. A glance at the horizon gave her pause. The sun was much lower than she’d first thought. But she had to go. Her dear friend needed his supper just as Mama had needed hers. The poor man whose name he kept to himself would blow away if a stout wind hit. And fierce winds raked across what remained of Castle MacDanua all the time. She had decided that was why her reclusive friend held so tightly to his staff with both hands. He was half bent and with one eye covered with a rag wrapped around his head, it was hard to know his age. His dark, shaggy hair held hints of silver, but very little. But it didn’t matter his age. His one good eye held kindness and maybe even a glimmer of caring.

She smiled and pressed her hand to her chest. She hungered for that kindness and caring. It was a rare treat compared to the hatred and fear she always received from others.

After a quick glance up and down the narrow road, she broke into a run. At least she had the way all to herself by waiting until this late in the day. Nary a soul braved the outdoors when dusk neared and brought the threat of the haunted mist with it. The villagers stayed inside with their windows shuttered and their doors barred until dawn.

Ethne scurried down the path unafraid. Years ago, she had caught the first few strains of the mist’s lonely song. The eerie pipes had entranced her. The troubled melody broke her heart and made her ache to hear the rest. She had wept for the ghost of the poor chieftain of Castle MacDanua and hated the horrid Morrigan-the-wicked even more.

Then Mama had yanked her away from the window, sealed it tight with the board on the ledge, and sang ancient words that Ethne didn’t understand. She had circled Ethne, chanting them over and over until well after sunrise. Frightening Mama in such a way had made her feel so terrible that she never risked listening to the pipes again.

“Friend?” she called out as she climbed over a low spot in the crumbling wall that once guarded the impressive stronghold that had watched over Tarbat Ness. The east tower still stood at the cliff’s edge. Surviving with it was the keep, although part of its roof was long gone. Time had shorn off the other towers, collapsing them into nothing more than mounds of stone. “Friend?” she called louder. She strained to hear above the incessant wind and the sea’s crashing waves. “Are ye here?”

“It is late, Ethne. Ye shouldna be here.”

His deep voice made her heart beat faster. It always did. It was as though her soul recognized his and leapt for joy. She turned and spotted him in the shadowy doorway of what might have once been the family kirk. She hurried over to him, lifting her basket for him to see. “Ye had to have yer supper. I couldna bear the thought of ye going hungry.”

“I would be fine, lass,” he reassured her gently but firmly. “Now hie yerself back to yer home. The haar comes soon.” He didn’t look at her, just glared downward with his jaw set and his knuckles white from his grip on his staff. Had she angered him by being late?

“I’ve plenty of time.” She took the blanket from the basket, shook it out, and draped it around his bent shoulders. “I mended this for ye. It’s not much, but I thought it might help keep the wind from cutting ye so.”

His sad smile made her want to pull him close and console him as if he were a frightened child. She held herself back, fearing she might upset him even more. He still didn’t lift his gaze and allow her to look into his deep blue eye, which always held the kindness she needed.

Leaning against the wall, he took one hand off his staff and tugged the weave closer around his neck. “I thank ye, lass. ’Tis a verra fine gift I wish I could repay.” Then he tilted his head and looked at her, surprising her with a tender touch to her cheek. “Hie yerself home, dear Ethne. I beg ye.”

“Come with me.” The words tumbled out of their own accord. Surely, Mama would be all right with such an act of kindness. “Come with me,” she repeated, covering his hand with hers and holding it tighter to her cheek.

His smile faded, and he sadly shook his head. “Go. Ye would never make it in time with me at yer side.”

She cast another quick look at the horizon. He was right. She would have to run to make it home before the sun dipped out of sight. A glance at the sea revealed the mist creeping toward the shore. “I could stay here and plug my ears with my fingers.”

“No.” The word rumbled from him like the snarl of a cornered animal. He backed deeper into the shadows, shaking his head. “Ye will go to yer home. Now. Ye ken?”

It hurt to see him so upset, so unsettled. Ethne hurried to empty her basket, placing the bundles of bread and herbs in the cracked holy water font beside the door. “Daren’t ye fret. I’ll make it home safe, and tomorrow I shall come early enough so we might have a longer visit, aye? And I’ll bring ye some of the berries I found.”

Shuffling even deeper into the shadows, he shoed her away with a wave of his staff. “Aye. Now go. Run for yer life, Ethne. The mist is almost here.”



## Chapter Three

“**W**HEN WILL YE tell her?” Mrs. Tarrel, as stubborn in death as she had been in life, shimmered into view.

Wolfe sagged into the tattered chair behind his broken-down desk and propped his staff against his knee. “When will ye relent and go to yer heavenly reward?” He already knew the answer, but the selfish part of him loved hearing it.

“When the curse is broken and yer life is returned to ye.” She floated closer, clutching her pale hands across her broad middle, even though she was much like the mist. If he peered hard enough, he could see right through her.

She wore the same clothes she had on the day she died. A dark kirtle, an apron to keep it clean, and shoes with stubby heels that sounded like thunder whenever she hurried down the halls. Over the years since her death, she had learned how to make the same racket throughout the keep, even though she no longer had a solid body to aid in her noisemaking. He had laid her to rest in what was left of the chapel, regretting he couldn’t do better by the dear woman who had shown him so much loyalty and motherly love.

“When will ye tell her?” she repeated, moving so close she hovered above his desk.

He glared up at her. “Ye should ken that without even asking. Ye are many things, Mrs. Tarrel, but simple is not one of them.”

“Mistress Ethne willna run from ye.” The housekeeper moved to the shattered window and peered out at the sea. Her wispy hair fluttered around her face as though dancing in the wind. “I told ye what I overheard at the pub. Who her mother is—or her foster mother, I should say. I dinna ken who her true family is. Although some say she might be from the next



settlement over.” After a judicious nod in his direction, she turned back to the stark view. “And there are those who hate what they did to that poor mother of hers because she bore the Morrigan blood.”

“And yet they didn’t lift a hand to stop it. Ye heard her screams that day, same as I.” Wolfe didn’t fault the villagers for hanging Morrigan-the-wicked or her daughter, Morrigan-the-lesser. But according to Mrs. Tarrel, Morrigan-the-least, Ethne’s foster mother, had never been right in the head since the day the wicked ones had nearly beaten her to death for freeing the doves they used for blood sacrifices. And he felt sure that the torture of having half her face burned away hadn’t helped her sanity either. “Ethne should take her mother and move from this accursed place.” Two centuries of bitterness burned hotter within him.

“Mistress Ethne canna leave here anymore than ye can.” Mrs. Tarrel floated back to him. “She takes care of her poor, troubled mother. Keeps the house and all the duties required while Mistress Rhona does what this world has forced some women to do for centuries just to survive.”

“When ye lived, I dinna recall such a generous nature toward whores,” he teased.

“At least Mistress Rhona doesna curse those who spurn her bed,” she retorted.

He flinched as though she had struck him. The housekeeper had stopped mincing her words well over a hundred years ago. In times like this, he wished she would resume the habit. He lowered his gaze and worried his thumb across the gnarled knots in his twisted staff. “Mistress Ethne deserves better than me.”

“Ye have learned much in the last two hundred years,” Mrs. Tarrel observed. “Loneliness and pain are cruel taskmasters.” She floated down to his desk and perched on it like a plump, wingless fairy. “Ye are a better man now than the one I served all those many years ago.”

“And yet I send many to their deaths. Just as I sent Lady Aria to hers.”

“The curse sends them to their deaths.” Mrs. Tarrel shifted with a deep sigh as though she still possessed the need to breathe. “And the agony of losing her only child sent Lady Aria to hers.” She crossed herself and looked upward. “God rest her soul.”

“God rest her soul,” he echoed, meaning every word more than anyone would ever know. “I hope the saints let her into heaven even though she took her own life. She didn’t know what she was doing.”

“She will be judged fairly.” Mrs. Tarrel leaned forward and earnestly peered into his face. “As will you. By both God and Mistress Ethne, if ye will but give the lass a chance.”

“Why after all these years—”

“Friend?”

The lilting voice that always lifted his weary heart reached him through the ruins. It was Ethne. Earlier than usual. Just as she had promised.

Mrs. Tarrel disappeared, but she wasn’t gone completely. The nosy housekeeper couldn’t help herself.

He struggled to stand, then hobbled outside with slow, painful steps that set his spine on fire. But the knowledge that Ethne waited for him somehow made the misery more bearable. That was why she must never find out who he really was. If she discovered him to be the cursed chieftain of Clan MacDanua, he felt sure he would never see her again.

“Friend? Are ye here?” Her call was louder this time, but her tone held a hint of something he couldn’t quite place. Fear? Leeriness? A sense of urgency? What was it?

He forced his twisted body to move faster. “I am here, Ethne! I am here!”

Just as he cleared the door and spied her, she shrieked and fell out of sight behind a broken section of the skirting wall.

“That’ll learn ye to stay away, ye vile witch!” shouted a lad as he stepped out from behind a tree on the other side of the road. “And here’s another for good measure!” He hurled a fist-sized rock at the spot where Ethne had fallen out of view.

“Leave her be!” Wolfe roared. Ignoring the excruciating pain, he scooped up a stone and fired it at the boy. “Get out from here or I’ll pipe the curse upon ye without the aid of the mist.”

The lad’s eyes went as wide as shields as he backed away. Then he turned and ran as though the devil himself had risen from the depths of hell to catch him.

Heart pounding, growling with every infuriatingly slow step, Wolfe hurried past the crumbling wall and dropped to his knees beside Ethne. “Dear God in heaven, they’ve killed ye.”

“She is not dead,” Mrs. Tarrel said without showing herself.

“Chase after that wee bastard and scare the life out of him, aye?” Ever so gently, Wolfe leaned over and raised Ethne’s head, cringing at the purplish swelling above her right eye. Somehow, he had to get her inside. Within the protection of the castle. If he left her in the ditch, who knew what those heartless bastards would do if they found her?

“I made the wee demon shite himself,” Mrs. Tarrel reported with a proud chuckle from somewhere above him.

“Well done, Mrs. Tarrel. Well done indeed.” Balanced on his knees, Wolfe caught hold of Ethne’s arms and pulled her across his shoulders as if she were a wayward sheep and he her shepherd.

“How can I help ye, my chieftain?” The housekeeper shimmered into view, flitting all around him.

“Ye can stop behaving like a feckin’ moth.” He grunted as he lurched forward but kept himself from going back down on his knees by slamming his shoulder into the part of the wall still standing. “Did ye ever figure out how to pick things up?”

“Aye, I’m getting better at it.” She floated closer and fixed him with a concerned look. “But I dinna think I should risk trying to carry Mistress Ethne.”

“I shall carry Mistress Ethne. Somehow.” The horrific pain already had him trembling, and sweat nearly blinded him, burning his one good eye. “Fetch my stick, aye?”

“Aye, my chieftain.”

With his focus locked on forcing one foot in front of the other and not letting Ethne slip from his shoulders, Wolfe slowly hitched his way toward the chapel. It took forever, moving at a snail’s pace, and having to stop every few steps to gird himself against the excruciating pain. But he had to make it. The small kirk was his only hope. Not only were a few of its benches still solid enough to support his precious burden, but he doubted he had the strength to make it to the keep and up the front steps. Damn the vile Morrigan for cursing him into such a weakened form.

With the greatest of care, he eased her down onto the bench closest to the altar. A dusty pillow floated toward him.

“It was in the corner,” Mrs. Tarrel said. “Brush the filth from it afore ye put it under her head, aye?”

Crouching beside Ethne, Wolfe dusted it off as best he could, then slipped it under her head. “She’s fearsome pale, Mrs. Tarrel. That stone couldha killed her. Might kill her yet.” He untied the blanket from around his neck, the gift from the sweet lass, and spread it across her. Then he sank to the floor and rested his forehead on the edge of the bench. He closed his eyes and begged the Almighty to save her.

“I said a prayer for her,” Mrs. Tarrel whispered without showing herself.

“As did I, but I dinna ken if mine are heard anymore.” He lifted his head and stared at Ethne, begging her to open her eyes.

“Water might help,” the housekeeper suggested. “I canna manage that just yet, I fear. Forgive me, my chieftain.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Mrs. Tarrel.” With his staff securely wedged in a crack in the stone floor, Wolfe pushed himself to his feet and hobbled over to the table behind the altar, the place where he sometimes sat and enjoyed the food that dear Ethne brought him. He didn’t need to eat or drink to exist. The curse took care of that. But he could still taste. So he always enjoyed whatever she brought. Especially when she flavored it so nicely with kindness and caring. He filled his only cup from the pitcher of fresh water Mrs. Tarrel insisted he keep on the table. Thank the saints for the wise old woman and her odd beliefs.

He made his way back to the bench and scowled down at the cup and then at Ethne. Damned fool. What good was a cup of water when she lay still as a stone?

“Wet her face with its coolness,” Mrs. Tarrel whispered. “It might help bring her back to us.”

He lowered himself to the floor, biting back the pained grunt that movement always tore from him. But then he went as still as the lass herself, mesmerized by the simple perfection of her pure loveliness. Her long, dark lashes rested on her pale skin. Her ruddy curls—nay, not ruddy, but a deep, reddish brown, a rich shade like the coat of a purebred, chestnut mare. Their silkiness tumbled across the bench and reached the floor. The odd red mark on her throat reminded him of the North Star he had always trusted to chart courses when out to sea. Her ill-fitting kirtle hid her comely shape, making him wish things were different and he could provide better for her. She awakened feelings in him he thought to be long dead. Not lust but the need to care and be cared for, the ache to be needed. Shaking himself free of the daze, he dipped his fingers in the water and gently wet her cheeks and then her forehead.

“I need a cloth,” he whispered, more to himself than the invisible Mrs. Tarrel.

“Tear it from the hem of yer léine,” the housekeeper said.

Of course. Again, he was a complete fool. Others had always taken care of him. Never had he taken care of others.

But he would do this and do it well—for his precious Ethne. After ripping free a hank of the cleanest part of his hem and wetting it, he carefully pressed its coolness to her throat and face.

The faster rise and fall of her chest encouraged him. She breathed deeper—a sure sign she was fighting her way back to opening her eyes. Her lashes fluttered, giving him hope. Then she opened them. A rare pair of jewels. One a brilliant sapphire. The other a sparkling emerald.

“Friend?” Her brows drew together, but then she flinched and touched her forehead. “I remember now,” she said in a tremulous whisper. Her eyes filled with tears. “I am so sorry. Soon as I am a wee bit steadier, I will go and never bother ye again. I swear it.”

“Ye will not,” he said, probably louder than he should have by the way her eyes flared open wider. “Ye will not,” he repeated in a more mannerly tone. “That wee bastard should be thrashed for what he did to ye.”

“They canna help it. They fear I am a witch.” Her voice broke, and she tore her gaze from his, turning away and staring at the back of the bench as a tear slipped from the corner of her eye and trickled down into her hair. “And now ye know about me and all I had hoped to hide from ye.”

“I know ye are the kindest—loveliest...” He struggled to tell her all that she made him feel, all the ways she eased his terrible loneliness. But he couldn’t. To describe such unbelievable relief from the starkness of his torture was almost impossible. But he had to try. “Yer generous spirit. The purity of yer caring heart. My precious Ethne, ye make my existence so much easier to bear.” He brushed the backs of his fingers across the soft curve of her cheek. But for her own safety, he needed to convince her never to return. Yet he couldn’t make himself say the words. “Ye have brought so much comfort to this old cripple.”

She turned back and faced him, her eyes still shining with tears. “Ye are not an old cripple.” With the hesitancy of a

skittish fawn, she reached out and touched his cheek below the rag covering his eye. “All I see is a courageous, caring man. Ye’ve treated me with more kindness than I have ever known.” Her smile faltered. “Who else would risk giving a witch shelter after watching her stoned?” Her bottom lip, so tempting, so kissable, barely quivered as she hitched in a teary sniff. “And the berries I promised ye all spilled out. I’m sure they’re trampled by now.”

“They dinna matter.” He clenched his teeth to keep from growling with pain as he shifted from his aching knees and sat beside her. A relieved huff escaped him as he leaned against the bench, took her hand, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “All that matters is that ye are safe.”

“But they were the sweetest berries—”

“Yer sweetness is all I need, dear lass.”

Her pallor disappeared and a lovely blush lent color to her cheeks. “Ye are such a fine man,” she whispered. “Will ye still not share yer name with me? I dinna ken what to call ye.”

“I have been alone so many years, I dinna remember it,” he lied.

She squeezed his hand and smiled. “Then we shall choose another. What name should ye have?”

“*Aonar* comes to mind.” The Gaelic for alone. More appropriate than she would ever know. And he didn’t care what she called him as long as she kept coming to see him.

Her expression shifted to a gently scolding look that lightened his heart so much he almost laughed. “Ye dinna have to be alone anymore,” she said. “I meant what I said about ye coming home with me.” She blushed deeper and lowered her gaze. “Mama is there, and Rhona too, but ye can sleep in the spare room so ye willna be bothered by the rest of us.” She gave a soft laugh that sounded like the sweetest music. “Rhona snores something fierce. She says it’s me. But it’s her doing it.”

How he wished he could. But the curse forbade it. The last time he had tried to leave the ruins, even more excruciating pain than he already endured had sent him crawling back. Trying not to show his struggles with his misshapen body, he pushed himself to his feet and retrieved her cup. “Let me fetch ye some fresh water for a drink. Ye dinna need to sip from what I used to wash yer face.”

“Why do ye always do that?” Ethne rolled to her side, then eased herself up to a sitting position.

“Do what, lass?” He daren’t look at her. She might see into his fears, learn even more about his lonely soul.

“When ye dinna wish to answer something, ye act as though I never asked it.” Her tone held a soft accusation.

He returned with the water and held it out. “I willna become even more of a burden to ye, Ethne. My place is here. Ye already risk yer life coming here to bring me food.” His heart ached and dropped like a stone to the pit of his stomach. This dear lass deserved so much more. More than tending to an ailing mother. More than being stoned if the villagers saw her on the road. And it was all because of him. The selfish bastard who had brought down the anger of a demoness upon them all. “Drink, lass, and know ye bring me all the comfort I deserve by brightening these shadows with yer light.”

She frowned up at him, ignoring the cup. “Ye are a good man, friend. I know it had to have caused ye unbearable pain to get me in here. Save me from the side of the road and from being stoned even more. I am not a fool. I see yer terrible suffering when ye’re merely trying to stand in place. Ye deserve better than living like a rat in the ruins.”

The caring in her eyes begged him to unburden his soul. The tenderness in her smile coaxed him to tell all. He fought it, for her sake and the sake of his own selfish need not to lose her. “Ye deserve better than me.”

He set the cup on the bench beside her and hobbled over to the westward window to check the horizon. The sun had just



touched the sea. She needed to leave, and soon. A soft touch on his arm made him turn. She stood so close—smiling up at him and muddling his mind with her gentle persistence.

“Please come home with me,” she whispered. “I need ye as badly as ye need me.”

He almost choked on a sob as he cradled her cheek in his hand. “Ye have no idea what ye ask, dear one. For yer sake, I canna do so.” He let his hand drop and turned his gaze back to the horizon. “I see ye are much recovered. ’Tis a good thing. For now, ye must go.”

“I willna go without ye.” She took his hand, moved closer, and brushed a heart-stopping kiss to his cheek. “Come with me now. I shall help ye.” She pulled his arm across her shoulders, hugged his waist, and turned him toward the door.

It took every ounce of decency he possessed to pull away and stumble back. He didn’t want to send her away forever, but there appeared to be no other way. His selfishness had hurt others. Never would he hurt her. “No. I willna have it. Go now, Ethne. And dinna come back. Not ever. I dinna wish ye hurt any more than ye’ve already been.”

“Ye dinna mean that.” She jutted her chin upward, defiance flashing in her eyes. “Ye need me. Just as I need ye.”

“I dinna need ye,” he forced out, doing his best to sound angry. “Now go from here, witch!”

His heart shattered as her mouth dropped open and she stared at him, hurt and disbelief shouting from her. He turned away, unable to bear the pain he had caused, the pain he deserved. He fixed his gaze on the horizon, knowing the mist and the accursed pipes would come to him soon.

The chapel echoed with her hurried footsteps as she left him. Alone. As he rightly deserved.

Wolfe bowed his head and wished he had never been born.



## Chapter Four

ETHNE CROUCHED OUTSIDE the kirk, staying low behind a pile of rubble overgrown with tall grasses. Did the man think her a fool? He was trying to protect her from something. She saw it in his face, heard it in the timbre of his voice, and felt the desperation in his touch. She did not need protecting.

A disgruntled huff escaped her. How dare he think her weak or helpless? She was a woman grown and had fought for years to not only protect herself but those she cared about as well. And she could protect him—a lonely soul aching to be loved. She would stay here, quiet as a wee mousie, until she found out what he was struggling so hard to hide.

Her heart pounded faster as the fog crept into the courtyard, swallowing up the rubble like a great gray beast devouring the land. An anguished roar from the front of the chapel startled her. She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream. It had to be her friend. No one else was here except the two of them.

With the silent stealth she'd learned while avoiding the villagers, Ethne eased out of her hiding place, crept to the front corner of the small church, and peered around it. Her friend stood just outside, clutching his staff and staring down at the heavy mist creeping toward his feet. The urge to shout for him to flee was strong, but she forced herself to remain silent. She needed to see what he intended to do.

His staff dropped to the ground, disappearing beneath the fog. But instead of stumbling to retrieve it, as she had seen him do before, he slowly straightened his back, making himself appear to grow. His bowed shoulders widened and leveled, filling out and squaring off as if ready to face any enemy. Where the bent, wasted-away cripple once stood was a

fearsomely tall, well-muscled warrior with a broad chest and a dark, wild mane as sleek and black as the feathers of a raven. He ripped the cloth from around his head and glared up at the sky with two good eyes instead of just one.

Ethne held her breath, unable to believe the transformation she had just witnessed. When he shifted and revealed the pipes in his hands, she knew. Her beloved friend, the half-blind, suffering man of kindness and caring, was the cursed chieftain of Clan MacDanua. A man the local legends said had been as fierce and protective as a great wolf. So much so, he even bore the name Wolfe MacDanua. But he had fallen to the seductress, Morrigan-the-wicked, and made the mistake of spurning her for his arranged wife. Ethne swallowed hard and clutched a fist to her heart. She ached for poor Wolfe MacDanua's cursed soul.

He placed the mouthpiece of the pipes between his teeth, tucked the bag under his arm, and filled it with his wind. The bleak hopelessness in his face broke her heart as he positioned his fingers on the chanter. Hatred for what he was about to do rolled off him in waves. He closed his eyes and started to play.

As soon as the sad strains filled her ears, a plan came to her as naturally as drawing breath. She would listen to the song in its entirety, and when Morrigan-the-wicked came to steal her soul, she would spit in the evil one's face and end the hag's cruel curse. Somehow. She didn't know how just yet, but she would find a way. Maybe her devil's mark and oddly colored eyes truly held the power everyone feared. If so, she would battle the dark witch and end her reign.

Ethne settled back against the wall, all the while keeping Wolfe in sight. According to everything Mama had said, the curse forced him to play until the sun rose and burned the mist away. He slowly wandered through the courtyard as he played. The thick fog swirled around his legs as though keeping time with the sad tune. The moonlight made him glow with an eerie blue-white light. He reminded Ethne of a restless spirit searching for his grave.

Tears streamed down her face as the song continued. It was a melody of mourning, of love forever lost, of wretched, aching loneliness. It was Chieftain Wolfe MacDanua's story. She yearned to go to him and tell him all would be well. But she daren't. She wasn't sure what the cursed mist might do to him if he stopped his song before daybreak. And she had to speak with Mama, glean every bit of information she could, before she faced the witch.

He turned and started walking toward her, his forlorn gaze locked on the ground. The closer he came, the more she shrank into the shadows, praying he would soon turn and take another direction. Thankfully, he did, enabling her to breathe again. As he walked away, she returned to her refuge behind the shaggy, weed-infested pile of rubble. At the back of the kirk, almost where it attached to what was left of the skirting wall, she pressed her back into the shadowy corner. After a while, she eased up and peeped at the moon, then pulled in a deep breath. It barely hovered above the ruins. It would be a while before it reached its zenith, then readied itself to relinquish its place in the sky to the sun. She hugged herself tight and concentrated on Wolfe's song. The saddest, most beautiful melody she had ever heard.



THE SUN ROSE, the mist faded, and his eternal shackles of deformation and pain returned. But this morning there was no glimmer of hope, no pinprick of brightness to lessen his agony, because Ethne would not come this afternoon. Or any day thereafter. He had severed the bond for her sake, knowing she drew too close for her own safety.

The rag he used to cover his mauled eye rose from the ground and floated toward him. "I have something to show ye, my chieftain," Mrs. Tarrel said without making herself seen.

"I dinna have the heart for anything this morn, Mrs. Tarrel. Please—leave me be."

“Ye must have the heart for this.” Her tug on his arm surprised him. The ghostly housekeeper had never done that in all the years he had known her, either when she lived or after. “Come now, my chief. Ye must.”

He allowed her to lead him past the overgrown mound of rocks and debris that had once been the fine bell tower he ordered built in celebration of his daughter’s birth. Then he halted, clenching his staff so hard his nails dug into the wood. “Dear God in heaven. I beg that ye deafened her to the song.” But he knew in his heart his prayer came too late.

Sunlight washed across Ethne, surrounding her in the gentleness of early morning light. It gave her the ethereal glow of a sleeping angel. He prayed she slept and that the wickedness of the curse hadn’t already killed her outright. But even if it hadn’t, the song of doom would eventually take her and send her soul to Morrigan. The knowledge of his dear Ethne’s fate tore a sobbing groan from the depths of his soul.

Her eyes flew open, and she sat straighter. “Chieftain,” she said in the soft, throaty whisper of hastily cast aside slumber. “Ye startled me.” She coughed and pushed herself to her feet, nervously brushing her kirtle in place. “Dinna be angry. I have a plan, ye ken?”

“A plan to send yer soul to the depths of hell?” He shook his head and turned away, unable to bear the hopefulness in her face. Poor, innocent lass. She had no idea. He bowed his head. Another ragged groan escaped him. Once again, his selfishness had cost the world something precious and good. Evil had won. “Ye shouldha gone, Ethne. Shouldha saved yerself.”

“I can break the curse.” She circled him, trying to make him look at her, but he turned away again. “Ye must give me a chance to end this misery,” she said.

“Do ye not think if there was a way to break the curse that I wouldha found it after bearing this torture for over two hundred years?” He scrubbed a hand across his face, flinching as he rubbed too close to the gouged eye that never healed.

“And now ye will die and yer soul will be lost.” He finally met her gaze. “Ye have done the verra thing I tried to save ye from, lass.”

Her jaw hardened with determination as she shoved in close and slid her arms around him, holding him in a gentle embrace. “I did what I needed to do. I did what was right.”

He reeled with her warmth, the sweetness of her scent. It sent him staggering back, making him drunk with her softness and the love in her eyes. “Ye deserve better!”

“Ye are not a bad man!” She closed the distance between them again. “Ye are the one who deserves better!”

“But I *am* a terrible man.” He had to confess, so she would see. “When the woman sent to marry me hated becoming my wife, I sought another’s bed. Gave in to the wicked seductions of the Morrigan. I was *weak* when I shouldha been strong. Instead of working harder to win my new wife’s favor, I merely serviced her to seed an heir, then sated my passions with the vile witch.” He met Ethne’s stubborn gaze, willing her to see him for the horridly selfish bastard he was. “And when I finally gained a grain of decency and became ashamed of my ways, I spurned the witch and sought forgiveness from the Lady Aria. But it was too late. Even though the wife I dishonored bore me a daughter, she never truly forgave me. And nor should she have.” He stepped away again, putting an arm’s length of distance between them. “Then our wee one died and my long-suffering Aria could stand no more of the unhappiness I had brought into her life.” He turned and cast a sad look up at the east tower, the only tower still standing. “She jumped to her death because of me.”

“Mama said ye were a good man,” Ethne said. “If Mama said it is so, then it is so.” She lifted her chin again as though daring him to challenge her. “Mama always knows.”

“And what will yer precious mama say when she discovers what ye have done?” A bitter snort escaped him. “I feel certain her opinion of me will change then.”

“It will not.” Ethne closed the distance between them yet again. “She will help me find a way to break the curse.”

“There is no way.” Wolfe hated himself more than he ever had before. “I deserve this hell. Brought it upon myself.” He touched her cheek with a shaking hand. “Ye deserve life. Love. A fine husband and precious bairns to care for ye in yer old age.” His voice broke. “Ye deserve better than me, dear one. So much better.”

“Leave what I deserve to me, ye ken?” She framed his face with her hands and pressed the sweetest of kisses to his mouth. “I will make ye free,” she whispered. “And then ye can decide whether ye want me here or not.”

He stiffened and clutched his staff tighter to keep from falling to his knees and weeping. What precious Ethne promised would never be. He knew it heart and soul. “Go, Ethne. Go to yer mother.”



## Chapter Five

ETHNE HURRIED THROUGH the door, bracing herself for what she knew awaited her.

“Praise the Almighty!” Rhona jumped up from the stool beside the fire and pulled her into a crushing hug. “We feared ye surely dead,” she said through gasping sobs.

“Ethne! Come to me, child,” Mama weakly ordered her from the narrow cot in the corner. She lay back against a pile of rolled blankets, a bag of rags, and what few pillows they owned, securely propped into a sitting position, her eyes red and her cheeks shining with tears. “What have ye done, daughter? What foolishness have ye brought down upon yerself?”

“No foolishness, Mama.” Ethne slid Mama’s gnarled hand into hers as she knelt at the worried woman’s bedside. “I discovered it is the cursed chieftain I’ve fed since last summer. Chieftain Wolfe MacDanua. Not some wandering cripple. I mean to end this curse once and for all.”

“The MacDanua,” her mother repeated in a horrified whisper. Her lined face crumpled with misery. “Oh, Ethne. No, my dear, sweet lass. Say ye didna listen to the entirety of the pipes’ killing song.”

“I have, Mama. And when the wicked one comes, I mean to best her and free the MacDanua.” Ethne squeezed her mother’s hand. “I love him, Mama, and he loves me.”

Mama closed her eyes, but her tears came faster. The scarred side of her face became an angrier red. “Ye canna break the curse, child.”

“Every curse can be broken.” Ethne refused to let everyone else’s disbelief veer her from her course. “Ye’ve said so many



times.” She rose from her knees and sat on the edge of the bed, leaning closer, willing her mother to believe. “I just need ye to tell me anything ye think might work. I will try them all.”

Mama shifted with a heavy sigh and wearily shook her head. “Ye canna break the curse, Ethne.”

Ethne stood, too anxious and driven to remain seated any longer. “I dinna ken a thing about witchery, but I remember every story ye’ve ever told about the wicked one and yer hateful mother. How they hurt folks. Their cruelties to ye. Especially when ye protected me from them. I’ll use the holy water ye stole to christen me with. There’s salt in the crock on the table. Rhona got us some silver just the other day, and I’ll pry the horseshoe from our doorpost so’s to have a bit of iron to be sure. Can ye tell me anything else I might use?” She hurried to the dried herbs hanging beside the hearth. “Sage! I’ve got a bit of sage too, and there are rowan sticks in the corner.”

Her mother shook her head while staring down at her hands fisted in her lap. “None will work, my precious daughter. Not against Morrigan-the-wicked’s evil.”

“Then what? Tell me, Mama. What?”

Mama lifted her head and gave Ethne a sad smile. “Same blood but a pure soul sacrificed for a lie told,” she answered quietly. Her watery blue eyes took on a faraway look. “I am the last. Morrigan-the-least. Daughter to Morrigan-the-lessor. Granddaughter to Morrigan-the-wicked. The tainted blood ends with me.”

“She means herself,” Rhona said in a horrified whisper. “To break the curse, ye need her blood. Her sacrifice.”

“That makes no sense,” Ethne said, even though the truth of it soured her stomach and made it churn. For the very first time, Mama’s reciting her ancestry, and the saying that always began it, finally made sense. “No lie has been told. Wolfe told me his wife knew of his adultery and never forgave him, even though he begged her and spurned the Morrigan forevermore.”

“He is not the one who lied,” Mama said. “The wicked one made a false blood oath with him. Swore to bring his dead wife back. Promised that the son newly seeded in his wife’s belly would be born healthy and whole and someday lead Clan MacDanua. But instead, she cursed him to become the deadly piper of Tarbat Ness and made him prisoner to the haunted mist of the Highlands.” She shifted with a heavy sigh. “That is why ye need blood from the Morrigan line to break the bond. Ye need me.”

Ethne sank back onto the stool and hugged herself, unwilling to believe that losing her mother was the only way she could save the man she loved. “There has to be another way. The tools I spoke of. Evil canna withstand them.”

Mama leaned forward and gently tapped Ethne on the chest. “What does yer heart tell ye, child? Always listen to yer heart. Have I not told ye that as well?”

“I am listening to my heart, Mama. I love him.” Then she caught hold of her mother’s hands. “But I love ye too, and am not willing to lose ye. I willna choose between ye. If I canna have ye both, then I will battle the Morrigan alone and take my chances.”

“Ye willna lose me.” Mama smiled, her eyes clearer than they had been in years. “Ye will free me.”

Ethne almost choked on a sob as she shook her head. “No. Ye’ve raised a verra selfish daughter. I canna bear the thought of losing ye. Not this way.”

“Ye would rather I die a slow, painful death from this poisonous sickness eating me alive?” Mama pointed at the battered black trunk in the corner. “The narrow wooden box in the bottom. Bring it to me, child.”

Ethne rose and backed away, shaking her head. “No. I will not fetch the athame.” Instead, she snatched a cloth sack off the hook beside the door and started gathering everything she needed to battle the evil curse. Salt. Holy water. Silver. Iron. Sage. She wished they had a prayer book or a cross. A cross—

she could make one with the rowan sticks and some leather strips.

“Ethne!” Mama smacked the wall beside her bed, making a loud pop. “I forbid this nonsense, ye ken? Do as I’ve told ye. Now.”

Ethne ignored her and turned to Rhona. “Daren’t ye help her harm herself, understand? I can do this without our losing her.”

Rhona stared at her, cast a nervous glance over at Mama, then turned back to Ethne.

“Swear it, Rhona,” Ethne demanded.

Rhona gave a weak nod, then bowed her head.

Not happy with her friend’s hesitant response but knowing it was as good as Rhona could give, Ethne charged out the door, cringing against Mama’s shrill cries. Everything in her wanted to turn back, run to Mama and hug the dear woman tighter than she had ever hugged her before. But she couldn’t. Not with Mama determined to die so that everyone else might live.

Never would she slaughter her precious mother like a sacrificial lamb on the wicked one’s altar. Nor would she wait for the evil Morrigan to choose the time to strike. Armed with her sack of weapons, she would summon the witch’s vile wickedness when the mist returned.

When she reached the ruins, she slowed. Wolfe had gone silent as a stone when she promised to save him. The hopelessness in his gaze had shouted that he believed all was lost. But all was not lost. Ethne refused to believe that.

“Chieftain MacDanua,” she called out as she moved deeper into what had once been the courtyard. He’d not given her permission to use the intimacy of his first name in anything other than her thoughts. He didn’t answer, but she knew he was there. Somewhere. The ruins held him prisoner.

The details of his poor wife came to mind. The east tower. The troubled woman had jumped to her death from there. Ethne gathered her skirts higher and picked her way around the piles of crumbled walls and blocks of stone. The east tower looked out across the sea. If the lady had dropped from the parapet, she would have met her end on the stone slabs covering the shoreline. Ethne needed to wage war against the darkness there, where the blood oath had been dishonored with Morrigan's lie.

She slipped through a crack in the wall and climbed down to the rocky strand beneath the tower. Shielding her eyes, she looked up at the parapet. Which section of the rounded wall had Lady Aria jumped from?

"She landed there, Ethne. On that slab," Wolfe said from behind her.

Ethne turned and gave him an encouraging nod. "Then that is where all this suffering will end, my chieftain."

"I would have ye call me Wolfe before ye learn to hate me." Flinching with pain as he made his way across the rough ground, he hobbled to her. "Ye must not do this, Ethne. Go from here. Surely, if ye travel far enough away, the curse will fail to find ye." His gaze sharpened with pleading. "Ethne—please."

She couldn't resist a victorious smile. "See? If ye were a wicked man or a selfish man, ye wouldna worry about me or feel remorse for anything." She boldly rested a hand on his shoulder. "We all make mistakes in this life. Ye were never given the chance to atone. When ye tried, the wicked one imprisoned ye with the curse."

"I would not have ye suffer because of me, lass. Can ye not see ye've made me love ye? I canna bear what the devil woman and her killing mist will do because ye helped me. Because ye cared."

"I love ye too," Ethne said. "And ye need me."

"Ye love a cripple? A man weak and worthless?"

“Nay—I dinna love a cripple who is worthless. I love the kind, courageous man I see before me.” She opened her sack and carefully placed its contents on the waist-high shelf of stone where Lady Aria had met her end. “I need to make a cross from these rowan branches. Can ye hold them in place while I tie them?”

“Aye, since ye refuse to listen.” He leaned against the squared-off rock and rested his staff against his shoulder. “Why rowan?” he asked as he held the sticks together as she instructed.

“Witches dinna like rowan. That’s what Mama always said.” Ethne lashed the wood together and knotted the leather three times.

“Dark clouds are coming.” Wolfe cast a worried frown at the sky. His scowl deepened as he scanned the sea. “The water churns harder with the rising wind. ’Tis creating a maelstrom.” He caught Ethne’s hand and squeezed, then bared his teeth, his face filled with imploring. “The demoness senses ye, and she comes before sunset. Run, Ethne. Afore it’s too late.”

“I will not.” She pulled free, took the salt, and sprinkled it in a circle around him. “No matter what. Stay inside this circle, ye ken?” She handed him the horseshoe and the pieces of silver. “And hold tight to these. All these things will protect ye.”

He tried to shove them back into her hands. “No. I need ye protected. Not me.”

Taking a step back to dodge him, she touched the mark on her throat and lifted a small, stoppered urn. “My different-colored eyes, my mark, and this holy water will send her back to the hell from which she came. I need nothing more.”

“Ye are wrong, Ethne!” her mother declared from close to the base of the tower.

Panic shot through Ethne like lightning. She turned and spied her mother clinging to Rhona, lashed to her friend’s back like a bundle of sticks. Rhona had her arms looped under

Mama's knees and hitched the old woman higher onto her shoulders as she picked her way down to the shelf of stone.

"I had to bring her," Rhona said in a tone imploring Ethne to understand. "She begged me to pack her here before it was too late. She's ready to be free of her pain, and now that ye've found the MacDanua, she yearns to make amends for the evil her grandmother did."

"But she will die," Ethne said, the words catching in her throat.

"Stop talking about me as if I am not here," Mama said. She patted Rhona's arm. "Set me on the stone, lass. 'Tis where the blood oath was dishonored."

"All of ye must go," Wolfe said, stepping out of the protection of the salt circle. "Go now, afore it's too late. Leave the Morrigan to unleash her temper on me. I am the one who started this feekin' mess."

"No, my chieftain," Mama said with a determined frown. "The blood oath was false. Ye were tricked. This evil is not of yer doing." She pointed a crooked finger at the rock. "Set me on the stone. Now."

Sidling closer to the large, weathered shelf, Rhona leaned to the side until Mama released her hold and slid down onto the stone. The frail woman held out her hand. "My athame. Hurry! The evil comes."

Ethne scrambled up on the rock and knelt at her mother's side. "Let me be the one to fight her. I beg ye—dinna spill yer blood."

Wolfe crawled up beside them, placing himself between them and the sea and clutching his staff like a weapon. "All of ye go. Now! Hurry!"

The wind howled louder, and the sea raged. Roiling clouds blackened the sky, and the deadly mist spilled across the water toward them. Ethne tried to pry the ceremonial dagger out of Mama's hand, but her mother held on to it with surprising strength.

“Death is not the end, my precious daughter,” she said, shouting to be heard over the approaching storm. “’Tis only a new beginning.”

“Mama, no. Please.” Ethne hugged her mother tight and buried her face in the curve of the old woman’s neck just like she’d done as a child.

Mama gently stroked her hair. “It will be all right, sweet lass. I will always be with ye.”

A torrent of wind and water hit them, nearly dashing them off the ledge. The high-pitched keen of the angry squall rose to a horrendous howl. The air grew heavy and smelled of brimstone. It stung their flesh like fire. Lightning flashed and thunder shook the ground.

“Same blood but a pure soul sacrificed for a lie told. For the good of all. For the harm of none. So let it be spoken, so let it be done. So mote it be!” Mama shouted, then shoved the long, lethal blade of the athame deep into her breast. Still clutching the hilt, she rolled forward and sagged over the stone. As soon as her blood dripped upon it, the black sky splintered with blinding shafts of light and the earth trembled.

The east tower rumbled and swayed from side to side, then collapsed, sending chunks of stone hurling down around them.

Ethne pulled Mama close and covered her as best she could. Rhona dove in to huddle over Mama too. Something solid and warm pressed across Ethne, shielding her like a wall of flesh. Wolfe. No longer the half-blind, twisted beggar but returned to the form of the breathtaking man she had witnessed playing the pipes in the mist.

An enraged shriek split through the tempest, then deafening thunder rolled the darkness away, making way for the light. The sea calmed, and for the first time in as long as Ethne had visited the ruins, the wind died down to a peaceful breeze. But her sorrow far outweighed her joy that the curse was finally broken. Mama was gone.

Wolfe rose and moved away, as though sensing Ethne needed this time with her mother.

“Oh, Mama. How can I go on without ye?” She cradled the precious woman close. Mama had always been there, always protected her. The breeze rippling through Ethne’s hair reminded her of Mama’s reassuring caress.

“I will always watch over ye, my precious daughter.” Mama’s whisper rode the wind. “Know that I am at peace and in pain no more. Just as I wanted. Dry yer tears and live on, sweet lass.”

“I am so sorry, Ethne,” Rhona choked out between sobs. “She was in so much pain. When she begged me to carry her here, I couldna refuse. Please forgive me.”

Ethne wrapped an arm around Rhona’s shoulders and pulled her close. “Hush, dear sister. I understand.” She sniffed and forced a sad smile. “Ye are my only family now. How could there ever be anything but love between us?”

Wolfe moved closer, his head bowed. He crossed himself while casting a sad gaze down at Ethne’s mother. “God rest her soul,” he said, his tone reverent and thankful. “Yer mother was not Morrigan-the-least, Ethne. Her headstone shall read, *Morrigan-the-greatest – the mightiest of selfless souls*, and we will make sure our children and our children’s children know of the sacrifice she made.”

“Our children?” Ethne repeated, her heart daring to lift the slightest bit.

“Aye, my love.” He gently scooped Mama up into his arms. “We willna let yer mother’s sacrifice be in vain. Come. Let us lay her to rest.”





## Chapter Six

WOLFE OFFERED ONE arm to Ethne and the other to Rhona and led them out of the MacDanua chapel cemetery into the courtyard. As they cleared the arched opening with its rusty gate hanging off-kilter, sunlight flooded the area as if blessing them with the promise of better days ahead.

Rhona pulled away and stepped ahead of them, turning with a shy smile. “The two of ye have much to work out. When ye are ready, supper will be waiting at home, aye?”

“I thank ye, Rhona. For everything.” Wolfe cast a slow look around. For the first time in over two hundred years, hope stirred within him. “There is much work to be done, but MacDanua Keep will shine again, and ye belong here as much as we do. This will be yer home as well, ye ken?”

Ethne gifted him with teary-eyed gratefulness, then gave Rhona an encouraging nod. “Aye, sister. We shall rebuild. Say ye will call this place home too. Please?”

Rhona ducked her head, vainly trying to hide her tears. “I will,” she said. After a quick swipe at her eyes, she sniffed and squared her shoulders. “But until it is more livable, we best eat and sleep at the cottage. Agreed?”

Wolfe laughed and nodded. “A wise plan, dear sister.”

Rhona gave Ethne a quick hug, curtsied to Wolfe, then turned and ran toward home.

“Thank ye,” Ethne said softly as she faced him. “She hasna had a peaceful life either.”

He gently cupped her face in his hand, unable to believe that all of them had received a second chance at life. He would not waste it. “Will ye be my wife, Ethne, even though I have

nothing to offer ye other than the ruins of a once verra fine castle?”

She slid her hands up his chest and smiled, then hesitantly touched his cheek. “I have nothing to offer ye either. Nothing other than my heart.”

“Ahh, that is where ye are wrong, m’love.” He eased her into a closer embrace and pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead. “Ye’ve given me hope, unconditional love, and a life I never thought possible.”

She stepped back and gave him a troubled look, making his heart beat faster.

“What is it, Ethne?”

“The villagers... Yer descendants.” She shook her head and lowered her gaze. “They willna accept me. At least, most will not.”

“To the devil with them.” He lifted her face and kissed her before she could argue. The warm, tempting softness of her mouth nearly undid him. She leaned in, pressing tighter against him as she shyly allowed her tongue to welcome his.

The sound of someone clearing their throat separated them. Ethne jerked away and looked all around, obviously confused when no one was there.

“Mrs. Tarrel,” Wolfe said. “Be polite enough to show yerself to Lady Ethne, if ye please.”

The nosy housekeeper shimmered into view, her ghostly smile so wide she almost glowed. She dipped an airy curtsy toward Ethne. “A pleasure to meet ye, Lady Ethne. I be Mrs. Tarrel, housekeeper to MacDanua Castle.”

Ethne blinked slowly, as though caught in a daze. “Greetings to ye, Mrs. Tarrel.”

Mrs. Tarrel bobbed in midair again, then turned back to Wolfe. “I ken I told ye I’d be going to my reward once the curse was broken, but the way I see it, ye need me now more

than ever. What with the keep to rebuild and a new wife? I dinna see any reason to hurry on my way.”

Wolfe smiled and tugged Ethne back into his arms. “What say ye, my precious new wife? Is it all right if Mrs. Tarrel stays?”

“Definitely.” Ethne tightened her arms around him. “She can tell me all yer secrets.”

“I can at that, m’lady.” Mrs. Tarrel chuckled as she faded from view. “I’ll be off for a wee bit now to give the two of ye privacy. Call out should ye need me.”

“Is she really gone?” Ethne whispered.

“I wager she has gone to the village to find workers to help us. She’s quite adept at stirring a person’s guilt and convincing folk to do what they shouldha done all along.” Wolfe had no doubt the wily housekeeper had also gone to fetch the priest to make him and Ethne man and wife before another day passed. “We should sit by the gate and watch for the priest.”

“The priest?” She stared up at him, looking amazed. “How do ye know he’s coming?”

“When ye spend over two hundred years with a housekeeper who is more like a grandmother, ye tend to see what she is about to do before she does it.” Wolfe stole another quick taste of Ethne’s luscious mouth. “And in this case, I dinna mind. I want ye, Ethne. To be mine for always. In the eyes of God and everyone else. My heart aches as though a part of it’s missing whenever ye’re not with me.”

“I love ye, Wolfe,” she whispered. “More than ye will ever know.”

“I love ye more, my precious Ethne. With all my heart and soul.”

The End

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*Many thanks and may your life always be filled with good books!*

*Maeve*

# **Once Upon a Haunted Scottish Cottage**

*Sofie Darling*





## Chapter One

*Scotland*

*1821*

THE INSTANT THE carriage rolled to as smooth a stop as the bumpy country road would allow, Theodora flung the door open, poked her head outside, and took a deep, replenishing gulp of delicious Scottish air, her eyes blinking against golden late-afternoon light.

Moppet flew from the cramped interior, her little spaniel legs carrying her as fast as they could move, as she pursued the freedom of fresh scents after yet another long day's ride.

"Moppet," Theodora called out, a warning in her tone that the spaniel not venture deep into uncharted territory.

Not that this patch of Scotland was unknown to Theodora. As a child, she'd visited from London with her parents, her mother always harboring a soft spot for her notoriously ill-tempered Aunt Sorcha.

Of course, Aunt Sorcha couldn't greet Theodora on this visit as she'd passed into the great heavenly beyond one month ago—God rest her cantankerous soul—which was what brought Theodora here, now.

Actually, the letter she'd received a fortnight ago brought her here, now.

True to her reputation of being an Original with a capital "O," Aunt Sorcha had left strict instructions that no one bother themselves—her words—to attend her funeral as her niece Marion and great-niece Theodora were her only remaining family, and they lived together all the way in London.

Theodora's parents had perished in a carriage accident along the Kentish coast seven years ago, and her mother's sister, Aunt Marion, had been living with Theodora as a companion since. Theodora would have long perished of starvation without her aunt to tend her corporeal needs. Her mind mostly tended toward books—mostly the Greeks with a few romantic novels thrown in for variety.

She stepped from the carriage and waited with valise in hand while the coachman unstrapped her travel trunk from the boot. She took in the thatched-roof cottage before her. Positioned at the outer edge of a sleepy little village, it remained as charming as she remembered—white with black trim around the windows and doors, an abundance of flora spilling from every direction.

All Theodora had to do was to stay for the two nights preceding the reading of Aunt Sorcha's last will and testament for it to be hers.

The letter in her reticule said so.

An unusual stipulation—but Aunt Sorcha had ever gone her own way.

Theodora was yet mildly shocked by the entire matter, truth told. She'd never got the impression that her aunt particularly liked her enough to leave her a bequest in her will.

Until six months ago, that was.

Theodora had been engaged to marry Mr. Hunt, who had been entirely unbothered that their engagement had entered its third year. The circulating library that she and Aunt Marion ran in London took up so much of her attention that she'd hardly noticed herself. It was Aunt Sorcha—a confirmed spinster all her days—who had been adamant in her weekly letters that Theodora set a date for the marriage.

Then six months ago, shockingly, Aunt Sorcha had done a complete about-face and urged Theodora to reconsider the engagement. She'd made some very sound arguments that

Theodora took to heart. She'd broken off the engagement the next day—with no small amount of relief.

“I'll be off if that'll be all, miss,” said the coachman. “Need to get the horses movin' to make Edinburgh by nightfall.”

Autumn was showing its colors in Scotland, and the days were growing short.

“Of course,” said Theodora, pushing her spectacles up the bridge of her nose. Money ready in hand, she paid the coachman.

The carriage rolling into the distance, Theodora took in another deep inhalation of fresh country air scented with pine and thistle. When her eyes opened, she noticed something... unusual... something she hadn't noticed before.

The front door of the cottage stood slightly ajar.

Moppet must've noticed the crack at that very moment, for Theodora just caught the hind end of the pup before she disappeared inside, silky tail wagging with the excitement of a new frontier to be explored.

“Moppet,” called Theodora, her feet kicking into a run to follow the intrepid pup.

Theodora crossed the threshold, expecting an interior as warm and cozy as the charming exterior suggested. The inside was, indeed, welcoming with its sitting room to the left and small library to the right—a library that had Theodora's fingers itching to catalogue. She suspected a few gems were waiting to be discovered in there.

However, though a low fire burned in the hearth, Theodora felt not a hint of its warmth—quite the opposite. A sharp finger of ice scraped across her skin and slowly purred up her spine, needling into her veins and making her blood run cold. All the fine hairs on her arms and neck prickled to a stand.

Her heart racing, she called out a weak, “Hello?”

From the stillness, no answer came. But that didn't mean Theodora didn't feel what her eyes didn't see...

*A presence.*

A trio of heavy heartbeats lurched past and...

It was gone.

Feet that had become frozen into place found the wherewithal to move, picking up steam with each step as Theodora followed Moppet's trail and dashed through the cottage, hands rubbing at goose bumps that had lifted on her arms.

By the time she entered the kitchen, heat flooded through her in a warm rush. It was as if the moment never happened.

She spotted another open door, this one leading into the back garden. "Moppet," she called out, again, certain it was futile. The little dog was lost to every adventure she found.

As Theodora followed the sound of barking—Moppet had clearly found an adversary—she noticed another sound: The rhythmic *thud* of ax striking wood.

She rounded a bend in the garden and came to an abrupt stop, her feet nearly tripping over themselves. There, not twenty feet away, stood a man, overcoat tossed aside, shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, ax gripped in a large, masculine hand. A man tall, broad, and sturdy as a brick wall with a lock of black hair that wanted to tumble down his forehead no matter how many times he swiped at it with the back of his hand.

And this man, well, he was handsome.

*Very* handsome.

Perhaps *too* handsome.

His handsomeness didn't bear dwelling upon.

Bemused, he considered the small dog barking her head off at him. The man would be the cottage caretaker.

“Moppet,” Theodora called out for the dozenth time, drawing both pairs of eyes.

The man’s head cocked to the side as he took in her presence. His eyes were the sort of gray that could appear silvery in a certain light. Yet his were warm, as if he was a man accustomed to smiling.

Theodora resisted the urge to give her dress a little straighten. “I’m Miss Tilney,” she said with more force than strictly necessary. “Miss Dunbar’s great-niece from London.”

Really, she hadn’t needed to offer so much information to this complete stranger.

And there was the easy smile she’d been half-expecting.

Somehow, it enhanced his handsomeness.

*Botheration.*

“Ah,” was all he said in a Scottish burr that rumbled from the depths of his broad chest—or possibly the center of the earth. Theodora couldn’t be certain.

“And you are?” The question bordered on a demand—possibly tipping into rude.

The too-handsome man offered her more of his easy smile and a slight bow. “Mr. Boyd.”

Theodora cleared her throat officiously in an attempt to dispel the unsettled feeling inside her. “Mr. Boyd, I will thank you for your, *erm*, wood chopping contribution to the cottage, but I’ve arrived.”

A shallow line formed between his straight black eyebrows. “Aye, I can see that you have.”

He didn’t budge an inch.

Theodora stood, flummoxed. Why wasn’t he moving?

*Of course.* He would expect payment for his wood chopping services. “If I could retrieve my reticule,” she said,

her feet already turned toward the kitchen where she'd dropped valise and reticule to chase after Moppet.

As she was opening her coin purse, she heard solid footsteps enter the room behind her. Unaccountable irritation fluttered through her.

She turned and nearly gasped. The size of Mr. Boyd. What was she to do with a big sweaty man who was taking up half the kitchen?

Pay him and see him off, that was what.

She held up a coin. "Will a shilling suffice?"

She hadn't the faintest idea about wood chopping rates in Scotland.

His eyebrows crinkled together. "For?"

"For the wood."

His brow released, and there it was again—his easy smile. "No charge."

Her coin purse clicked shut with an annoyed snap. As good manners dictated, she inclined her head. "My appreciation."

He was at liberty to leave.

Yet he didn't move. He was looking at her, as if...as if...

He knew her.

Which was impossible.

"Were you employed long by my aunt?" she asked for something to say.

"About a year."

*Ah.* This was a quaint Scottish village. Everyone knew everyone. The man would expect tea. "Would you care for a light repast, Mr. Boyd, after all your, *erm*, exertions?"

Her gaze kept drifting down and getting stuck on his bare forearms, lightly fuzzed by black hair and sinewy muscles.

She couldn't help noticing a glistening slick of perspiration from his, *erm*, exertions.

She swallowed against a suddenly parched throat.

He didn't seem to notice. "Aye, it wouldn't go amiss."

*Botheration.* Didn't Mr. Boyd understand *no* would've been the polite answer? Instead, he'd politely accepted in his light Scottish burr, pulled out a chair, and settled in, crossing one ankle over the other thigh.

The man looked entirely too comfortable—and entirely too...*man*.

But the comfort and manliness of her guest wasn't Theodora's biggest problem.

She turned and considered the kitchen, dread crawling through her.

In London, Aunt Marion was in charge of tea—and everything else related to food—and Theodora ran their circulating library. It was a delegation of duties that pleased and suited each woman.

But now...

*Oh*...what had she gotten herself into?



## Chapter Two

MISS TILNEY WAS smaller than Ian thought she would be.

But that was likely because she'd loomed so large in his mind these last months.

In reality, she was an average-sized woman—and a comely lass. Not even her spectacles could obscure her bright, intelligent blue eyes.

He saw a few things more, too.

She hadn't the faintest idea who he was—which was fair enough.

And she hadn't the faintest idea of what to do in a kitchen. There she stood, staring at the stove as if it were the first time she'd ever laid eyes on one.

Perhaps it was.

But she wasn't the sort to give up, either. She began sorting through the provisions Ian had brought from Edinburgh this morning and arranged the cheese and ham onto a platter. A good start, even if Ian was a trifle bit worried about the bread she was presently slicing and putting directly onto the stove's surface. It was a valiant effort from a woman who clearly didn't know up from down in a kitchen.

When, at last, she set the makeshift meal on the kitchen table and sat directly across from him, the toast was only slightly singed, and Miss Tilney seemed quite pleased with the result. Her direct gaze caught his. "As caretaker for the cottage, you really mustn't leave the doors wide open to any animal intruder who would happen along."

Ian's brow gathered. "The doors were open?"



He hadn't left them so. In fact, he'd intentionally fastened them shut.

To his right, the little dog was dancing on her hind legs, tongue hanging out of her mouth. He held up a morsel of ham. "May I?"

Miss Tilney lifted her gaze long enough to nod, then cast an assessing glare toward the slice of blackened toast in her hand. Arriving at the lone logical solution, she picked up a knife and began scraping.

Now would be the time to disabuse her of the inaccurate conclusion she'd reached regarding his identity. "Miss Tilney, I feel compelled to inform you we've gotten off to an erroneous start."

Her knife paused, mid scrape. "Oh?" she asked. "Is this about the doors? I can assure you I'm not angry, and I do appreciate all the chopped wood. You shall not lose your place over such a trifling matter."

Her reassuring smile doubled Ian's feeling of guilt. "I'm not the cottage caretaker," he stated bluntly.

She blinked. "You're not?" A line of concern formed between her eyebrows. "Then who are you, precisely?"

"I'm a solicitor from Edinburgh."

Her head canted with curiosity. "...who chops woods during his free time?"

"Our offices handled your aunt's affairs for over a decade."

Skepticism curled at Miss Tilney's pert mouth. "Surely not. You can't be older than five and twenty years."

"The offices of Boyd and Son," he clarified and added, "In Edinburgh."

"I take it you're *Son*?"

He nodded.

She didn't yet appear satisfied. "Yet...you're *here*, and my aunt, well, she no longer is."

"My sincerest condolences for your loss, Miss Tilney."

*Blast.* Those should've been the first words out of his mouth upon meeting Miss Tilney today. Everything kept getting jumbled in the wrong order—and it was his responsibility to put it right.

She continued before he could speak. "And you're here... *today*, Mr. Boyd." Though not a question, it was a question.

"It has to do with the will."

"Are you in charge of the reading?"

"My father shall perform that duty."

From her expression, he saw his answer hadn't cleared up the confusion. "I received a letter."

Miss Tilney's eyes, bright and blue behind her spectacles, narrowed.

"From your aunt," he added.

Here was the bit he didn't like, because it was completely unexpected and he remained uncertain what Miss Dunbar could've meant by it.

"When?" asked Miss Tilney, still and watchful.

She hadn't asked, *What letter?* but *when*.

Interesting.

"A fortnight ago."

It didn't need to be said that Miss Dunbar passed away one month ago—and that he'd received a letter from a dead woman.

Miss Tilney went pale as if a ghost had walked across her grave. "What sort of letter?"

Ian stood and retrieved the missive from his overcoat hanging by the kitchen door. He placed it, open, in the center

of the table between them. As she scanned the contents, Miss Tilney's hand flew to her mouth with a sharp gasp. Wide eyes lifted and met his. A beat later, she grabbed her reticule and started rummaging. Her hand emerged holding a white square.

Another letter.

A quick reading revealed the letters were identical in every way—including the message within.

To inherit, the recipient was to stay the two nights preceding the reading of the will inside the cottage.

Miss Tilney's gaze lifted. "What can this mean?"

*Mischief*, Ian didn't say, but he was thinking it. Miss Dunbar had a penchant for playing little games with people. He saw the same knowledge shining within Miss Tilney's eyes.

*Blast.*

"I shall, of course, leave," he said, as befitted a gentleman.

The furrow in Miss Tilney's brow deepened; her thoughts clearly racing. She was as intelligent as he'd thought she would be—and prettier than the small portrait in Miss Dunbar's library suggested. Before today, he'd only thought he liked her through her letters.

Now, he rather knew it.

And their acquaintance would have to end before it barely had a chance to begin.

"No," she said, definite.

Surely his ears were deceiving him. "*No?*"

"Don't leave," she said. "*Stay.*"

"Why?" he asked slowly.

"What if you leave and neither of us inherits the cottage?"

Ian could see her reasoning. If Miss Dunbar had been willing to play one jape, why not another? Yet... "It's not quite

respectable for an unattached man to share a cottage with a proper young lady.”

Determination firmed within her eyes. “You’ve brought enough provisions to last us a few days.”

Ian knew the beginnings of a logical argument when he heard one. He settled back in his chair and let Miss Tilney proceed.

Eyes alight with purpose, she continued. “Further, the cottage has two bedrooms upstairs.”

Even as Ian saw it was a good idea, he also saw it was a potentially terrible idea—possibly even disastrous, if her honor came into question.

She seemed to have heard his thoughts and shifted forward. “No one knows we’re here.”

A laugh startled out of Ian. It couldn’t help itself. “Everyone makes it their business to know everyone else’s business in a Scottish village.”

Miss Tilney looked utterly unconvinced by his argument. “We stay.”

Quick understanding came to Ian. “It’s your aunt’s library, isn’t it?”

“Pardon?”

“You wish to absorb it into your circulating library in London, don’t you?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You know quite a bit about me, it appears.”

“As Miss Dunbar’s solicitor, I was privy to information about her family.”

Now wouldn’t be the optimal moment to mention the weekly letters.

Miss Tilney propped her chin on her hands and considered Ian with her clear, unflinching gaze. “So, we have an

understanding?”

Like that, Ian knew this about himself: He couldn't say *no* to anything Miss Tilney asked of him. “Aye.”

Her brow released with relief as she stood, kitchen chair scraping across the aged pine floor. “I believe we should be able to keep out of each other's way, considering I have my aunt's library to catalogue and you have—” She blinked.

“Wood to chop?” he offered.

She nodded, and within three seconds, she and her little dog swept from the room...

Leaving Ian with the tea crockery to clear.

Not that he minded.

Miss Tilney wasn't the sort of young lady to think about the dishes. She had loftier matters on her mind.

And he would be spending the next two days with her—*alone*.



## Chapter Three

*Midnight*

*T*<sub>AP-TAP...TAP-TAP...TAP-TAP...</sub>

Theodora dragged a pillow across her face.

*Tap-tap...tap-tap...tap-tap...*

The coverlet followed.

*Tap-tap...tap-tap...tap-tap...*

She peeked out from beneath coverlet and pillow to find Moppet curled at the foot of the bed, sleeping soundly, utterly unconcerned.

*Tap-tap...tap-tap...tap-tap...*

It was no use.

The *tap-tapping* was relentless.

She swung her feet onto pine floorboards and crossed the small room in four determined strides. She poked her head out the window, suspecting a loose shutter, but each side appeared secure. Further, the noise had mysteriously ceased. Perhaps it had been an errant gust of wind.

She crawled back into bed and brought the covers up to her chin. Scotland held a chill that could creep into one's bones.

She'd barely closed her eyes when...

*Tap-tap...tap-tap...tap-tap...*

This time, she didn't hesitate. She shot out of bed and grabbed her night-rail, cinching it tight about her waist before reaching for the bedroom door handle. The racket had to have been coming from Mr. Boyd's room. The man must sleep like the dead, if he couldn't hear all that banging about.

Five seconds later, she was at his door, her fist giving it a firm trio of knocks.

Theodora began reconsidering the wisdom of this course of action when the door flew open on creaky hinges, startling a gasp from her. Before her stood the sleep-disheveled Scotsman, hair tousled about his head, shirt hanging loose, and trousers that she suspected weren't fastened. Her eyes dared not look down.

"May I help you, Miss Tilney?" he asked, his voice groggy as he rubbed his eyes.

Had the man truly been asleep? "Could you please affix your window shutter so it stops banging about?"

Mr. Boyd's silvery gaze narrowed, and he cocked an ear to the side. Stubborn, provoking silence prevailed.

"What banging?"

Theodora heaved an irritated sigh. "If it happens again, please secure it."

She pivoted on her heel and heard a "Good night" at her back.

She hadn't been lying in bed two minutes when...

*Tap-tap...tap-tap...tap-tap...*

An instant later, she was retracing her steps to Mr. Boyd's door. He was looking slightly less bedraggled than a few minutes ago, as if he'd predicted her return.

"You must do something about that infernal shutter."

He let his cocked head and closed eyes answer for him. He was listening and—*frustratingly*, like her—hearing nothing but dead quiet. The house was silent as a crypt.

Stealthily, a frigid draft swirled around Theodora's bare ankles and slowly snaked up her legs, lifting goose bumps in its wake. Instinctively, she crossed her arms over her chest to ward off cold that wanted to go through to the bone... The

same icy shard of air that she'd felt upon entering the cottage earlier.

"Is all right with you, Miss Tilney?" asked Mr. Boyd, concern in the question.

"Do you not feel that chill?"

His brow gathered, and he shook his head.

She threw exasperated hands into the air and whirled around in frustration—*did the man hear and feel nothing?*—her intention to return to her room and not leave until morning, no matter how much the shutter banged about.

Except, somehow, with the sudden flurry of movement, the loose fabric of her night-rail became tangled in her legs, and her feet tripped over themselves. "Oh!" she cried out as, improbably, she began to tip over and—

It all happened in the split of a second, but long enough for Theodora to register that she was about to tumble down the cottage's steep, straight flight of stairs.

Then she felt it—a hand clamping around her upper arm... and pulling her back from the brink...and into powerful arms...and chest.

Mr. Boyd's broad, muscular chest.

Her brick wall assessment from earlier had been absolutely correct.

Her head angled back so she could meet his eyes, reflecting shock surely mirroring her own. "Are you injured, Miss Tilney?"

She'd become lost for words for the first time in her life, reeling from the near fall down the stairs—and something else, too. The warmth of Mr. Boyd's embrace... The *strength* of his embrace... The very nearness of their faces... The vibrancy that pulsed in the intimate patch of air between their mouths... as if she could lift onto the tips of her toes and...



“Here,” rumbled from the deep of his chest, “come and sit for a minute.”

He set her away from him, and Theodora nearly sighed at the loss. He was right—*of course*—but that didn’t mean she had to like it.

As he guided her inside his bedroom, it took a moment for her to realize he was guiding her toward his—

*Bed.*

He seemed to realize it as well. Discreetly, he shifted course and led her to the chair positioned before a desk. He pulled another chair near, so they sat across from each other.

Theodora had a serious question to ask, but she feared he would laugh.

Nevertheless, she must.

“Is it possible this cottage is haunted?”



IAN WOULD CHALK the question up to Miss Tilney having just suffered a fright, for she was too intelligent a woman to believe in ghosts.

In the clear light of morning, she would see that.

So Ian avoided the question. Instead, he asked, “Would you care for a glass of water?”

She gave her head a firm shake, her eyes stormy, but her color returning. All sleep-tousled, she was lovely.

Lovely enough to kiss.

Which he’d almost done—before he’d recovered his wits.

It was simply that upon finding Miss Tilney in his arms, it seemed the logical course.

Thankfully, the voice of reason had intervened, and he hadn’t made a fool of himself—or worse, compromised her.

Her gaze strayed toward the neat stacks of papers strewn about his desk. “I imagine being a solicitor in Edinburgh involves a great deal of paperwork.”

“Indeed.”

“How did you come to be a solicitor, Mr. Boyd?” She was making polite small conversation while she recovered her equilibrium.

“I’m descended from a long line of Edinburgh solicitors,” he replied. “I wouldn’t really know any other occupation.”

She gave a wistful smile. “You are fortunate to work with your father.”

Ian was aware of the carriage accident that had killed both Miss Tilney’s parents. Out of respect, he didn’t mention it. “I’m earning my place in Papa’s offices. It’s how I found myself paying weekly visits to help Miss Dunbar order her estate over the last several months of her life. It’s the sort of work expected of a junior solicitor.”

Miss Tilney’s gaze shifted and settled onto the nearest stack of papers. Her head canted. “Is this a letter from Aunt Sorcha related to her affairs?”

Ian leaned forward, catching Miss Tilney’s crisp rose scent as he took in the contents of the paper. “This correspondence relates to the wrongful death of a lady’s pet goat. Purportedly, the animal would scale a stone wall and eat all the neighbor’s flowers. Poor fellow turned up dead one morning. The neighbor says it’s not their doing, and our client insists it is. I believe the courts will have to decide the matter.”

Miss Tilney didn’t appear interested in the least by the story. Instead, she’d planted a finger in the center of the paper and held Ian’s eye. “But this is Aunt Sorcha’s handwriting.”

He leaned closer. “I can assure you it’s not.”

Her eyebrows gathered. Really, she had the most expressive face. “Whose is it, then?”

“Mine.”

“*Yours?*”

If Ian was reading her most expressive face correctly, he’d shocked her to her core.

“*This* is your handwriting?”

“It is.”

Her eyebrows released with understanding. “Mr. Boyd, *you* wrote Aunt Sorcha’s letters to me.”

*Ah.* He’d walked directly into this. “Your aunt’s eyesight began failing rapidly, and she’d needed someone to transcribe her letters.”

Miss Tilney was looking at him strangely. The possibility existed that he might need to be concerned.

“It was curious how much nicer Aunt Sorcha had become in her weekly letters.”

“Oh?” Ian asked in a futile attempt to buy time, as she’d caught him on the back foot. He had, perhaps—*definitely*—taken liberties with Miss Dunbar’s correspondence.

Miss Tilney’s gaze narrowed. “She’d become so helpful with her sound advice.”

“That’s, *erm*, encouraging to hear.”

Miss Tilney’s gaze prodded. “It wasn’t Aunt Sorcha giving sound advice.” Her gaze probed. “It wasn’t Aunt Sorcha being nice.” A single eyebrow lifted. “It was *you*.”

That *you* emerged in the confident manner of an accusation made in a court of law. Miss Tilney argued her case well.

And she wasn’t wrong.

She wasn’t finished, either. “*You* are the one who advised me to break off my engagement to Mr. Hunt.”

Ian saw there was no use in denial. Besides, he didn’t want to deny it. He’d been pleased to have done that bit of good for Miss Tilney.

“Mr. Hunt wasn’t worthy of you.”

“You said that in the letter.”

The moment stretched long as their gazes held. Ian felt an immense wave of relief wash through him. Just as he’d seen Miss Tilney clearly from the beginning, she now saw him so, as well.

Yet it wasn’t simply relief he was experiencing, but something more, too—something intangible that pulsed between them.

*Awareness.*

*And...intimacy.*

They were two people who knew each other.

He’d admired this woman from afar for a year. What wasn’t to admire? She was lovely, intelligent, and ran a successful circulating library in London.

Now that he’d met her in person, he saw his admiration wasn’t misplaced.

She drew in a sharp breath and shot awkwardly to her feet. “I...I...must bid you good night, Mr. Boyd.”

With that, she fled the room.

Leaving Ian alone with thoughts he knew would keep him awake until dawn’s early rays were streaming through the bedroom’s lone window.

Had he been in the wrong?

It was true that he’d taken liberties with Miss Dunbar’s correspondence. But he hadn’t been able to keep his opinions to himself, not when he’d known himself to be in the right and Miss Tilney in need of sound advice.

It was correct that it was in the open.

He could only hope Miss Tilney felt the same in the morning.



## Chapter Four

*Next day*

GOLDEN RAYS OF the setting sun streamed through mullioned windows, giving Theodora her first sign of the time since she'd entered Aunt Sorcha's library this morning. Her suspicion had been correct: The unassuming shelves possessed quite a few gems that she was keen to add to her circulating library.

After Theodora's parents' sudden and tragic death, the circulating library had been Aunt Sorcha's idea—Papa's single indulgence in life having been books, volumes spilling from study into drawing room and even into bedrooms—but it was Theodora's passion.

Subscription was simple: Patrons paid one guinea per year and two pence for each volume borrowed. And what a privilege it was for access to Papa's wonderful collection of books and periodicals that ranged from natural philosophy to religion to politics to agricultural treatises to biographies and beyond.

A few years ago, they'd expanded their offerings to include novels, which were printed in three volumes to keep patrons returning with voracious appetite. Their addition to the shelves had greatly enhanced Theodora and Aunt Marion's profits and made it possible for them to keep the Knightsbridge townhouse, as the library's popularity continued to grow with each passing year.

Now, Theodora lifted her arms above her head and stretched muscles grown achy from their hunched-over position. From her curled up place on the armchair cushion, Moppet slitted one eye open. Once she gathered her mistress wasn't doing anything unusual, she closed it again.

It had been Theodora's favorite sort of day—the sort where she could spend hours alone with books.

Except today, she hadn't been entirely alone with books.

She'd also been alone with her thoughts.

Of the two, books were the easier to catalogue.

While it was true she'd been doing what she loved all day, she'd been doing something else, too: She'd been avoiding Mr. Boyd.

To think *he* had been her correspondent all those months...

*His* letters she'd looked forward to receiving.

The thought still astonished her.

With her failing eyesight, Aunt Sorcha wouldn't have been aware of what the junior solicitor from Edinburgh had been writing to her niece—and the advice he'd been giving her.

Advice that Aunt Sorcha wouldn't have approved of, for Aunt hadn't changed at all.

But that advice?

It had changed Theodora.

The faith it had shown in her... It had made her stronger. It had made her believe in herself enough to beg off a too-long engagement with a gentleman she hadn't especially liked. Oh, Mr. Hunt was nice enough in a distant way, but, in truth, he hadn't been particularly keen on the marriage, either. That was what Aunt—

*No.*

That was what *Mr. Boyd* had helped her to see.

It was *Mr. Boyd* who had told her to wait to marry someone who adored her.

And the strange part was...Theodora took no offense. In fact, she suspected she liked Mr. Boyd immensely.

The thought unsettled her.

But perhaps not as much as it should.

Really, she found she wanted to know a bit more about him. Wouldn't it only be fair?

She began cataloguing the few facts she knew about him. He was kind and thoughtful. *Considerate*. He was the sort of man who wouldn't let a woman fall—either down a flight of stairs or into a marriage that would prove altogether wrong for her.

Theodora pulled a curious book from the last uncatalogued shelf. Though it appeared the same as its neighboring volumes, the spine was blank. She ran her palm across the brown leather surface, ever finding joy in that cool, smooth feel. She lifted the cover, and her brow crinkled with surprise. It wasn't a book at all. Rather, the cover was a lid and a false front for a small box containing what appeared to be a bundle of letters.

Carefully, for their yellowed edges put them at several decades old, Theodora lifted them from the box. The top letter was addressed to Miss Sorcha Dunbar. Guided by overwhelming curiosity, Theodora unknotted the twine holding the packet together and opened the top letter.

*My dearest love Sorcha*

Theodora's eyes went wide, and her mouth agape.

*My dearest love...*

That would suggest this letter—and the remaining letters bundled with it—were...

Love letters.

And not any mere love letters.

Love letters to...*Aunt Sorcha*.

Before she could read on, footsteps sounded at the door. Without thinking, she shoved the letters back into the box and slammed the lid shut. She glanced around for a safe place for it. The top shelf of the bookcase should do.

However, when Mr. Boyd entered two seconds later, he misinterpreted her upstretched arm. “Miss Tilney,” he said, rushing across the room, “please let me assist you.”

Like that, he was beside her, all burly masculine man and smelling of Scottish pine. Though she voiced a protest, it was admittedly squeaky and did nothing to dissuade him from his intended gallantry. Seeing no help for it, she took a step backward to allow him to retrieve the box she’d hastily, but ineffectively, shoved up there.

Then it happened.

As he made to offer the box to Theodora, a pleased smile curved about his mouth, the bookcase wobbled. He didn’t notice for his back was to it, but mild alarm pinged through Theodora as she felt *it*—an icy blade of air breezing across the back of her neck, prickling all the fine hairs to a stand. The bookcase teetered again, and foreboding knifed through her. “Mr. Boyd, I think you should step away—”

But she wasn’t able to complete the sentence, for the wobble gained momentum and was tipping over and, without thinking, Theodora was pushing Mr. Boyd out of harm’s way. However, she used a bit too much force, and the split of a second later, she and Mr. Boyd landed on the floor in a tumble...

Her spectacles flung across the room...

Her atop him.

But no matter about that, presently.

She had other pressing matters on her mind as she gazed down into Mr. Boyd’s silvery eyes.

“Did you notice it?”



MISS TILNEY’S EYES were bluer without her spectacles, somehow deeper and more intense.

Ian noticed that.



But he was noticing all sorts of sensations at this moment.

Sensations—*physical* sensations—no gentleman had any business speaking aloud.

“Notice what?” scraped across his throat in a gravelly rasp.

Her gaze remained locked onto his, and she didn’t move. She hadn’t yet acknowledged her position, *erm*, on top of him.

Straddling him, in fact.

“The shard of frigid air that blasted through here the instant before the bookcase tipped over,” she whispered, as if someone might hear.

Ian searched his mind, but truly, he felt incredibly hot.

“I didn’t,” he managed, electing for short and to the point. It was for the best while she sat atop him and gave his body ideas that were rather inconvenient to the moment.

Eyes wide, she leaned forward—which didn’t help matters, for he’d caught her intoxicating rose scent. “I think this cottage is haunted.”

“*Haunted?*” he all but scoffed, a healthy dose of skepticism edging each syllable, seeing him through this impossible situation.

Miss Tilney remained undaunted. “By a *murderous* ghost.”

“Why would a ghost be trying to murder you?” The question had to be asked.

“Not just me, Mr. Boyd. The bookcase was trying to murder *you*.”

A shocked laugh escaped Ian.

Miss Tilney blinked those big blue eyes of hers and appeared to snap to...

And realize where she was situated.

On top of him.

Ian regretted the laugh as she scrambled to her feet and straightened her dress, eyes averted as she collected fallen books that had scattered. Ian returned the bookcase to an upright position and kept half an eye on Miss Tilney.

When her gaze began casting about the floor, he intuited her problem. “Are you looking for your spectacles?”

A rueful smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. “They are rather difficult to find when I’m not wearing them, an irony not lost on the short of sight.”

Ian gave the floor a quick scan. “There,” he said, pointing to a spot a few feet behind her.

As she bent to retrieve her spectacles, she also picked up a slip of paper that had fluttered to the floor. Her brow gathered.

“What is it?” he asked before he could determine if he had the right to ask.

She studied the paper closely. “A list of some sort.”

“A catalogue of Miss Dunbar’s books?”

Miss Tilney shook her head, a frown of concentration forming about her mouth. “It’s a list of names,” she said. “Women’s names to the left and men’s names to the right, with lines connecting them. A very odd list.” She read to the bottom, and her brow furrowed.

“What is it?”

She glanced up. “Is your given name Ian, perchance?”

“Aye,” he spoke with an abundance of caution.

“Two names are, *erm*, circled.” She held out the paper. “See for yourself.”

Ian accepted the list.

*Theodora      Ian*

Miss Tilney’s eyes brightened with realization. “I think I know what it is.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Do you recognize any of the names on the list? Perhaps from the village?”

As a matter of fact... “I believe I do.”

“It’s a matchmaking list,” she stated, radiating satisfaction. “Aunt Sorcha was the village matchmaker.”

Ian hated to temper Miss Tilney’s obvious delight, but it needed to be said... “That seems unlikely.” He’d spent considerable time with the woman. Miss Dunbar hadn’t possessed a romantic bone in her body...

*Had she?*

“I found these.”

As Miss Tilney held up what appeared to be a bundle of letters, a loud, unruly growl rent the air. She froze in place, and a scarlet blush crept up her throat.

The growl had come from the vicinity of her stomach.

Ian thought it best to pretend it never happened.

She must’ve had the same thought, for her mouth opened to continue, but her stomach had thoughts of its own—and was most adamant about voicing them.

It rumbled again, this growl even louder than the last.

“Have you eaten today, Miss Tilney?” It had to be asked. The woman possessed no great culinary skill.

“I, *erm*, had a slice of ham on bread this morning.”

Ian’s brow furrowed. “And you’ve had nothing since?”

Miss Tilney squared her shoulders and lifted her chin a notch, gathering herself into a defensive posture. “Well, I—”

Her stomach grumbled again.

Actually, it was more of a roar.

“Miss Tilney, I believe it wise that we take our conversation into the kitchen before your stomach consumes you whole.”



## Chapter Five

THEODORA SAW SHE had no choice but to follow Mr. Boyd into the kitchen.

Although what they were to do once they got there, she wasn't sure. Last evening and this morning's "tea" provided ample evidence of her ineptitude in all matters gastronomical.

Best she stuck to books.

Except she needn't have worried. Upon entering the kitchen, Mr. Boyd at once set to. He seemed to know where everything was, from food to implements. Further—and this was the amazing part—he knew what to do.

"Can I help?" she asked. *Weakly.*

He pointed toward the kitchen table. "You can sit."

Relief stole through Theodora. But another feeling quickly sprang up—*curiosity*. Was Mr. Boyd preparing to make their evening tea?

"I didn't know men could find their way around a kitchen," she said, unable not to.

He'd shed his jacket and rolled his shirtsleeves up to his elbows, much like he'd done yesterday while chopping wood.

And much like yesterday, Theodora found her gaze wanting to drift along exposed muscles and sun-darkened skin.

He glanced over his shoulder, good humor shining in his eyes. "The kitchen was my favorite place as a child." He shrugged. "I picked up a few skills."

Theodora could see he was being modest. He'd picked up more than "a few skills," judging by the smells beginning to emanate from the stove, which had already been hot from the

low-burning fire that was ever present in a well-tended kitchen.

Her gaze fell to her hands, and she found they still clutched the bundle of letters. She began reading the top one aloud. “*My dearest love Sorcha.*”

Mr. Boyd pivoted at the waist and raised a single inquiring eyebrow. In answer to his unspoken question, she lifted the letter. A bemused smile playing about his mouth, he returned to meal preparation.

Theodora felt—*yet another*—blush heating her through. It might be best if she read the letters silently to herself and provided Mr. Boyd a summary at the end.

One letter followed the other, and a picture formed. “Aunt Sorcha once had a love.”

“That’s...surprising,” said Mr. Boyd, diplomatically.

“Mr. Malcolm Ross,” continued Theodora. “He signed every letter *Your Malcolm, forever.*”

An ineffable sense of melancholy came from nowhere and stole through Theodora. She wasn’t sure she’d ever experienced such a deep well of sadness in her life as she laid the letters open, side by side, and began relating their sad tale. “In the first letter, Malcolm tells Sorcha of an opportunity he has to secure land in America.”

“Enterprising of him,” said Mr. Boyd.

Men generally approved of such ventures.

“In the next letter,” she continued, “Malcolm writes that he understands Sorcha’s objections to leaving Scotland, but they can be together and start a new life as husband and wife.”

“He’s still trying to convince her.”

“By the third letter, Malcolm seems resigned that she’s refusing him. But he makes one last effort.” Theodora felt herself smiling wistfully. “He tells her he will build her a replica of this cottage.”

“What sort of man would he be if he didn’t want to please his love?”

Though Theodora had only met Mr. Boyd yesterday, she understood he was that sort of man.

“The fourth letter is farewell.” Theodora could barely speak the words for the sorrow clutching her throat. “Malcolm has resigned himself that they won’t be together.”

“And that was the last she heard from him?” Mr. Boyd set the table with plates and cutlery before placing a large platter containing trout and a variety of root vegetables between them.

Theodora’s stomach lurched with aggression.

“There’s one more,” she said through her ravenous hunger. “It’s a year later, from America. Malcolm is informing Sorcha that he’s to be married in a month’s time.” Next was the part that made Theodora’s heart ache for her aunt. “His signature is no longer *Your Malcom, forever*. Instead, he simply wrote *Sincerely, Malcolm*.”

Theodora refolded the letters and tied the twine around them with slow deliberation. “I think Aunt Sorcha chose this cottage over the love of her life.” She’d needed to hear the words aloud. “Which resulted in her keeping her beloved Scottish cottage—and losing her happiness.” Theodora shook her head in bafflement. “She refused Malcolm so she could keep a cottage?”

Mr. Boyd’s mouth turned down at the corners, which was as close as Theodora had ever seen him come to a frown. “That’s not why she refused him.”

“No?”

“She refused him, because she was scared.”

“*Scared?*” Theodora was fairly certain Aunt Sorcha had never spent a single moment of her life frightened by anything.

“I see it every day in my line of work. People making a bad choice, because they’re afraid.”

“It is difficult to leave everything you know.”

“But that’s not what they’re afraid of losing. That’s the excuse. They’re afraid of risking something of themselves.”

And Theodora knew exactly what. “Their heart.”

“Love is a risk some can’t take.”

“Because,” Theodora began slowly, understanding coming to her, “one has to risk everything.”

“So, one plays smaller and makes the wrong choice.”

“Like I almost did with Mr. Hunt.”

Mr. Boyd was too discreet to say *yes*, but they both knew it.

Mr. Boyd knew something of life, but that knowledge didn’t give him a cynical outlook, rather the opposite. He approached life with kindness and generosity.

Theodora found she liked the unexpected man sitting opposite her very much.

Her gaze fell to the table and the feast set before her. “This looks amazing.”



## Chapter Six

GRATIFICATION COURSED THROUGH Ian.

It couldn't help itself.

Even so, it wouldn't do to natter on like a fool. "You must try it first. Looks can be deceiving."

Miss Tilney flaked off a bite of trout and brought it to her mouth. Ian watched, transfixed, her eyes closed for a moment of bliss while she chewed. "This is the most delicious fish I've ever eaten."

"That's the hunger speaking, I believe."

She went utterly serious. "It is scrumptious, Mr. Boyd."

"Now that you're partaking of a meal prepared by me, you can call me Ian."

"*Ian.*" She spoke his name as if testing the taste of it on her tongue. "And you can call me Theodora," she added with a shy smile.

"I would be honored."

"Now, Ian—" A charming little laugh escaped her at the use of his given name. "One doesn't learn to make food this tasty from hanging about kitchens. Tell me the truth. Someone taught you your skills, correct?"

"It happens that my family's cook is one of the best in Scotland," he said. "I was in the kitchens every day, stealing bits of shortbread and other tempting treats. One day, Mrs. MacFergus told me that if I was going to be her shadow, then I should learn what was what in the kitchen."

"She taught you how to cook?" asked Theodora, a note of disbelief in her voice. "And you took to it?"



Ian nodded. "I enjoy it."

Theodora's head canted to the side, and she was staring at him as if he were the strangest man on the face of the earth. "But food is simply sustenance. It fills you and makes it possible to get on with your life. Eating is what you do between the important parts of your day."

Though she didn't understand his passion for food, Ian wanted her to. "Food...this meal...we are sharing it. You taste and enjoy the trout, and I taste and enjoy the trout. It's a communal experience between you and me. Tell me this," he continued. "Do you read in your spare time?"

"Every day."

"Well, I cook."

"You finish your day's work and...*cook*?" A laugh of disbelief escaped her. "Doesn't that feel like more work?"

"It doesn't."

"Fascinating."

The way her bright blue eyes were staring at him... It was as if she were seeing him for the first time.

"Mr. Boyd—"

"*Ian*."

"Ian, you differ greatly from anyone I've ever met."

He could tell from how she spoke the words and the look in her eyes that she liked that about him.

"About the letters," she began. She looked suddenly... uncomfortable.

"I feel for Miss Dunbar," he said. "The choice between love and security would be a difficult one to make."

Theodora nodded, absently tapping Miss Dunbar's bundle of letters. She looked as if she were mulling over a decision. "Not these letters." Her gaze sharpened. "The letters from *you*."

*Ah.* He'd been wondering when those letters would come up again. "Theodora, I must offer my sincere apologies for taking liberties."

"Why?"

Actually... Ian wasn't sure. He wasn't sorry in the least.

He'd meant every word he'd written.

Theodora's mouth twitched into a smile. "I rather liked that Aunt Sorcha became more pleasant to me."

"Yes, well, I can see that," said Ian, still discomfited by his past decision. "But I should have told you the instant we met."

Theodora nodded, slowly, considering. "Perhaps," she allowed. "When Aunt Sorcha told me to be bold and brave, it was *you* telling me to be bold and brave. *You* thought I could be so."

"Your aunt was proud of the success you'd made of your circulating library in London. She told everyone she met." Ian wanted Theodora to know that about her aunt. "I've no doubt she thought you bold and brave. She was one of those people who had a difficult time expressing such feelings."

Theodora looked thoroughly unconvinced. "She was quite determined to see me married to Mr. Hunt."

"You couldn't have married that nodcock, could you?"

"Everyone seemed to think so." A beat. "Except my aunt...*you*."

The praise sat uncomfortably within Ian. The truth was he'd undeniably overstepped.

"It was your *bold and brave* that gave me the strength to break off the engagement."

"You're better off without him."

Here was firmer ground for Ian, for it was the truth.

Theodora gave a dry laugh. "Without him, I'm now a spinster."

“You’re too pretty to be a spinster.” The words were out of Ian’s mouth before he could consider them.

Theodora blinked, and a shallow line formed between her eyebrows. “You think me pretty?”

“Every man with seeing eyes must think so, lass.”

The moment stretched long as a comely blush pinked Theodora’s cheeks, making her even prettier.

“I think I should...” Ian truly didn’t know where he was proceeding with that sentence.

*Kiss you.*

That wouldn’t do.

“Yes?” she asked, a hair breathless.

Ian recovered himself. What was it about her that brought out the impetuous side of his nature? “Clear the table,” he said.

She blinked. “Of course.”

Ian began moving the dishes from table to sink, feeling her gaze on him. While he’d felt like he’d known her all these months—had, in fact, known her to be a capable woman who knew her own mind—he hadn’t been prepared for the reality of Miss Theodora Tilney. The directness of her clear-eyed gaze. Her unflinching quality. He found it most attractive.

As he reached for the shallow pan he’d used to sear the trout, an icy shard of air breezed through the room. His hand wrapped around the handle and instantly released as the copper pan clattered to the stove in a crash. Ian shouted, sharp, searing pain shooting from his palm up his arm.

Theodora was at his side in an instant. “What is it?”

“My hand,” said Ian, unable to believe it. “I’ve burned it.”

Without hesitation, Theodora grabbed his wrist and pulled him toward the sink, where she plunged his hand into a tub of water. She shot him a concerned glance. “One would think a

man who knows his way around a kitchen would know better than to grab a hot pan by the handle.”

“That’s the thing,” he began. “I’d placed the pan away from the heat. There’s no reason the handle should’ve been hot.”

She touched light fingertips to copper. Her brow crinkled. “It isn’t hot.” Her gaze met his, utter seriousness in their depths. “I can think of one reason the pan was hot one instant and cold the next.”

Ian immediately caught her meaning. “The ghost.”

She nodded. “The *murderous* ghost.”

Their gazes held, solemn. Then her mouth twitched, and his did, too, and they burst into laughter. How good it felt to be sharing a laugh.

Ian’s gaze fell—to where Theodora’s hand was wrapped around his wrist.

To where she was touching him.

Her gaze fell there, too.

She glanced up and met his eye. Of its own volition, his other hand reached up and was caressing her cheek...cradling the nape of her neck...and his head was angling down...

His lips touched hers, her breath sweet against his mouth.

Mirroring his movements, her free hand reached up, tentative, and caressed his stubbled cheek...slender fingers tangling through the hair at the nape of his neck, sending a warm shiver cascading through him...

She lifted to her toes and pulled him toward her, deepening the kiss, the tip of her tongue sliding across his lower lip.

*Oh, Lord.*

Even as he wanted to follow this path, Ian knew what he must do...

He pulled away, gently, just enough so their lips were no longer touching. Their gazes held one another's captive, their breath shallow and fast.

"It wouldn't be wise to continue that kiss," he murmured. "It could lead..." Oh, why had he started such a sentence? "Well, you know where it could lead."

She nodded, knowledge shining in her eyes. She was an innocent. He knew that much about Miss Tilney. But she was a well-read woman. She would understand about such matters—and their consequences.

She touched trembly fingertips to kiss-crushed lips. It was the way she did it—with curiosity and awe, as if...

"Don't tell me that's the first time you've ever been kissed?"

Her eyes didn't tell him any differently.

"You mean, in all the years you were engaged to marry Mr. Hunt, he never..."

She gave her head a curt shake.

Unaccountable anger at the blasted nodcock surged inside Ian. "He didn't deserve you, Theodora."

She took a small step backward, far enough to provide a bit of distance between them. She lifted his hand from the bucket of water and examined it. The skin was bright pink, but the burn wasn't severe. "It'll smart for a few days, is all," she said, returning his hand to the cooling water. An unsteady moment beat past. "Tomorrow is the reading of the will."

"Aye."

That *aye* took every bit of Ian's will to speak.

"And then..."

She didn't need to complete the sentence.

*And then they would go their separate ways.*

“I can finish up here,” said Ian. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Opaque emotion flashed behind her eyes before she nodded and left the kitchen, her little dog trailing in her wake.

Ian knew how he should feel.

He should feel like an utter cad for kissing her.

But he didn’t.

What he felt was longing—longing unlike any he could’ve imagined.

Was it possible that they would never see each other again after tomorrow?

Having corresponded with Theodora for nearly a year, he felt like he knew her—and wanted to know more of her.

In fact, he wasn’t sure there was enough time in an eternity of years to know Miss Theodora Tilney fully.

But he wanted the chance.



## Chapter Seven

*Next day*

RETICULE IN ONE hand and valise in the other, the bedroom door clicked shut behind Theodora. She had quite a day ahead of her—a day she didn't feel inclined to rush toward.

Somehow, she'd managed to sleep the night through. Really, it had been a wonderful night's slumber—not a hint of ghostly shenanigans.

A sheepish smile pulled at her mouth.

*Ghosts.*

Perhaps Ian was correct, and she'd been indulging in a bit of fancy with the notion of a murderous ghost.

She touched light fingertips to her mouth.

Ian had kissed her.

And she had kissed him right back.

Her lips yet tingled with the slick, warm feel of his mouth pressed against hers.

It was a wonderful experience, being kissed—its expression the release of a pent-up feeling she hadn't been aware of existing inside her. If she had, she might've tried it earlier in life.

But no.

She hadn't known Ian until two days ago.

From that one time, she knew he was the only man she ever wanted to kiss.

Which could prove a problem.

After today, she might never see him again.

The dull ache that had settled in the center of her chest last night expanded.

Voices drifted up the stairwell as she took the steps on quiet cat feet, Moppet's claws clicking lightly on pine treads as she led the way down. Theodora wasn't yet ready to face Ian or his solicitor father—or the day ahead.

At the bottom of the stairs, instead of turning left toward the sitting room where she was expected, she opened the front door to let Moppet out for a final exploration of the garden. Then her feet made a right toward Aunt Sorcha's library.

She stepped into the room, hesitantly, unsure what to expect. "No more crashing bookcases, if you please, Aunt Sorcha," she said, low, so her voice wouldn't carry beyond this room. She felt half a fool for speaking to a ghost who—*likely*—didn't exist.

Carefully, she picked her way through stacks of catalogued books until she reached the bookcase she sought. She found the false book box and opened it. From her reticule, she withdrew the bundle of Malcolm's letters and placed them inside with great care. With a feeling of protective reverence, she lifted onto the tips of her toes and shoved the box onto the highest shelf she could reach.

*There.*

The letters were where they belonged.

*Here,* with Aunt Socha.

"Farewell, Aunt."

As Theodora was striding across the library's threshold to exit, a now-familiar ribbon of air slid across her neck. *Icy.* Air that cut through skin and muscle all the way to bone. She went still—and waited.

"Aunt Sorcha?"

The question fell from her mouth in a breathless whisper. While part of her felt ten ways a fool, another part half



expected an answer. But the lone sound in the room was that of the blood rushing in her ears.

“What should I do?” she asked, the murmur so low she could hardly hear the words herself.

But something happened when the question left her mouth.

She *heard* it—and she knew the answer.

Her step determined and only slightly wobbly with nerves, she crossed the small foyer to the cozy sitting room where Ian and his father waited for her. Father and son looked near mirror images of one another, except for the silver at the elder Mr. Boyd’s temples and the smile lines that formed at the corners of his eyes.

“Miss Tilney,” said Ian, stepping forward, “may I introduce my father, Mr. Boyd, to you?”

Anxiousness shimmered about him, and she understood why. He wanted her and his father to like one another.

“Mr. Boyd,” she said, inclining her head and offering a smile.

“Miss Tilney,” said Mr. Boyd. He was a serious man, but kindness shone in his eyes.

Theodora knew she liked him already.

“Right,” he continued. “Shall we get on with this unusual business?”

Mr. Boyd took his place on the settee, and Theodora and Ian settled into the two armchairs opposite. A solid lump formed in Theodora’s throat, and a slick of perspiration coated her palms. She flashed a nervous glance toward Ian. He gave a nod, reassurance in his warm gray eyes. Whatever lay inside Aunt Sorcha’s will, all would come out alright. That was what his gaze told her.

Mr. Boyd began reading, and Theodora released the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. Though she maintained an interested demeanor, she could hardly attend the

words for they were in the language of the legal world, which admittedly wasn't her favorite form of reading.

However, the words were having quite an effect on Ian, whose sudden impatience had him moving to the edge of his seat and his brow furrowing. "*Jointly?*" he asked—*demanded*.

Theodora had never seen him so...forceful. Perhaps she was catching a glimpse of the Mr. Ian Boyd, junior solicitor extraordinaire, that the world outside this cottage knew. She found this side of him rather captivating.

But the word he spoke snapped Theodora to—*jointly*.

Her mind searched back for the words preceding *jointly*.

*They shall...own...Miss Sorcha Dunbar's beloved cottage...*

*Jointly.*

Now Theodora's brow was furrowing. "My apologies," she began, haltingly, "but are you saying that Ian—*Mr. Boyd*," she corrected herself, "and I are to own this cottage...*together?*"

The elder Mr. Boyd shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. "Since you both occupied the cottage the two nights preceding this reading, you have fulfilled the first stipulation of your aunt's will."

"There's a second?" Dread crept through Theodora, as her heart made a rather compelling case that it should break free of her ribs.

Mr. Boyd looked as if he'd rather be kicking rocks down the lane than presently sitting in this room, fielding this simple question—whose answer would be anything other than simple. That much was clear from the elder solicitor's expression.

"The second stipulation is that the two of you marry."

A beat of shocked silence reverberated through the room.

It was Ian who broke it. "Papa, did you know about this?"

Mr. Boyd shook his head. “I can assure you I did not. A week after Miss Dunbar’s decease, an addendum arrived at our offices with the instruction that it not be opened until the reading of the will.”

Ian moved to sit beside his father and read the document firsthand. “Do we know if it’s legally binding?”

As the men began debating the validity of the will, Theodora sat still as a river stone, unmoving as water rushed around it.

Her mind, however, raced.

What could Aunt Sorcha have possibly meant by this?

In a flash, she understood.

*Of course.*

It had been right before her eyes this entire time.

“Mr. Boyd,” she said, “could you give your son and me a private moment?”

Two pairs of surprised eyes lifted from the document.

“Indeed,” said Mr. Boyd, discreetly keeping his curiosity to himself.

He gathered the papers and left the room.

Theodora was alone with Ian.

Save the ghost, of course.

Speaking of the ghost... “I no longer think the cottage is haunted by a murderous ghost.”

Bemusement lit within Ian’s eyes. “And you have a theory what other sort of ghost it might be?”

Theodora remained utterly serious. “It’s a matchmaking ghost.”

Ian’s mouth opened surely to refute her statement, then closed. She’d rendered him speechless.

One finger lifted into the air as Theodora began her argument. She had a case to make to a solicitor, after all. “Upon my arrival, the front and back cottage doors were open.”

“Yes?”

“And Moppet rushed straight through,” she explained with great deliberation. He didn’t seem to understand. “Leading me to you.” A second finger joined the first. “As did the banging shudder during that first night.”

Ian’s gaze grew less skeptical and more considering, as if he were giving her theory a chance. “And you tripping and nearly falling down the stairs?”

She held up a third finger. “Brought me into your arms.” Now, she was holding up four fingers. “As did the bookcase tipping over.”

A slightly wicked smile pulled at Ian’s mouth. “Oh, that wasn’t your arms straddling me on the floor.”

A furious blush streaked through Theodora to the tips of her ears.

“But did she have to burn my hand?” he asked.

A reasonable question. Yet... “It was but a light searing, and it led to...” Her gaze dipped and rested a beat on his mouth.

*The kiss.*

She didn’t need to say it.

They both knew.

“So,” said Ian, “our stay in the cottage the two nights preceding the reading of the will, and the stipulation that you and I marry in order to inherit—”

“Was Aunt Sorcha’s final act of matchmaking,” she finished for him.

Ian gave a bemused snort. “She wasn’t exactly subtle, was she?”

Theodora joined him in a smile, but she yet had serious words to speak—the most serious of her life, for they would determine her future happiness.

“I must return to London,” she said, searching for a place to begin and landing there.

Ian cocked his head. He looked as if he had some serious words to speak, too. “You *don’t* have to return to London.”

“I do,” she said, realizing she’d likely started in the wrong place. “To see my books packed up correctly.”

Silvery gray eyes narrowed. “Oh?”

“I’m thinking a move to Edinburgh might be in order.”

“Why is that?”

And here she’d arrived at the serious words she must speak—the ones that pushed her into unknown territory. She rushed across the short distance between them, perched beside Ian on the settee, and began digging inside her reticule. She had a case to make for their future—and she would make it thoroughly.

Her hand emerged with the paper she sought. “Hold this.”

Ian’s brow gathered. “Your aunt’s match list?”

Once she’d found a pencil, Theodora placed the paper flat on the table before them. “I was thinking about Aunt Sorcha’s match list and the fact of our names on it, and, *erm...*”

Tip of pencil depressed into paper, she drew a line from her name to his.

Now, they were connected.

“I must return to London, *then* move to Edinburgh so my heart can be complete.” Oh, how her nerves had both body and voice trembling. “My heart can’t be complete without my books—and it can’t be complete without you.”

Long, masculine fingers took hers and twined through.  
“Theodora...”

The look in his eyes as he spoke her name emboldened her...gave her hope.

“You see, though we only met officially two days ago, I was already halfway in love with you before we ever came face to face.” She brought his hand—only a little pink from last night’s searing—to her cheek. “I won’t make the same mistake as Aunt Sorcha.”

“And what mistake is that?”

“I will follow my heart where it leads.”

Oh, could she speak the next words in her heart?

*Yes.*

“And my heart has led me to...you.”

Ian squeezed her hand, reassurance in his eyes.  
“Theodora.”

“Yes?”

“You’ve stated your case quite convincingly.”

“Have I?” she asked, relief uncurling in her stomach.

“For over a year, I’ve adored you from afar,” he said. “And I can think of nothing I want more than to spend the rest of my life adoring the woman I love.”

Tears of joy sprang to Theodora’s eyes. “You told me once never to settle for a man who didn’t adore me.”

“And you shouldn’t,” he said. “You won’t. You’ll be the most adored woman in Scotland.”

A swift blast of icy air swirled through the room, so frigid it made Theodora’s teeth want to chatter. Instinctively, she and Ian moved closer, the few inches between them disappearing, and he gathered her in his arms.

Really, they were left with no choice but to hold on tight—and kiss each other warm again.



## Epilogue

*One year later*

IAN SAT READING a two-day-old newspaper—quaint villages in Scotland were content with receiving their news a few days late—and taking unhurried pleasure in the silky feel of his wife’s hair as she lay stretched on the settee, resting her head on his lap, eyes drifted shut, lashes a dark fan against her cheekbones.

*His wife.*

Theodora was a wife—*his* wife—and he was a husband—*her* husband.

Sometimes, it was a fact difficult to countenance, for once they’d decided to be together, life had taken on the pace and spin of a whirlwind. Theodora had immediately returned to London to pack up her life and move it four hundred miles to the north in Edinburgh. Her Aunt Marion had been delighted to return to her homeland of Scotland.

From there, along with Theodora establishing a new circulating library, they’d begun the planning for the wedding. To Ian’s great surprise, Theodora had taken to it, at times sounding no less intimidating than a general about to take to the field of battle.

“It’s simple,” she’d explained. “I want the day to be a grand reflection of our love.”

And it had been.

And all the days that had come after—all six months of them—had been, too. What was this very moment—them sitting contentedly after an evening meal of venison stew—if not a reflection of their love?

Though the moment was small, it was no less grand.

“Do you like the newest piece of artwork gracing the cottage?” asked Theodora, her eyes yet closed, a hand idly stroking Moppet, who lay sleeping at her side.

Ian gave a dry laugh. Above the fireplace hung Aunt Sorcha’s match list, framed and set in the cottage’s place of pride for all to see. Though only he and Theodora knew its meaning now, in the years to come their children and children’s children and so on would know the story—a story which would pass into the realm of family legend passed from one generation to the next.

Theodora’s eyes blinked open and met his from her place on his lap. “I have something to tell you, my dearest.”

Ian detected a note in her voice. Since they’d wed, he thought he’d come to know her full range of notes. But this note held a mystery. “Yes?” he asked, cautious.

“And I couldn’t tell you in Edinburgh.”

He set the newspaper aside. “Why is that?”

“Because I thought it fitting that Aunt Sorcha hear the news, too.”

Ian felt his eyebrows crinkle together. “But Aunt Sorcha is...”

Then he saw it—the secret smile curling about his wife’s lips. His heart kicked into a full gallop. “What is it you wish to say to me, my love?”

“Give me your hand.”

Her fingers twined through his and tugged his hand down until it rested on her subtly rounded belly. “*This.*”

Joy in its purest form streaked through Ian. “You’re with child,” he said, stating the obvious with no small amount of awe.

Of a sudden, Theodora gasped, but her smile didn’t fall. “Do you feel it?”



“Feel what?”

But even as he asked, he did feel it—a rush of warm air sweeping into the room and enveloping them in a protective embrace.

Eyes watery blue with unshed tears, Theodora sat up and faced him. “*Love.*”

“It’s all that matters.” he spoke around the lump in his throat.

All he wanted was to kiss his wife.

Toward that end, he reached out and cradled the back of her head, their eyes fast on one another. He brought her mouth to his.

And when they kissed, all the love and happiness they held for each other and the new life they were bringing into the world poured through them...

The match list’s work was done—even to Aunt Sorcha’s exacting satisfaction.

The End

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## **About Sofie Darling**

Sofie Darling is an award-winning author of historical romance. The third book in her Shadows and Silk series, *Her Midnight Sin*, won the 2020 RONE award for Best Historical Regency.

She spent much of her twenties raising two boys and reading every romance she could get her hands on. Once she realized she simply had to write the books she loved, she finished her English degree and embarked on her writing career. Mr. Darling and the boys gave her their wholehearted blessing.

When she's not writing heroes who make her swoon, she runs a marathon in a different state every year, visits crumbling medieval castles whenever she gets a chance, and enjoys a slightly codependent relationship with her beagle, Bosco.

# **Once Upon a Haunted Hillfort**

*Mia Pride*

## **Dedication**

To my PA, Alison, for standing by me through the hard times and keeping me afloat.

I couldn't do this without you!



## Chapter One

“COME ON, SOPH! Stay and have a few drinks. It’s Halloween!” Becky begged, jumping up and down in her bunny costume, floppy white ears bouncing around her jovial face.

“I would, but I promised my aunt I’d attend a book signing event at her job tomorrow. You know the archaeology program I was accepted into? The program director and his wife recently wrote a book. They are visiting, and I want to meet them. Which means I need to be up early.” In truth, Sophia felt out of place at this party. Her friends were wonderful, but Sophia always had a sense that she was different and never quite belonged.

“Nerd.” Becky stuck her tongue out at Sophia, who rolled her eyes and leaned in to kiss Becky on the cheek.

“Well, this nerd needs to pay rent and behave. My mom is shelling out a fortune for my tuition. The least I can do is deserve it.” Sophia adjusted her tall, white wig as it tilted like the Leaning Tower of Pisa for the dozenth time that night. She thought being Marie Antoinette would be a great costume, but she hadn’t anticipated the wig issues—or the French foreign exchange student who kept pretending to cut off her head all night.

“Wait.” Becky held up a finger and narrowed her eyes. “Doesn’t that guy work there? The one your aunt keeps trying to set you up with?”

“Yeah, but that has nothing to do with it. I’ve never seen his face. In fact, I can’t even remember his name. Anyway—gotta go. Bye, everyone. Love you! See you soon.” Sophia blew her friends kisses as she grabbed her purse and pulled out the keys. Her small, yellow sedan was a mild nightmare with

shuddering brakes and a radio that only worked on its own terms, but it was all she could afford. Besides, it was just temporary. Soon, she'd be leaving her temporary flat in Moray and living near the University of Aberdeen's campus, so she wouldn't need the car.

Hopefully, this new stage of Sophia's life would help her discover her true self, the part of her that always felt like something was missing. She couldn't explain why, but she felt deep in her bones that the missing piece resided at the university. So, she'd left San Francisco and everything she knew to come to Scotland. She knew without a doubt that something life-changing awaited her.

Kids ran through the streets carrying bags of candy and wearing a variety of costumes, from monsters to princesses, while parents followed and reminded them constantly to stay off the lawns. A group of teenagers gathered in the parking lot just outside Becky's flat, laughing as they held bottles of alcohol.

Sophia didn't want to be the old lady telling them how to behave. After all, she was only 20, but she saw keys hanging from one of the boy's hands as he opened a silver SUV and tossed a bottle of whiskey into the passenger side. To hell with minding her own business, she decided. This boy couldn't be older than 17. He was going to kill himself or someone else, and her conscience told her to speak up.

"Excuse me," she said nicely as she walked over. "You clearly have been drinking, and there are a lot of people out tonight. You can hurt yourself or someone else if you drive."

"Aye, Mum," the kid snickered.

Sophia rolled her eyes and decided to speak with someone possibly more reasonable. Pinning her gaze on a young woman dressed like Frankenstein's bride, Sophia said, "You're going to let your friend drive off drunk and get killed? Is that how much you value your friend's life?"

The girl blanched and looked from Sophia to the boy behind the driver's seat. "Give me yer keys, Daniel. Shite, ye are goin' ta kill yerself or some wee child." She held out her hand, and Daniel, flashing Sophia a dirty look, relinquished the keys.

"Ye should mind yer own business, lady. Now I'm goin' ta be late to the party."

"Better late than dead. Have a nice night."

Sophia shook her head and walked toward her car. She hated confrontation, but maybe she'd saved a life tonight. As she slowly drove through the crowded neighborhood and entered the main road, silence and darkness replaced the bright, noisy streets she'd left behind.

When her radio popped on unexpectedly as usual, and her favorite Halloween song blared through her speakers, Sophia smiled and sang along, looking up in the rearview mirror to squint at the bright lights that suddenly began flashing behind her.

"What the...?" The same car had been on her tail since she'd left Becky's, but now its brights blinded her.

Ahead, the light turned from yellow to red, and Sophia stopped. But the blinding lights from the car behind her seemed to speed up, get closer, and flood her car's interior with a blinding brightness that made her tremble as adrenaline pumped through her veins.

The car wasn't stopping.

In a panic, Sophia laid on her horn, hoping to get the driver's attention and make them stop, but they continued to barrel forward. It was a matter of seconds, though it felt like an eternity, as she turned her wheels toward the side rail, hoping to move out of the way and avoid the oncoming car. But she felt the jolting impact as a loud crash rang in her ears, metal crunched, and glass shattered. Her body flew forward, and her face smacked against her steering wheel.



Her car plowed into the side rail, rolled down an embankment, and something warm and fluid ran down her brow as the Marie Antoinette wig slid off her head. Figures the airbags are as faulty as the radio, she thought, and then, everything went black.



## Chapter Two

“**W**HERE DO YE want me to put these?” Callum asked, lifting the box of dusty pamphlets with a grunt.

His supervisor, Thelma, tore her gaze from the table she’d been fussing over all day to look at him from across the room. “Ye can place those down in the basement for the night. Everything is looking great in here. I know ye are anxious to join the festivities tonight, but I’m just so nervous about tomorrow!”

Callum shifted the box in his arms and smiled at the older woman, whose gray hair frizzed around her reddened face. “Everything will be just fine, Thelma. Murielle and Samuel have been here for book signings before. It gets packed, but we have enough books to sell. Once these pamphlets are out of the way, I think everything will be ready.”

Thelma nodded and took a deep breath. “Ye are right, lad. It’s just that their work has truly inspired this village. They are celebrities! Everything must be perfect.” She tittered to herself as she shifted a stack of books toward the center of the signing table, stepped back, cocked her head to the left, then moved them back where they had been.

Callum had become close friends with Murielle and Samuel, the couple who had discovered an ancient book about Pictish life in the caves just below their shores. Before that discovery, little was known about the people whose ruins now rested beneath Burghead’s paved roads. This visitor center stood upon the ancient hillfort’s ruins. He valued Murielle and Samuel’s work as much as the next person, but he knew they’d never fuss because a stack of books wasn’t perfectly centered on the table.

Thelma's phone buzzed in her pocket, and frowning, she slipped her readers on and squinted at her screen. "Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no..."

Callum watched as Thelma's face blanched, and she leaned against the table, knocking her perfect stack askew. "Is everything okay?" Had Sam and Murielle canceled their signing tomorrow? He couldn't figure out what else could make his boss turn as white as a ghost.

"I wish it was something so trivial. Ye ken how I told ye my great-niece from San Francisco moved here to start at university?"

Callum creased his brow and nodded. Thelma had talked his ear off about her "beautiful" great-niece she hoped to set him up with soon. Their family had been in or around Burghead as long as his, but her sister's family had moved to California two decades ago when Sophia was a baby.

"I... she... I need to go." Thelma grabbed her purse from the counter and ran toward the door, talking as she moved. "She is in hospital. A damned drunk driver plowed into her and ran her off the road. She... well, the text I received from Sophia's mother said I needed to hurry. It doesnae look good. Once that last box is stored away, just lock up behind ye, aye?" Thelma's voice shook, and she didn't wait for him to speak before heading out the door.

Callum stood as still as a statue for a few moments as he processed what had just occurred. His heart ached for Thelma. Having no children of her own, it had seemed that her great-niece, Sophia, was like a daughter to Thelma. He silently prayed that Sophia would pull through whatever injuries she'd sustained as he walked toward the stairs leading down to the basement.

As he carefully traversed the stairs, Callum recalled his first meeting with Murielle when she had visited the Burghead Visitor Centre and appeared quite distressed. Callum had called Samuel to pick her up, but before Sam had arrived,

Callum had learned that Murielle was not from this time. She had lived in the year 686, right here in this village.

It was rumored that the caves along the Moray coast held ancient secrets and served as a portal between times, but Callum had never believed such nonsense—until he met Murielle. Now, the scared and lonely Pictish Princess he had met last year had embraced her place in this time with her new husband, Samuel, a professor of archaeology and a man from this time.

Though Callum was excited to see them again tomorrow, he was anxious to lock up the visitor center for the night and join his village in their annual Samhain fire festival. Reaching the basement, Callum carefully placed the box onto the last step and pulled his keys from his jeans pocket to unlock the spring-loaded basement door. When the keys became jammed in the old lock as they sometimes did, Callum jiggled them futilely before giving up and using a nearby stool to prop the door open. He'd have to remind Thelma to change this lock again, though he'd reminded her many times already. Grabbing the box from the step, Callum walked into the musty room. He crinkled his nose, always put off by the damp smell that permeated the walls.

A stack of boxes littered an old folding table in the corner, and Callum plopped the pamphlets atop the others. They'd all need to be set out again once the signing was over, so he made a mental note to keep everything in one place for easy retrieval.

When an earthy-herbal scent suddenly overpowered the usual musk, Callum sniffed the air and looked around the room for its source. It wasn't the first time the distinct scent had caught his attention in the basement, but he'd yet to find the source. Though it was similar to sage and wholly more pleasant than the smell of what he suspected was mold, Callum was a man who preferred not to ignore odd things but to seek answers.

Bending over, Callum opened a box that appeared to have been forgotten beneath the table for long enough to gather a thick layer of dust. Torn books and old office supplies filled the box, but there was nothing that would produce such a scent.

“Och, ye do have a nice arse, Callum.”

With a startled yelp, Callum smacked the back of his head on the table as he attempted to jolt upright. Then he spun around, looking around the dark room, wincing as he held his head with one hand as he scrambled to pull the string hanging from the mounted light overhead. When the light flickered to life, Callum looked around the room, finding himself alone.

“Who said that?” he whispered, looking beneath the table again.

A disembodied gasp echoed off the walls, like a startled woman, though he saw nothing. “Hello?” He wouldn’t be surprised if the visitor center was haunted, for it quite literally rested on the remains of the old Pictish hillfort where Murielle’s brother once ruled over many centuries ago. Still, he’d never seen or heard anything while down here.

And certainly, never anything that complimented his arse, of all things.

Turning in a circle again, Callum saw nothing but the peeling white paint on the walls, old periodicals, and a broken diorama he still needed to repair. Illustrated posters of Pictish villagers plowing fields, dying cloths, and tending to cattle were pinned to the wall, their yellowing corners curling at the edges. But, he was sure the only living creature in this basement was him, and perhaps that wee rodent that he’d seen periodically popping its whiskered nose out of the hole behind the desk.

Pulling out his cell phone and checking the time, Callum realized that the Samhain festivities in town were well on their way. His people took All Hallow’s Eve seriously, as did he. Deciding he could investigate the basement another day when

he had more time, Callum walked toward the door, where the keys still dangled inside the lock. As he reached for them, the stool holding the door open flew to the side, crashing against the wall. Callum yelped.

And the cursed spring-loaded door slammed closed, locking him inside.

Shaking the knob lock, Callum cursed. The herbal scent hung heavily in the air, and the single overhead light flickered as if it were deciding whether or not to give up on life. He knew the feeling.

When the room's temperature dropped, and the hackles on his neck stood on end, Callum straightened his spine and closed his eyes. The way that stool had flown into the wall? *That* was not normal.

"Ye have my attention, whoever ye are," he whispered as he turned around, only to be met with sad hazel eyes framed in thick black lashes.

"Ballocks!" he shouted and jumped back, his heart beating wildly as he looked at the slim, pink-cheeked young woman standing before him with waves of rusty hair floating about her round face. "Who the bloody hell are ye? How did ye get in here without me noticing?"

She blinked and opened her mouth slowly, only to snap it shut and take a step back. She was bonnie, he'd give her that. But the shock in her eyes left him uneasy. Wasn't he the one who was supposed to be frightened?

"Ye can see me?"

"Aye. I see ye. Do ye know what ye've done? We cannae get out of here now!" he grouched. "It's locked from the outside, and there aren't windows down here!" Pulling out his phone, Callum cursed when he saw the dreaded "x" beside the signal bars. "Of course. Why *would* I get reception down here?"

Looking back up at the lass, Callum scanned her length and frowned when he took in her dark blue tunic with long

sleeves and a wide neckline—much like those the Picts once wore. Was she some history fan-girl who arrived a day early for Sam and Murielle’s presentation? She wouldn’t be the first to arrive in historical clothing.

“Are ye here for the book signing and presentation? It isnae until tomorrow.”

She shook her head and took a step closer to him. He almost stepped back but decided to stand his ground and get some answers. “Ye do realize we are now stuck down here, aye? ’Tis AllHallow’s Eve. Nobody will be coming back ’til morning.”

“I have been stuck down here for... ages...” she said. “Ye can see me. Ye heard me!”

“Aye and aye. Why wouldnae I?” He narrowed his eyes. “What do ye mean ye’ve been stuck down here for ages? I’ve been in and out of this room many times and never seen ye.”

“I’ve seen ye, Callum,” she responded, stepping closer, holding out a pale hand. When her fingers grazed his arm, the chill of her flesh made him shiver. She appeared healthy and hale, yet she felt as clammy and cold as death. Maybe she had been down here all day with the frigid air chilling her bones, and he simply hadn’t noticed.

Then, he remembered the words she’d spoken that had caused him to hit his head. Was that what this was? A hallucination? Had he cracked his head that hard? Nay, he knew he hadn’t. “Why did ye say I have a nice arse? And... how do ye know my name?” He looked at his shirt to verify that he wasn’t wearing his name tag, which still sat on his nightstand. He wasn’t meant to work today but had to come by to set up for tomorrow.

She shrugged and raised her brows. “I have watched ye come and go many times over the past year when ye first arrived. It used to be only auld people before ye showed up. Yer name is Callum. I’ve heard it spoken. But ye look like Ronan.” She tilted her head curiously, and his heart stopped

before it began beating wildly and thundering in his ears. *Ronan!* He'd heard that name before from Murielle.

Another time-traveler? Had she come through the cave, like Murielle had? "Do ye know where ye are?" he asked her slowly.

"Aye. The Burghead Visitor Centre's basement. That is what it is today."

"What was it before today?" he asked slowly, afraid he didn't wish to know.

"It was our home. Me and Father's." Her voice grew soft and whimsical as if she conjured a distant memory. "Before... before he killed me."

She was killed? A sick feeling fell over him. It was not every day a woman stared you in the eyes and told you she'd been murdered. "Your father murdered ye?"

She shook her head. "The new cleric. He called me a heathen for believing in the old gods. Said we survived the illness in our home because I worked for the Devil. I dinnae understand this new religion or why they wish to destroy us. Tell me, Callum. What year is it, and does the new religion still exist?"

"It's the year 2023, and if ye speak of Christianity, aye, it still exists."

She nodded sadly. "I wasnae evil, ye ken. Truly, I wasnae! I tried to tell him that Queen Cairiona healed Father. He came home with a terrible illness after his journey, but the new queen knew how to help him. He wouldnae listen. He accused me of praying to the heathen gods—which I had done, of course, but I needed to save Father! The cleric burned mugwort to repel my evil, but when nothing happened, he drowned me." She shuddered when the memory became too much, and Callum noticed her cheeks reddening.

Mugwort. He knew that herbs were often used to repel evil spirits in her time and even in this era. That explained the herbal scent wafting through the basement.



She appeared as alive as any lass. But she'd mentioned Queen Caitriona, Murielle's brother's wife. In the year 685, King Brodyn married a time traveler from modern days named Caitriona, who'd passed through the cave in early 2023. He knew this from his talks with Murielle. He also knew that he looked very similar to his ancestor, Ronan, a well-respected warrior of King Brodyn's and Murielle's guard. Murielle had mistaken Callum for Ronan when they first met here and believed Callum to be a reincarnation of him.

"I believe ye," he said. And he did. "Did ye know Ronan well? Murielle says I look like him. He is my ancestor."

The lass's eyes widened, and she nodded. "Aye! Ronan was a great man but always too busy fighting for King Brodyn or guarding Princess Murielle to pay me much mind. I cannae tell ye how relieved I am that ye can finally see me. I have seen ye walk past me many times and always longed to talk to ye. Why can ye suddenly see me?"

Callum looked at her curiously. "Maybe because it's Halloween? Or *Samhain*, as ye may call it?" He shrugged. "They say the veil between the living and dead is lifted on this day."

"Aye, that makes sense!"

"As much sense as the fact that I'm locked inside the basement with a woman who died well over a millennium ago," Callum said, looking around the room for any way out. There wasn't one.

"Ye aren't afraid of me." The woman stepped closer and looked at him with those hazel eyes. She looked so real—so alive. Wee freckles dotted her nose, and flecks of gold reflected in her irises. She was absolutely beautiful.

"When ye grow up in a village built on ruins, ye see things. However, I've never seen a ghost as real as ye. 'Tis hard to believe ye aren't alive. I've also never heard a ghost talk about my arse." Callum pursed his lips but couldn't prevent the smile from gracing his lips.

Her pale cheeks pinkened as if blood still coursed through her veins. “Ye werenae meant to hear that.” She looked away shyly, and he found himself thoroughly intrigued by this woman. Bold one minute and shy the next. “When nobody can see ye, ye speak yer mind freely and frequently.”

So, she thought he had a nice arse, eh? Callum shouldn't be flattered that a dead woman was attracted to him, but something about her made his heart beat erratically, and not from fear. He was as attracted to her as if she were a warm, living human woman, and he found he needed to learn all he could about her.

“Well, if we're stuck in here, we may as well get to know one another,” Callum said, sitting on the creaky wooden floorboards. Nodding, she sat beside him and tucked her red waves of hair behind her ears.

“What is yer name? Tell me about yerself.”

“My name is... or was... Sorcha.”

“Is,” Callum said with a smile. “Yer still here, aye?”

She smiled and nodded. “I was nineteen summers old when Queen Caitriona arrived. As I said, she saved my father from certain death, and I was eternally grateful. She and Murielle both helped me greatly.”

“So, ye know Murielle?” Callum asked. “She will be arriving tomorrow. Do ye know she lives in this time now?”

“Aye, I have heard what I can from here.”

Callum filled her in on the cave's odd portal through time and those, including Queen Caitriona, who had passed through it. “'Tis how she knew how to save yer father,” Callum said.

Sorcha listened with rapture to everything he said, smiling, laughing, and tilting her head back as she did so. Callum took a secret moment to observe her while she spoke of her life in Pinnata Castra as a merchant's daughter. She'd lit up with joy with her recollections, and Callum found himself wishing to

touch her again—just her hand—to see if she still felt cold. She looked so pink and healthy now.

Still, he dared not cross such a boundary, even if their connection felt natural. After all, they had known one another in his former life. They spoke freely to one another, and her years spent trapped in this place had taught her a thing or two about modern times. Aside from her thick brogue, her ability to speak their language was impressive. He knew Picts spoke a combination of Celtic, Gaelic, and Latin—a language lost until recently when Samuel and Murielle had discovered an ancient book created by monks that explained the Picts in great detail, including their language.

Though Callum had done well enough with the lassies in his short twenty-one years, he'd never met one he felt so drawn to. Was it because she was unavailable? He'd heard that men only want what they can't have. But that didn't feel right—because she felt right—different.

“May I speak honestly, Callum?” He nodded and looked into her eyes, a nervous smile forming on her pink lips. “When Father Emmitt began accusing me of consorting with dark powers, I tried to tell him that Pa and I survived the illness due to Queen Caitriona's healing. He said she was also wicked and that he would come for her next, then her sister, Emilie. He says they arenae like us. They are sent from the Devil. When I tried to warn them, he...”

Callum's throat constricted as the mood darkened in the basement, and any remaining warmth vanished. It was as if her life force diminished when she spoke of her death. Her features dimmed, and her eyes, still beautiful, lost all their sparkle. “He... what, Sorcha?” Reflexively, Callum placed a hand on Sorcha's knee to both support and encourage her while she spoke. A spark of strange energy shocked his fingertips, and he hissed, pulling back. But it didn't truly hurt. Nay, he was simply startled, not only by the sensation but the images it provoked.

Suddenly, no words were necessary. Sorcha didn't need to tell Callum what had happened, for he saw her memory in his own mind. Sorcha, bending over near a stream, collecting a green-leafed plant with blooming white buds, was suddenly pushed from behind. With a yelp, she landed face down in the water. Water flooded her—no, *his* lungs. He began to cough and struggle for air. An angry voice shouted at him from the surface, accusing him of conspiring with the evil spirits who saved her from God's wrath. For, in Father Emmitt's mind, the illness Sorcha and her father had evaded was a punishment from the Almighty for worshipping heathen gods.

Callum thrashed and kicked, struggling for air as cruel accusations filled his ears. "I shall rid this place of yer kind! Ye will be first, but ye shallnae be the last! 'Tis God's will!"

A final desperate gasp left his lips as his lungs filled with water, and everything went black.



## Chapter Three

“CALLUM!” HIS BODY shook as Sorcha’s voice called to him, and when he opened his eyes, she leaned over him, shaking his shoulders and crying. Were those real tears streaming down her cheeks? “Callum! Wake up!”

Gasping, he sat up and clutched at Sorcha, pulling her down atop him as he caught his breath. The familiar musty-floral scent surrounded him, pulling him back into the present. He was still inside the basement, even if he’d somehow transported through her memories. He wasn’t sure why he felt this intense need to cling to her other than personally experiencing her final moments and feeling her terror.

“Sorcha...” he croaked as he wrapped his arms around her, feeling her heartbeat against his. “How...”

Silently, Sorcha clung to him. She was real. Her tears soaked through his plain white tee shirt. Her breath fanned his chest. Her heart beat wildly in rhythm with his, and her skin was now warm and soft. “How is this happening? I... felt it.”

“Felt what?” she asked, propping herself up with confusion glazing her eyes.

“Your... your death. When I touched ye, I saw it through yer eyes. I felt yer fear. Och, Sorcha.” Callum sat up and, overcome by emotion, pulled her into his lap, wrapped his arms around her, and held her while silence surrounded them. She rested her cheek against his chest and curled up so that his chin rested on the top of her head. Her arms curled around his waist.

“It was long ago, Callum. I’m only sorry ye had to experience that. I havenae interacted with another person since that day. I didnae ken touching me would cause such a thing.”

Sorrow creased her face, and Callum's stomach twisted as an odd fluttering gripped his belly. The desire to lean in and take her lips with his was strong... too strong.

So, he did. Gripping the back of her neck gently, Callum leaned closer, slowly placing his lips on hers. She audibly swallowed, and her breathing hitched before she gave herself over to his kiss. Her lips were warm and soft, as was all of her. She felt so good in his arms, so right in his lap. He could imagine himself with her, laughing, loving, and sharing memories... then, he realized what he was doing, where they were. Had he been too forward, too aggressive? He pushed away.

"I'm sorry, Sorcha. I dinnae know what came over me."

"Dinnae apologize, or ye shall break my heart," she whispered, looking down at the floor. Her dark lashes fluttered before she spoke again. "I have been so alone. I've watched ye come and go from this place for so long, unable to speak to ye. Unable to tell ye that my heart and stomach hurt whenever ye are near. Now, ye can see me. I can... I am... *here*." She looked around the room with wonder as she ran a finger along the wooden floor's grain. "I can feel the world around me for the first time since my death. I dinnae ken why, but ye gave me this gift. Please, Callum, dinnae take it away. I havenae felt the touch of a man. I died before I had such a chance. And I've longed to speak to ye for many moons. Now, ye can see me. Ye can feel me. If this is the only time I shall ever feel yer touch, please dinnae deny me the simple pleasure of it."

Overcome by her plea, Callum pulled her closer as he sat on the floor, wrapping her legs around his waist and kissing her with a fever he'd never experienced. He wasn't sure if it was the strangeness of the encounter that drove him wild or simply the beautiful woman in his lap, begging to experience a wee jot of affection before she lost the chance forever. Deep down, Callum knew it was more. So much more. There was something between them that he'd never experience again if she disappeared.

Sorcha simpered and tugged at his hair as his tongue slid into her warm, sweet mouth. If she appeared to him exactly as she had the day she died, then Sorcha had truly been the bonniest lass in all of Pinnata Castra, and he wondered how she could have remained untouched for so long during a time when girls married quite young. Either way, she was here now, solid and whole. She wanted to feel alive, and he'd gladly oblige her.

His cock throbbed painfully in his jeans, but he did his best to ignore it. He'd not push his luck and take advantage of the lass, even if she was technically nothing but a manifestation. To him, she was real, and she deserved his respect.

But when Sorcha began to shift atop him, Callum groaned and pulled away from her lips, trailing his tongue down the creamy column of her throat, nipping her sweet flesh as she wriggled in his arms.

"Callum." She sighed his name, and he clenched his fists into her tunic's fabric to prevent his hands from wandering to her small, perky breasts or even lower beneath her tunic. Lord, he'd never had to use so much restraint. The energy surrounding them crackled in his ears and buzzed through his bones, sending currents of desire through his every cell.

Releasing her tight grip on his shoulders, Sorcha leaned back and looked into his eyes. Her chest rose and fell as she slowly pushed her tunic down her shoulders, exposing her breasts. Callum watched as her nipples puckered, responding to the chill in the room. How was this happening? It may be Samhain, but he'd never thought such a thing was possible.

Sorcha straightened her spine and took a fortifying breath. "I want ye to touch me, Callum."

He wanted to do that more than he'd ever wanted anything in this world. But it didn't feel right. She was untouched by a man. Moreover, she was a ghost. He had to remind himself that she wasn't real, even if she very much was at the moment.

“I... I want to, but I cannae.” He shook his head and closed his eyes.

“Is it because I’m dead?”

That made him open his eyes and look at her. “From where I am sitting, Sorcha, ye arenae dead. It’s about honor. Ye are untouched by a man. I dinnae want to take advantage.”

“When I was alive, I had to fight lads off with a stick. Now, I’ve found the one man I wish to touch me, and he willnae. Callum, I have been stuck here for... what year is it again?”

“2023.”

“I cannae even count that high. How long have I been here, Callum?”

He swallowed hard and felt his stomach tighten as he did the math. “About 1,337 years... approximately.”

“Do ye ken what it’s like to be stuck in one place that long? Of course, ye dinnae. One has nothing but time to ponder their life, death, and all they never accomplished. One day, ye showed up, and I have never been the same. Callum, ye arnae a stranger to me, and I am not a young lass—not truly. I ken what I want, and I want ye. If this is too hard for ye, I understand. I will leave ye be.”

Sorcha began climbing off his lap with dejection in her eyes, and Callum growled in frustration, grabbing onto her tunic skirt to tug her back into his lap. The fabric tore just above her knee, and then her slim, silky legs encircled him as she heaved for breath, making her breasts rise and fall before his gaze.

“Ye cannae know how badly I want ye,” he said through gritted teeth. “But then what? Ye disappear, and I’m left with nothing of ye but memories of this moment?”

“Aye,” she whispered. “Mayhap tonight is all we have. Perhaps once a year on Samhain, ye will see me again. I cannae say. Does that change anything? I want to feel alive



while I can, Callum!” she said with frustration. “I want ye and nobody else!”

He'd heard enough. Gripping the back of Sorcha's neck again, he pulled her in, slashing his lips across hers until she gasped, opening her mouth so he could slip his tongue inside and taste her. She was warm, soft, and womanly in his arms. His hands slid up her smooth arms to cradle her breasts, making her arch into his palms.

When he rolled her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, Sorcha cried out and gripped his shoulders as her hips began to move. He knew exactly what that meant. She wanted more... and he desperately wished to give it, though he wasn't sure how far to take this. Slipping one hand beneath her torn tunic skirt, he sought out her core, swallowing his groan when he felt her slick heat against his finger.

Sorcha mewled against his lips and shifted, seeking his touch. His fingers explored, grazing her nub and making her cry out for more. When her hands slid down his chest and stomach to finally rest on his restrained erection pressing against the front of his jeans, she growled in frustration. “Where is yer trouser string? I dinnae ken how to undo this odd fastener!”

With a chuckle, Callum unbuttoned his jeans and dragged down the zipper, allowing Sorcha to reach in and take him in hand. Her hot palm clenched him, and he groaned as he leaned in to nip at her ear. Dear God, she was a temptress.

“I admit that I dinnae ken what to do next,” she whispered as her fingers explored his manhood. “I have never seen a man's...” her voice trailed off, and he saw her cheeks redden.

“Cock?” he asked with a raised brow. She nodded shyly.

“Aye... cock.” She giggled as she said the word and something about her innocence only drove him over the edge.

“Are ye certain ye want this?”

“More than anything, Callum. I've wanted ye for so long. Make me feel alive again.”

Her plea was genuine, and Callum pushed aside his reservation. Aye, she was a ghost. Dead. Dust. Yet, by some miracle, she was here now in his arms, begging him to give her something no man had ever given her before. On any other day and with any other woman, Callum would refuse. This was madness. Yet, she had appeared to him for a reason. Moreover, he sensed a connection with her on a level deeper than just the flesh. After all, if all that was left of Sorcha was her soul, then it connected with his on a level he simply couldn't explain, and his body reacted to her in a way he'd never experienced.

A powerful sense of possession washed over him as he looked into her eyes, pushed his jeans down to his knees, and slowly guided her down onto his throbbing erection. She slid her arms around his neck as she straddled his lap, though she didn't know what to do, so Callum gently gripped her hips and urged her to move as he pushed deeper into her, careful not to hurt her.

To his surprise, Sorcha sighed and tilted her head back as she got comfortable with the movements, with no sign of pain or discomfort on her face. Only pure pleasure shone in her eyes as her cheeks pinkened, and she gripped his neck.

Callum groaned and slipped his hands beneath her skirts, cupping her backside as she moved against him. She felt more real than any woman he'd ever been with. Responsive, pure, confident, and eager. All of his reservations left as he became caught up in the moment—caught up in making love to a woman who died over 1,300 years ago.

No. He pushed that thought away. He may never see Sorcha again, and that thought stabbed his heart but only made him even more determined to treasure her every movement and breathy sigh.

Leaning in, Callum took her lips with his, slipping his tongue into her mouth as she moaned and moved against him with a heightening fervor that matched his own. For a lass who'd never done this, she had a natural talent that drove

Callum to the brink. But he didn't want her first time to end without her finding pleasure, so he slipped a finger between them and stroked her nub, making her gasp and quiver at the new sensation. Within moments, Sorcha cried out and tensed around him, making him reach his boiling point just as she went slack in his arms.

Panting, Callum held her against him, wrapping his arms around her back and pressing her against his heaving chest, terrified she'd disappear into a puff of smoke.

But with each breath, she remained in his arms, her chest rising and falling with his.

"Ye havenae idea how much this meant to me, Callum." Sorcha rested her head on his shoulder and nuzzled into him. The intense need to hold onto her was relentless, but they were still on the hard wooden floors. Callum looked around the room for something to lay upon. Spotting an extra tablecloth sticking out from a nearby box, Callum reached to the side, pulled it out, and carefully laid her down upon it, wrapping his limbs around her, wanting nothing more than to relish this moment.

"Ye arenae going to disappear on me, are ye?" he asked. He wanted it to sound lighthearted, but a sense of dread laced his words. He knew she wouldn't stay—couldn't stay. He wasn't sure how she'd been able to show herself in this manner as it was, but it couldn't last... could it?

"I dinnae want to leave... but I fear I shall. I cannae control it."

A thought came to Callum. "Ye can manipulate yer environment." When she scrunched her nose and lowered her brow in confusion, Callum clarified. "Ye pushed the stool away from the door so I couldnae leave. Ye knew ye could do that."

She shook her head. "I didnae ken I could do that. I never have before. I've never been seen. Never been heard. But when ye heard me, I panicked and kicked the stool away from

the door. All I could think about was ye running away in fright after I'd spent 1,300 years alone and invisible. Mayhap, the pure fear of ye running away from me gave me some unexpected strength. I hope ye aren't angry that I trapped ye. I didn't ken the door would lock."

He nodded his understanding. "I am not angry at all, Sorcha. But I was never frightened. I was shocked, confused, and perhaps shaken, but I wouldn't have run from ye. I have seen other spirits. Ye know Anya McLean?"

Sorcha's eyes lit up, and she smiled. "Aye! She was the auld healer in our village. She lived nearly 100 years, rest her soul. She passed away last year. Ye have seen her?"

"Och, she is a well-known spirit in these parts. We see her dressed from many eras. Her soul has lived many lives. I am her descendant."

"And Ronan's," Sorcha added.

"Aye. My family has never lived anywhere else but the surrounding areas." Callum looked at Sorcha and gently scooped a red tendril of hair behind her ear. "I'm going to save ye."

Her eyes widened, and she swallowed. "I dinnae understand."

"In the morning, when I get out of this basement, I am heading for the cave. I will find ye in yer time. And I will save ye."

Sorcha smiled and opened her mouth to respond but paused as terror washed over her features. She gripped his arm and pushed herself up to a seated position. "I... I grow weak. Callum..."

The wooden clock on the wall began to ding, and Callum realized it was midnight. All Hallow's Eve had ended, and her spirit was fading. *One...two...* Her hand began to fade before his eyes.

"Sorcha!"

Then, she became translucent. *Three...four...*

“Callum...” she whispered. “I want ye to ken... that I love ye...” Her bright curls dimmed, grew almost pink, and then he could see through her. *Five...six...*

“I will find ye, Sorcha! I promise! I will save ye!” *Seven...eight...*

She smiled and put a hand out to him, and her lips formed the words again. *Nine...ten...* “I love ye,” *Eleven*. No sound came out. The only thing Callum heard was the last strike of the clock. *Twelve*.

“Sorcha!” He yelled and dove forward.

But Sorcha was gone.



## Chapter Four

MURMURING VOICES MADE Callum's ears perk up, and he ceased his relentless pacing as he ran toward the basement door. Seven hours had passed since Sorcha disappeared, but Callum hadn't slept or even sat down. All he'd done was consider ways to save her, things to say when he'd meet her in her time. His pulse quickened when he realized that someone had finally arrived at the visitor center. Desperation and adrenaline shot through every cell in his body as he called out for help.

"It's Callum! Can ye hear me?" he shouted as he banged on the heavy wooden door and rattled the knob to make more noise.

The voices stopped just before the doors swung open. Luckily, he stepped back in time to avoid being hit by the door. When Murielle and Samuel stood on the other side, he sighed with relief and rushed toward them. He'd not slept a wink or done anything but ponder his encounter with Sorcha, determined to find her again.

"Callum?" Murielle asked, her sleek blond hair catching the light as she stepped closer. "Are ye all right?"

Callum shook his head. "Ye know a lass named Sorcha, aye?"

Murielle frowned and looked at Samuel with concern in her eyes.

Samuel shook his head as he regarded Callum. "We do know a lass named Sorcha, yes. But surely not the one you are referring to."

"From Pinnata Castra. Red hair...Queen Caitriona saved her father from a smallpox outbreak in 685?"

Murielle stepped forward, and for the first time, Callum noticed her red-rimmed blue eyes and shaking hands. “How do ye ken this, Callum?”

“She was here! Last night, I came down to the basement to store some pamphlets and heard a voice. When I reacted to it, the stool I used to prop the door open flew across the room.” He pointed to the black metal stool near the wall. “It was Sorcha! She told me she’d been stuck down here since her death! Murielle, there is a clergy member... a priest, or a monk, who will come to Pinnata Castra. He will accuse Sorcha of being a witch... or whatever the equivalent of a witch is at that time. He drowns her, claiming she used some dark force to survive a plague. Sorcha said that, just before she died, he threatened to go after Queen Cairiona and her sister, Emilie. I need to get to her! I need to save her!”

Panic overcame him. Now that he was free to leave the basement, he wanted to run full speed toward the cave and save Sorcha.

“Callum.” Murielle put a hand on his shoulder and looked at Samuel before speaking.

Samuel cleared his throat and closed his eyes. “You cannot save her, Callum.”

“Sure, I can! I know all the stories! Emilie saved Wee Lucas! Why cannae I save Sorcha? I have to try! I... I love her...” His voice trailed off as the words slipped through his lips so naturally that he hadn’t even had to consider the truth of them. How could he be in love with a woman who died so long ago... a woman he’d spent only a few hours with? He couldn’t explain it, but he had to find her.

“Callum, she is gone. She died a week ago. Murielle and I were visiting when it happened. She is likely the first case of what is now considered a witch hunt in Scottish history. Only, they didn’t call it that back then. We apprehended the priest, and he is currently being dealt with. King Brodyn had to lock him away and send a messenger to seek a church official. Only

they can determine his punishment. He cannot hurt Cait or Emilie now. But Sorcha is lost to us. I'm so sorry."

"No." Callum backed away and clenched his fist.

A tear slid down Murielle's face. "I loved Sorcha, Callum," Murielle croaked. "She was a great friend. I was there when her father fell ill, and she sought help. Cait was able to help because she was vaccinated against smallpox, which I dinnae ken at the time, of course. I havenae slept a wink since it happened. We almost canceled this book signing, but Burghead is home to us, and I didnae want to disappoint the people."

Samuel looked around the basement and rubbed his freshly shaven chin. "Murielle... this building... isn't it built pretty close to where Sorcha's home was?"

"Aye." Murielle nodded. "Now that ye mention it, I believe this may have been the exact location of her home." She looked at Callum with sorrow in her gaze, but the twisting, gnawing ache in his stomach made him break eye contact. He couldn't bear the pain. All he'd thought about all night was how to save Sorcha.

"It was AllHallow's Eve. I suppose the veil was thin enough for her spirit to be seen," Samuel added.

"It wasnae just her spirit," Callum whispered as he looked around the room. "She was whole. Real. Solid. We talked all night, but at midnight, she disappeared." *Talked, fell in love, and made love...*

"The veil had closed," Murielle murmured with understanding. "To think that Sorcha has been trapped here all this time... my poor sweet friend." Murielle clutched her chest as tears ran down her cheeks. "Ye couldnae have saved her, even if ye tried, Callum. Ye cannae cross the veil of time."

"How can ye possibly know that?" he asked with frustration. He wasn't angry at Murielle or Samuel, of course. He was angry at the universe for bringing Sorcha to him, only



to rip her from him immediately without any hope of saving her.

“A soul can only exist within one body at a time. You and Ronan share a soul. He couldn’t cross over with Murielle, and I suspect it’s because his soul is occupying your body now. Ronan is occupying your soul in the year 687. If you crossed over, God only knows the catastrophic consequences,” Samuel explained.

“Furthermore,” Murielle said, gently taking his hand. “Sorcha’s line died with her. If ye saved her... then what? She cannae have children, or else the timeline would be altered. I believe, if ye were meant to save her, she wouldnae have appeared to ye a week—and a few thousand years—after her death.”

“And, Callum, what would you say to her? That you met her spirit in the year 2023 and traveled back in time to save her?” Samuel shook his head. “I know how painful this is. I really do, but I see no scenario where you were ever meant to save her. I’m so sorry, Callum.”

Callum couldn’t respond. What was there to say? He’d spent the night holding her, loving her, getting to know her in a soul-searing way he’d never experienced. And for what? Just to be left empty, aching, and broken.

Murielle looked from Callum to Sam, then back again. “I have something I’d like to give ye.”

“Murielle... are you sure? It means a great deal to you,” Sam questioned.

She nodded and smiled. “I’m sure. He needs it more than I do.”

Callum wrinkled his brow as he watched Murielle unclasp a small brooch from her purple blouse. “Cait gave this to me after Sorcha died. It’s her cloak pin. She wore it every time she left the house on cold days. Here.”

Callum observed the small silver brooch in Murielle’s palm. A crescent shape with intricate swirls intersected with a

V-rod—a prevalent Pictish symbol. Slowly, Callum put out his hand, and Murielle gently placed the clasp into his palm.

“I cannae take this from ye.”

“Then we can share it,” she said with a smile. “Ye keep it for now. I think it will help ye heal. Sorcha was a verra special lass. I amnae surprised she had such an effect on ye after all these years. And I dinnae ken what happened between ye both down here, but I assume ye had as great an impact on her as she had on ye.”

What did it matter? She was gone, and Callum was left here alone to suffer the loss of a woman who never existed in his time.

Clearing his throat, Callum placed the brooch in his pocket. “Yer signing is starting soon. Do ye need help setting up?”

Samuel shook his head and patted Callum on the shoulder. “No, we can handle this. You have been trapped down here for what I assume is several hours. Go home, eat, shower, sleep—whatever you need to do. We will be all right.” Samuel slipped on a smile. “Hey, just think. In January, you’re joining our archaeology program at the university. We’ll get to spend much more time together. Soon, you’ll be helping us excavate the cave.”

Callum nodded. Maybe they were right. After all, they knew more about the limitations of traveling through time than he did. His excitement to start at the university was stunted by the pain of losing Sorcha, but perhaps it was good timing. After this experience, how would he continue to work here? He’d languish away in this basement, hoping for any sign of the woman who stormed his heart, consumed his body, and then left him with nothing but her memory.

When Murielle and Samuel grabbed the boxes of their books and ascended the stairs, Callum remained. He wasn’t quite ready to walk away, nor was he certain that Sorcha was

gone. After all, she'd been able to see him for years, even if he couldn't see her.

Pulling her brooch out of his pocket, Callum ran a thumb across the cool metal's surface, knowing that just a week ago, Sorcha had worn this clip. It was almost 1,400 years old, and yet it wasn't. The entire concept was mind-boggling, and though he'd pondered time travel since the day he'd met Murielle, he'd never had the urge to try it until last night.

But, he had to heed Samuel's warnings. Sorcha was gone. He couldn't save her. And he'd be risking a possible catastrophe if he crossed over. He shuddered to think what would become of his and Ronan's soul if their bodies occupied the same time or space.

Still, it wasn't fair. He was doing just fine until Sorcha showed up, and part of him wanted to shout at her for leaving him, even if he knew it was ridiculous.

"Are ye here, Sorcha?" he asked, looking around the room. "I wish I knew if ye could hear me. I was going to save you. I wanted to run to that cave, pass through, save ye, and bring ye back here to live with me." He chuckled at his foolishness. It had never been an option. What had he been thinking? Murielle was right. If he'd found Sorcha in her time and told her the truth, she'd have run away in fear. Nay, they were meant to have one night together and nothing more. Though, he couldn't understand why. What was the purpose of any of it?

Sighing, Callum held up her brooch. "If this is all I have of ye, I shall cherish it forever, along with your memory. Just know that ye are loved. I cannae explain it. I just know ye and I were meant to be together, even if just for one night. Ye've changed my life. I love ye and pray ye arenae stuck here. I hope that ye have moved on and found peace."

With an achy pit of anguish settling in his belly, Callum left the basement where her home had once stood, where he'd lost his heart to a woman who didn't exist, and felt a shot of pain through his heart when the door slammed behind him. He

knew today was his last day working here. If he stayed, he'd languish away, spending time in the dark, lonely basement, hoping for another glimpse of a woman he'd never have.

Nay, life was for the living, and he had to go on, even if he'd never forget Sorcha—a woman lost to the pages of history. But to him, she'd live on forever in his heart.



## Chapter Five

WATER FILLED HER lungs as she struggled to break free. She screamed and swung her arms at her attacker, but just like always, her body went limp, and darkness overcame her for what felt like a thousand years. Then, his face swam before her. Brown hair and blue eyes, like always. “Callum!” She reached for him, hoping this time he’d not slip through her desperate fingers. But just like he did every time, he vanished.

Her alarm rang beside her ear, and Sophia sat up in bed with a gasp. Sweat covered her body, making her cotton pajama pants stick to her thighs and her hair cling to her nape.

Ever since her near-death experience nine weeks ago, the same dream had plagued Sophia, leaving her empty and aching for something she couldn’t place. A man with a familiar face and name but nothing more. And the heaviness of water flooding her lungs still weighed her down. Were dreams meant to feel this visceral?

She’d spoken to her therapist about the dream, but so far, Sophia couldn’t unlock what buried trauma her therapist believed resided in her subconscious. Aside from the reoccurring dreams, she’d been getting glimpses of a time long ago and faces of people she felt like she knew. She had all her memories, yet it seemed she had many more that belonged entirely to someone else. Was that even possible?

According to the doctors, she’d died the night of her accident. Her heart had stopped beating. Her lungs had stopped breathing. Her brain had stopped synapsing. Sophia’s death was called at 11:59 p.m. on October 31st. Though she’d heard of out-of-body experiences, she’d never believed in such things. But Sophia had floated above herself, watching as they covered her with a white sheet. Peace had washed over her as

bright white light warmed her with a comforting embrace. A voice called to her, telling her it was time to go home, and promised that everything would be as it was meant to be.

Then, Sophia had come to life with a gasp just before they wheeled her body down to the morgue. Doctors, nurses, and staff ran around in a frenzy, calling for help as machines began beeping again.

“She came back to life at midnight, exactly!” one of the nurses said to a doctor, who ran over to shine a light in her eyes.

“Incredible,” he muttered. “She was dead.”

“Well, she isnae dead now!” a nurse said in a shaky voice. “Get the neurologist!”

“Callum,” Sophia had croaked in a weak voice, making the doctor frown in confusion.

*Callum.* The name had been the first thought that whispered in her mind when she returned to life. But who *was* Callum?

From that day forward, these dreams had consumed her, almost glimpses of a past life through someone else’s eyes. She could vaguely recall a man named Callum, even though she’d never met him. Her family and therapist had decided it was a side effect of her trauma, perhaps a coping mechanism to replace the memory of the crash, which remained hazy in her mind.

But Sophia knew there was more to it, somehow.

The first day of her new archaeology program had arrived, and despite her life-altering accident and her parents’ encouragement to return home, Sophia was determined to stay the course. Her future awaited, shining brighter than ever. More than anything, she treasured every new breath she took. Life was fragile, but she was stronger than ever.

Sophia showered and slipped on a pair of dark blue skinny jeans, a purple, cable-knit sweater, and brown boots before

grabbing her book bag and looking into the mirror. Her hazel eyes shone with excitement, and she tucked her wild red waves of hair behind her ear, a gift from her Scottish grandmother—Sophia’s inspiration to return to her highland roots and study the past.

The University of Aberdeen was only fifteen minutes from her new flat, and though the early January air was frigid, and she required a puffy coat and beanie to keep warm, she enjoyed the walk to the first class of her new life. Her professor, Samuel Sullivan, was a world-famous archaeologist who’d recently discovered the first written records of the Pictish people. He’d translated it with his wife, and together, they traveled for book signings and lectures. She was beyond grateful to have been accepted into this prestigious program. More importantly, she did it independently even though her aunt Thelma had worked closely with him at the Burghead Visitor Centre. Sophia knew that this was the beginning of a new life for her.

Wisps of breath drifted from her lips as she walked onto campus, and Sophia looked around in awe at the ancient building with bright red foliage climbing up its stone walls. She had survived that awful accident for a reason, and this was it. Whatever her future held, it would come to fruition here. Never had she felt a greater connection to anything. She’d heard about Americans feeling an odd connection to their ancestral lands, but Sophia knew, deep in her bones, that she belonged here, maybe even lived in Scotland in a past life.

*Callum.* The name whispered in her mind again. *Callum.* Who was Callum? Why did that name keep running through her head, and why did it make her insides ache with a sense of loss and longing? It was as if she’d lost something—no, *someone*—dear to her heart, yet she hadn’t a clue who Callum was. Blue eyes and brown hair swam through her mind again, much like in her dreams.

Students rushed by from every direction, likely just as anxious to start the new Winter term as she was. As excited as Sophia was to start her new journey, a sense of panic began to

wash over her. “Oh, no...” she whispered as the feeling of being held underwater and slowly drowning transported her back to her traumatic accident and subsequent death. It was as if she’d died twice. Once from the car accident and once from drowning—which was impossible, for there hadn’t been any water near the crash site.

Gripping her aching temples, Sophia closed her eyes and tried to drown out the chatter around her, focusing on her breathing. “You’re not dead. You’re not drowning,” she whispered to herself. She had to get a grip. Now was not the time for another episode.

*Callum.*

Shaking her head and gritting her teeth against the surmounting pulsing pain, Sophia opened her eyes and took a few steps on the slick cobblestones, yelping when she barreled into someone. Familiar blue eyes stared down at her, making her suddenly lose her balance. Her feet slipped from beneath her, but his arms gripped hers to hold her upright.

*Callum.* The pesky inner voice spoke.

“S-Sorcha?” The man looked at her with a mixture of pain, hope, and horror.

That name... she knew that name. Looking up, she saw him, and if her brain had stopped synapsing when she died, it made up for it now as thousands of electrical pulses sparked in her head. A tunnel opened in her mind’s eye, flooding her with images, voices, and memories that were not hers—yet they were hers entirely.

“Callum?” She gripped his arm when the sensations overwhelmed her, and he guided her toward a bench away from prying eyes and swiftly moving bodies. Class was starting, and within minutes, the courtyard was nearly empty.

“It’s you,” she whispered. “I... I know you.”

“Aye. Ye know me. How... I dinnae understand. How are ye here?” He looked her up and down, frowning, when he saw a small scar on her forehead from her accident. She touched it



and wondered how she could be two women at once. She was Sophia. She had Sophia's memories and personality, but she also was Sorcha. She remembered it all now. It was as if running into Callum had knocked the cobwebs off some repressed memories.

Images of being drowned flashed in her mind, and she gripped the collar of Callum's brown coat as panic overwhelmed her. "Queen Cairiona! Her sister, Emilie! He was coming for them next! Callum! Ye must warn them! How am I here? I... I dinnae ken what is happening!" When her American accent began to morph into a Scottish burr, she slapped a hand over her mouth.

"They are safe, Sorcha. They are well. Murielle and Professor Sullivan have verified that the man who drowned ye was captured before he hurt anyone else."

She shook her head as tears swam in her eyes. "I am Sophia Nelson. I am from San Francisco. But I am also Sorcha Mac Bielich from Pinnata Castra. Callum, what is happening?" She shook with fear, and he silently held her, rubbing her back and doing his best to comfort her as she broke down into tears. "I dinnae ken who I am! Why do I remember ye in the basement? I remember us... us..." Sophia looked up at him and remembered everything, especially their night of lovemaking on the basement floor of a visitor center that now resided where her home once stood.

Callum made calming shushing noises and took her hands. The instant their skin touched, waves of white light pulsed through his fingertips, and glimpses of Sorcha flashed in his eyes, only it wasn't him—at least not him in this lifetime. *Ronan*. He was seeing her through Ronan's eyes. His stomach flipped, and his heart raced when he looked at her. Ronan had loved her. The pain twisting inside his gut told Callum that Ronan had suffered an unrequited love for Sorcha before he married Eva. Had she known this? Now, as Callum, a feeling of wholeness washed over him, and he just knew in the very depths of his soul that she was the piece of his essence that had always been missing.

“Sorcha... Sophia... I dinnae have the answers, but I think Samuel and Murielle can help.” He paused, and a speculative expression crossed his face. “Wait. Yer name is Sophia Nelson? Do ye have an aunt named Thelma?”

Sophia wiped away a tear and cocked her head. “Aye...I mean...*Yes!*” She growled with frustration. “I have two languages competing in my head! Why did seeing you trigger Sorcha’s memories? And how do ye ken... you *know*... my Aunt Thelma?”

“I worked with her at the Burghead Visitor Centre until I met you, or Sorcha—in the basement.”

Things began to click. *Wait a second*...“Are you the co-worker she always tried to set me up with?”

Callum nodded, and Sophia frowned. This was all too much. She couldn’t sort her emotions; worst of all, she simultaneously felt emotions from Sophia—herself—and Sorcha—who was inexplicably familiar and simultaneously mysterious.

All this time, Aunt Thelma had tried to set her up with Callum, the man Sorcha had fallen in love with. And now Sophia held all Sorcha’s memories. “I cannae do this.” Standing, Sophia began to walk away from the bench. She had to get to class, but how could she when in this condition? How could she concentrate?

“Wait!” Callum grabbed her hand and pulled her back toward him. “This isnae a coincidence! Ye know it isnae! Yer aunt tried to set us up for months. I was with her the day...” He paused and looked at Sophia with sadness in his blue eyes before reaching out to gently run a finger along the small scar on her forehead. “The day of yer accident. We were working together. She got the text from yer mum that ye were in the hospital here in Scotland. Thelma rushed out the door in a panic. Later that night, I met Sorcha in the basement. She was a spirit, yet she was verra much alive. I couldnae understand. I still dinnae, but things are coming together.”

Sophia shook her head, the knots in her belly tightening as her anxiety increased. Chills ran up her spine as she pondered the situation and listened to Callum try to piece it together. She felt as though she were being pulled in two directions at once.

Callum's voice was like a lifeline, pulling her back to the present and tying her in place. "Sophia, what time was yer accident? Yer aunt said ye were declared dead but returned to life. Do ye know the times?"

She crinkled her brow and pulled away from him to grab her throbbing temples. "I was run off the road around nine o'clock and remember nothing until I awoke exactly at midnight on November first. The doctors said I'd died. I had no brain waves, pulse, or oxygen for nearly two minutes." She shivered when she remembered seeing herself on that metal gurney, being prepared to be toe-tagged and stuffed in a freezer. She gripped her belly when it began to roil.

"I saw myself. I floated above my body, drifted away into the light, and heard a voice assure me that I was coming home and everything would be as it should be. That's all I remember before waking. Then, the dreams of drowning began. I kept seeing you—but just your face. It appeared to me as if behind a veil. I'd wake up in a sweat calling for you, but I didn't understand who you were until just now. I'm Sorcha, but still Sophia. How?" Her knees weakened, and her vision swam. She swerved again and gripped Callum's sweater sleeve for purchase.

Callum took her arm again and walked her gently back to the bench. "Sit, please. Ye arenae well."

"How can I be well? I freaking *died*, Callum! I was dead! Now I'm here, and I think I'm some woman named Sorcha and see images of people and a place that appears quite old."

"1,337 years old, to be exact."

"E-excuse me?" she questioned, raising her brow. "What are ye... you talking about?"

“Does this feel familiar?” Callum reached into his coat pocket and pulled out Sorcha’s silver brooch, holding it out to her.

“My brooch!” she cried, hesitating to touch it. “How do ye have it?” She wished her mind would settle on one dialect or accent, but it seemed to be switching between the two at will.

“Murielle had it. I was devastated when ye disappeared on me, Sorcha. Murielle allowed me to have yer brooch, to feel closer to ye.”

He held the brooch out for her to take, but she shook her head. “I amnae ready to hold the brooch I wore when I died 1,337 years ago. I still need to process my most recent death,” she murmured with a shudder rolling up her spine.

Nodding, Callum tucked the brooch away again and took her hands. “Based on what ye have told me, I have an idea what is happening, but I think we need to speak to Samuel and Murielle right away.”

“As in Professor Samuel Sullivan? I’m supposed to be in his lecture right now. I didnae understand until just now that Murielle’s husband, Samuel, is Samuel Sullivan, my professor. How can they help us, though?”

Callum chuckled and shook his head. “Now, it really cannae be a coincidence. Ye are part of his archaeology program?”

“Yes.” She explained how Thelma had encouraged her to apply, and she’d done so on her own merits.

“I am also just joining his program. Do ye recall what I told ye about Murielle traveling through the cave to live in this time with Samuel?”

She nodded. “I do. We were in the basement together. Wait. How can I have been in the hospital as Sophia on that night but have Sorcha’s memories? Callum, did Sorcha’s soul replace mine when I died?”

Callum didn't respond immediately, but nausea roiled in her gut when he didn't appear shocked by her question. Instead, he gently cupped her hands between his and shook his head. "I dinnae know, but it crossed my mind. Sorcha appeared to me just after Thelma received the message about yer accident. I'd never seen her before, though she claimed she always saw me."

"She did. Or rather, *I* did. I can see it in my memories. She tried to get yer attention and believed ye were Ronan at first, but ye didnae see her until that one night. By then, she understood that ye were Callum, though she couldnae understand how ye looked so much alike."

"And, she disappeared at midnight on November first. I went back several times afterward, but she was gone. Sophia," he said, squeezing her hands. "Ye look just like her. Ye share her memories. When yer accident happened, she appeared to me, and then she disappeared right when ye came back to life. I cannae make sense of it, but it has to be fate. How else is it that ye look like her, even if ye werenae born with her soul? It's as if ye were always meant to join with her."

"I've never heard of such a thing. It doesn't seem possible."

Callum scoffed. "I've recently come to know there is more in this world than we believe, especially around Burghead. Will ye come with me to speak to Professor Sullivan?"

Sophia nodded and, hand in hand, she walked with Callum into the building, and together, they awaited Professor Sullivan outside his office.



## Chapter Six

CALLUM FELT LIKE he was floating in his chair as he waited for Samuel to end class and return to his office. He was here, holding Sorcha's hand. Sophia's hand. He wasn't sure who was who. Had Sorcha possessed Sophia's body, or did Sophia share Sorcha's soul? Were they two women, or were they one in the same?

He'd seen and heard a lot of strange tales about the cave, of time travel, and even souls living multiple lives. He even shared Ronan's soul, or so he had been told several times. But just nine weeks ago, Sorcha's soul had been trapped in that basement. Now, she was here, and though it made sense, once he tried to understand it, the whole thing made no sense at all.

"Callum?" Sophia whispered as she rested her head on his shoulder. Already, it was as if they'd known each other their entire lives, just as it had felt in that basement. "I'm scared."

"We will figure this out. Ye have me now. I willnae let anything happen to ye ever again." She nuzzled into his side, and contentment wrapped around him like a blanket.

"Callum?" Murielle's voice floated to him, snapping him out of his thoughts. Sophia lifted her head from his shoulder, and Murielle gasped. "Sorcha?" Murielle ran over to them and pulled Sophia into her arms. Samuel stood behind Murielle with confusion morphing his features.

"Murielle!" Sophia cried, hugging a friend she recognized from so very long ago.

"How are ye here?" Murielle asked. "Ye died! I've missed ye terribly. I had wondered if yer soul existed in this time. How did ye find us?"

Samuel stepped forward to unlock his office as students flooded the halls now that classes were ending. “Let’s go into my office,” he said calmly, pushing the door open. They filtered in, and Samuel closed it behind him.

Callum had Sophia sit in one of the seats and addressed Samuel. “I’m sorry we missed our first lecture, Professor Sullivan. Ye know how much this program means to me. But, as ye can see, we have a bit of a situation.”

“So, I see,” he said, sitting behind his desk, looking at the woman who settled beside Callum curiously. “I assume your name is not Sorcha in this time?”

She shook her head. “My name is Sophia Nelson.”

From there, she and Callum took turns explaining the entire situation to Samuel and Murielle, hoping they could help explain the situation.

“Sorcha—I mean, Sophia.” Callum turned to look at her beseechingly. “I want ye to know that, after our night together in the basement, I wanted to go back in time to save ye from yer fate, but Murielle told me ye were already gone. I had no way to save ye.”

Murielle wiped a tear away and moved to stand beside Samuel. “My heart. It verra well may burst. I cannae believe my beloved Sorcha is here with us. I think I understand what happened, but I cannae be certain.”

“I also have an idea, but I’d love to hear yours, Love, and see if it matches mine,” Samuel said, looking up at his wife with a pure love shining in his eyes that Callum understood for the first time in his life, for he felt the same overwhelming emotion every time he looked at Sophia.

“Well,” Murielle said, scratching her head. “I believe Sorcha and Ronan’s—or Sophia and Callum’s—souls were meant to be together, but she was stuck in the in between for so long that her soul couldnae move on. Sophia looks nearly identical to Sorcha, much as Callum looks nearly identical to Ronan. Ronan’s soul moved on, but hers couldnae until she

finished whatever business she had. That, and she needed a body. Most souls inhabit a body at birth.”

“But Sorcha couldn’t occupy Sophia’s body because she was stuck,” Callum added.

Murielle nodded. “Precisely. But it all happened exactly the way it was meant to. Callum didn’t see Sorcha until Sophia was in her car wreck at nine o’clock when her soul was preparing to cross over. That’s when Sorcha became temporarily stronger. Her soul was preparing to transition into Sophia’s body. That’s how Callum was finally able to see her. And she disappeared when Sophia was declared dead at midnight. Callum spent those three hours with Sorcha, neither of them knowing that Sophia’s soul was weakening as Sorcha grew stronger. Sorcha could finally move on because Callum—or Ronan—was Sorcha’s unfinished business. Just when he fell in love with her, Sophia died, and Sorcha was pulled into her body.”

Sadness gripped Callum as he listened, gripping Sophia’s hand. “But Sophia had to die for Sorcha to live. I’m so sorry, Sophia. Your soul, it—”

“It was temporary, Callum. It didn’t make me who I am. I am still me. I am still Sophia. I have all my memories, ideas, passions, opinions, and personality. I’m just now who I was always meant to be. I’m whole now. I feel it. It’s all right. Please, do not mourn for what I lost, for I have gained so much more.”

“And her Aunt Thelma kept trying to set us up without even knowing we were meant to be. How is that possible?” Callum asked, tilting his head.

“Because ye were always meant to be,” Murielle said, placing a hand on his shoulder with a smile. “One way or another, yer souls were going to come together. Once Sorcha inhabited Sophia, it was time.”

Callum was at a loss for words. He was part of some ancient web of events that all led to this moment. Goosebumps



broke out across his body as it all sank in.

“There is something I dinnae understand,” Callum said, looking at Murielle. “If my soul is meant to be with Sorcha’s, why weren’t she and Ronan together in their time?”

Sophia cleared her throat and nervously wrung her hands together. “I... well, Sorcha, was in love with Ronan,” she softly admitted, looking from Callum to Murielle. “I never told a soul. I was much too shy, and he was busy guarding Murielle or fighting battles for King Brodyn. Before I could get up the nerve to tell him, he married another woman. A few months later, I died. My unfinished business must have been to express my love for Ronan—or Callum. Once I did, I was free to pass on.”

“And Sophia’s soul left just in time for ye to inhabit the body ye were always meant for,” Murielle said in awe. “And Sophia, I never told ye this because I didnae ken how to ye felt about Ronan, but he was in love with ye, as well. He told me, but he was too busy keeping the royal family safe, and he didnae believe ye cared for him, so he focused on his duties. Then, Eva showed up, and she showed great interest in him, so he married her. Ronan was devastated when ye passed, Sorcha. He locked himself away for nearly a full moon’s cycle while he grieved. He was never quite the same, blaming himself for not protecting ye. Eva wasnae too happy about it.”

“When I touched Sophia’s hand earlier in the courtyard, a shock ran through me, and I felt Ronan’s emotions and saw his memories for the first time ever. Being reunited seems to have sparked some repressed memories. But I felt his intense love for Sorcha. It was actually painful. He believed his love was unrequited, so he lived with the pain of that. Then, Eva arrived, showered him with attention, and he married her.” Leaning over Sophia while she sat in a chair, Callum kissed the top of her head, thankful she was here and praying she remained by his side for the rest of his days. “It should have been ye,” he whispered in her ear.

“Clearly, you were also both meant to end up in my program together and work with Murielle and me as we research the Picts. And who better to have on our team than a Pictish princess,” he said, gesturing to Murielle, “a man who has passed through both times all his life,” he added, pointing to himself, “and two people who once lived in that time. I lost Caitriona and Emilie on my team, but I have gained you.”

“I think I need to lie down,” Sophia muttered. “This is going to take me a while to adjust to.”

Samuel stood from his chair and walked them toward the door. “Callum, take her back to your flat so she can rest. I will send you today’s lecture notes. Just contact your other professors and tell them you had a family emergency. I will vouch for you, if needed.”

Nodding, Sophia thanked him, hugged Murielle tightly, and then allowed Callum to take her to his place for the night.



## Chapter Seven

SOFT LIGHT FILTERED through thin blue curtains, and Sophia stretched, jumping with fear when she rolled over to find Callum beside her. She'd completely forgotten that she'd fallen asleep at his flat the night before after hours of talking, sorting out the many pieces of their mystery, and pleasuring one another in ways she had never experienced before.

The soreness between her legs, the ache in her thighs, and the clumsy smile on Callum's face made her feel the heat of a flush as it all rushed back to her. His short, dark hair stood up around his head, and a sexy scruff covered his jaw.

"Good morning, gorgeous," he murmured, pulling her closer and kissing her deeply until she groaned and opened her mouth to him, allowing his tongue to taste hers.

"Good morning," she replied, wrapping her arms around his neck and nuzzling closer. When his fingers slid between her thighs beneath the sheets, she eagerly offered herself to him, widening her legs as her pulse rate increased.

"How did ye sleep?" he whispered before leaning down to suck one bared nipple into his mouth. She'd forgotten that they'd both fallen asleep nude, but she was very glad they had. His touch was a balm to her soul, one she had waited centuries for. It was true that, as Sorcha, she'd been too shy to approach the strong, handsome warrior that Ronan had been.

But as Sophia, she was bolder and ready to seize the life and the man she'd loved for so long. Both Sophia and Sorcha's memories drifted through her mind, and she knew it would take a while to adjust. But the only thing that mattered now was accepting the gift she had been given—to be loved by Callum and to share a life together. They were young and had many years left to grow, travel, and work together with

Samuel, but she vowed never to shy away from what she wanted again.

And right now, she wanted Callum. “Make love to me,” she sighed as his fingers stroked along her sensitive, needy flesh.

“I don’t know if we have time,” he said, nibbling on her neck. “Class starts in an hour.”

She groaned and arched when his fingers hit the perfect spot. “Then later. Promise?” she gasped when electric waves of pleasure ran through her body.

“Och, I promise,” he said with a cheeky grin, watching her with rapture as she shuddered and went limp beside him. “I dinnae think there is anything I could ever deny ye,” he added, giving her one more intense, passionate kiss before pulling the sheets off of them. His long, lean muscles flexed as he climbed out of bed, and she watched his perfect arse as it flexed when he picked up his boxers.

Callum turned around and raised a brow at her, knowing she’d been watching. Shamelessly, she shrugged and slid out of bed, perfectly comfortable in her skin, which was an entirely new sensation for her.

“I told you that you have a nice arse,” Sophia said with a wink, making Callum chuckle before pushing her back onto the bed to kiss her senseless as she laughed and squirmed beneath him with delight.

When Sophia’s soul had left, so too had many of her reservations and fears. She had a new lease on life, and Sorcha had waited 1,337 years to finally be here with Callum.

And there was no way she was going to squander one more second of it.

The End

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## **About Mia Pride**

Mia is a full-time mother of two rowdy boys, residing in the SF Bay Area. As a child, she often wrote stories about fantastic places or magical things, always preferring to live in a world where the line between reality and fantasy didn't exist.

In High school, she entered writing contests and had some stories published in small newspapers or school magazines. As life continued, so did her love of writing. So one day, she decided to end her cake decorating business, pull out her laptop and fulfill her dream of writing and publishing novels. And she did.

When Mia isn't writing books or chasing her sweaty children around a park, she loves to drink coffee by the gallon, get lost in a good book, hike with her family and drink really big margaritas with her friends! Her happy place is the Renaissance Faire, where you can find her at the joust, rooting for the shirtless highlander in a kilt.

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# **Once Upon a Haunted Knight**

Elisa Braden



# Chapter One

*August 1832*

*Morecock House*

*Lancashire, England*

“**H**AVE YOU A man, Mrs. Black?” The *creak-thud, creak-thud, creak-thud* of Mrs. Crosby’s crutches slowed. The housekeeper peered at Addy over her shoulder. “Mrs. Black?”

Addy dragged her attention away from the elephant tusks mounted above the billiard room door. She’d been *Mrs. Black* for less than a day—a courtesy afforded to housekeepers, not maids—so she’d nearly missed the question.

“A man for what, precisely?”

Mrs. Crosby arched a brow. “If you must ask, then I have my answer.” The *creak-thud* rhythm resumed, along with her brisk instructions. “Mr. Bootle delivers supplies from the village on Fridays. He can assist you with heavier tasks. Your duties are keeping Mr. Whittaker’s collections tidy and arranging for repairs.”

Addy followed the woman she’d been hired to replace into a corridor lined with Egyptian masks, Greek busts, and a bizarrely buxom goddess statue. “Morecock House appears quite sound. Didn’t you say renovations were completed last year?”

Pausing, Mrs. Crosby replied, “Yes. They were necessary after the flood.”

Flood? The house sat on a small rise surrounded by flat lawn, rolling meadows, and wooded hills. There wasn’t a lake or stream for a mile in any direction.



“Mr. Whittaker travels a great deal,” Mrs. Crosby continued. “He and Mrs. Whittaker are rarely in residence. If they return during your employment, I suggest hiring temporary staff from Lancaster.”

Lancaster was a half-day’s ride. She could walk to Morecock Green in ten minutes. “Why not from the village?”

Rather than answer, Mrs. Crosby led her into a parlor decorated from floor to ceiling with paintings of exotic animals. There was even a portrait of Mr. Whittaker riding a camel like a heroic steed. Addy marveled that a man would choose to have himself immortalized looking that ridiculous. The very wealthy were a mysterious breed.

“Dust every item weekly,” Mrs. Crosby advised. “I recommend a schedule of five rooms per day. Do you cook?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You’ll be cooking for yourself. The larder, stillroom, and cellar are at your disposal. Give Mr. Bootle a list of anything you require.” Keys jangled as she moved back out into the corridor. “The groundskeepers are managed by the land agent, Mr. Evanston. They’re here Saturdays and will provide you with wood and fresh game.” They passed a green drawing room where a marble sculpture of Zeus stood beside a full suit of armor. The pair looked like two chums wagering on a horse.

Addy had been a maid since age sixteen. She’d worked her way up from hauling kitchen scraps out of a Liverpool scullery to collecting a Cheshire baroness’s bed linens for washing. She’d scrubbed, waxed, and polished until her arms were sleek with muscle and her hands rough with calluses.

Dusting Mr. Whittaker’s peculiar assortment of curiosities could not properly be called a job. She’d have no maids to manage, no mistress to please, no menus to discuss with the cook. There was no cook. No butler or footmen. No servants at all. She’d be entirely alone here, answerable only to an absent

land agent, doing less work than she'd done as a chambermaid.

So, why were they paying her a housekeeper's wages?

The *creak-thud, creak-thud, creak-thud* of Mrs. Crosby's crutches echoed as they passed into a long portrait gallery. Addy wondered how the woman had broken her leg. She wondered why the villagers had gone silent when she'd told them she was the new housekeeper at Morecock House. She wondered why she'd been hired without an interview.

But this position was a rare stroke of good fortune in an otherwise luckless life. Addy wasn't brave enough to question it.

At the end of the gallery, they passed a set of paneled doors. The *creak-thud* rhythm quickened, but Addy's pace slowed. "Mrs. Crosby, what room is this?"

*Creak-thud, creak-thud, creak ... thud.* The housekeeper stopped. Her shoulders stiffened. "The library."

Addy adored libraries. The hush. The solitude. The scents of leather, paper, and beeswax-polished wood. She tried the latch, but it was locked.

"Don't."

Addy frowned at the woman who'd gone parchment pale. "Why?"

"A little advice, Mrs. Black." Mrs. Crosby glanced down at her leg. Her lips twisted bitterly. "Resist all curiosity. Do not relax your guard. And *never* open that door."



*September*

ADDY'S RESISTANCE LASTED a month. It was the books. Always the books.

On a drizzly Tuesday, she was climbing down from the stepladder in the gallery when a ball of orange fluff brushed

her ankle. Hands on hips, she grinned at the long wall between the library and the staircase.

“Three hours, Princess. We’re finished for the day, and it’s not yet noon. I’d say well done, but sadly, you were of little help.”

The cat nudged Addy’s shin with an imperious shoulder. Absently, Addy bent down to give her a stroke—which put the library doors squarely in her vision. They taunted and beckoned, promising wondrous worlds far away from her own.

She brushed her brown woolen skirt and tried to ignore the compulsion that had been hounding her for weeks. But the rain outside pattered softly. And she’d finished her work early. And nothing rivaled the pleasure of curling up with a cup of tea, her new feline companion, and a roomful of stories.

“What do you suppose is in there?” she asked the cat. Princess answered with another nudge and a loud purr. “Besides books, obviously. Nobody gives dire warnings about books.” Addy nibbled her lip. She fingered her ring of keys, clinking them together. “Libraries need cleaning, too.”

Princess didn’t reply, but she did crouch into a pounce position in front of the doors before attacking the fringe on a nearby carpet.

Addy took it as a sign. “I’ll just peek inside.”

“Rwl.”

She sorted through the keys, trying one after another. “No one will know. In and out, quick as that.”

“Rawl?”

“You needn’t come along if it frightens you.” Finally, she found the key that clicked.

“Rowl.”

“Don’t be cross. I’ll only be a moment.” She opened the doors.

Inside, the air was stale, the room dark. But the scents of leather, paper, and old wood reached beyond the dust. She drifted deeper. It was large for a library, larger than the green drawing room. Every wall was lined with shelves and every shelf lined with books. Most of the furnishings—a long table, a pair of sofas, four tall chairs, and several cabinets—were draped in white sheets. Heavy velvet curtains covered five windows. The room had been shrouded, entombed, and forgotten.

“Such a pity,” she murmured. “What have they done to you?”

Immediately, she set to work. First, she drew back the curtains, coughing at the dust plumes. Daylight revealed more shrouded furnishings in the corners of the room—a tall urn, a pair of desks, and what appeared to be either a mirror or a gigantic painting leaning against one wall.

A thready meow came from the corridor. Princess peeked around the doorframe, her eyes comically flared, her fur standing on end.

“Not to worry, Your Highness. The only sinister thing about this library is the neglect.”

Invigorated with new purpose, Addy removed the shrouds, marveling at the fine quality of each revealed piece: the fluted walnut table, the buttery wingback chairs, the glass-door secretary with an old-fashioned quill-pen set. The rosewood and velvet sofas strayed too close to ochre for her taste, but she couldn’t fault the craftsmanship.

Of all the rooms Mrs. Crosby could have locked away, this one made the least sense. The furnishings were lovely, the books numerous, and not one atrocious oddity or overendowed statue spoiled the elegance of the space.

Folding the sheets carefully to avoid scattering dust, she didn’t notice Princess had entered until she heard a yowl behind her. The cat had snagged her claws on the last remaining shroud—the one covering the painting.

Addy hurried to rescue her, but the cat pulled the sheet loose, burying herself in the canvas. She thrashed and yowled in true feline outrage. Addy quickly lifted the cloth free, which earned her a furious scratch from the panicked Princess. Addy yelped. The cat hissed and darted toward the door.

Dabbing her bleeding wrist, Addy called, “Temperamental little beast. I feed you, you know! You’d have starved if it weren’t for me ...”

Her words ran dry as she caught sight of the portrait Princess had unveiled. Framed in dark, carved wood, the painting was at least eight feet tall and five wide. But it wasn’t the imposing size that made her gape.

It was the man.

He was a knight—dark-haired, bearded, and brooding. Dressed in chain mail with steel plating along his shoulders, wrists, and boots, he held an axe in one hand and a shield in the other. A sword was strapped to his hip. His helm lay in the mud at his feet. Behind him was a castle and a looming storm. He gazed into the distance as though listening for the next wave of attackers. To Addy, he seemed immovable.

“Oh, my.” Impossibly rich colors swirled in strokes of layered paint. She could almost hear thunder cracking, hooves pounding, and swords clanking as men battled to take ground. “Who painted you?” she whispered. She glanced at the bottom of the painting, but there was no signature, only a brass nameplate embedded in the frame.

“Sir Hugh Marshal.”

Eyeing the man’s towering stance, ferocious frown, and massive shoulders, she quirked a smile. “You’re quite the formidable figure, Sir Hugh. But you’ve a dollop of dust on your beard.” She retrieved her stepladder and a cloth then gave him a gentle swipe. “There. Much more dignified.”

A plaintive meow sounded behind her.

Climbing down, she chided Princess, “If you were a better mouser, you wouldn’t be so hungry all the time.”

“Mow. Row. Rewwwl.”

“Very well, I accept your apology.” She chuckled. “But perhaps we should apologize to our new acquaintance. We’ve disrobed him with an appalling lack of ceremony.” Casting a teasing glance at the towering Sir Hugh, she nodded toward the cat. “Pray, forgive us, kind sir. Her Royal Highness, the Princess of Pillownia doesn’t know her own strength.”

“Rowl?”

Addy sighed. “She only knows her own appetite, which is bottomless.”

Princess swished her tail back and forth in a lazy arc. She purred and wound herself around Addy’s ankles.

“After more salmon, are we? I shall ask Mr. Bootle to bring extra from now on.” Shifting her attention to the portrait, she frowned. “Perhaps he can help me move this, as well. It would benefit from better light.”

She began gathering up the folded sheets and stacking them in the corridor. Then came the dusting, shelf by shelf, book by book. By the time she finished, daylight was dimming, Princess had vanished, and Addy’s stomach grumbled its emptiness. “I suppose I should start dinner. No doubt Princess will give me another scratch if I delay any longer.”

Having finished her work, she started to leave the library. Nothing should have halted her. Except ...

*You forgot to introduce yourself.*

Whimsical and strange, the impulse tugged like a tide. Slowly, she turned in the doorway and retraced her steps. Feeling like an absolute ninny, she addressed the man in the painting. “I suppose it’s only right. I know your name, after all.” She dipped a curtsy. “Mrs. Black, at your service.”

Introductions complete, she retreated.

No. It wasn’t sufficient. A ticklish pressure in the back of her mind prompted her to reveal more. *What a silly goose you*

*are*, she chided herself, *talking to cats and paintings*. Clearly, she spent too much time alone.

Yet, she found herself pausing. Answering. “Adeline Black. Friends call me Addy.”

The pressure eased. She shook off an eerie shiver and left Sir Hugh Marshal to enjoy the sound of the rain.



### *October*

ADDY DIDN'T KNOW when she began imagining his voice. She only wished their conversations were less infuriating.

In the weeks after unlocking the library, she took her mid-morning tea at the desk nearest Sir Hugh's portrait. After her work was done, she rushed back to curl up in one of the leather wingback chairs, where she could pet Princess and wallow in a tale of romantic adventure. After dinner, she returned to the library to read before bed.

Unfortunately, Sir Hugh took her cozy silence as an invitation to interrupt. Repeatedly.

That odd, ticklish pressure to converse with her imaginary knight persisted until it felt as natural as her own thoughts—which it was, of course. He wasn't *real*. Addy knew that. The man was likely a figment of a talented painter's imagination.

She'd seen renderings from the medieval period before, and this one looked nothing like them. Her last employer, the Cheshire baroness, had displayed a panel from the thirteenth century in her grand hall. The figures had been much simpler and flatter. Sir Hugh's painting resembled the baroness's grandest portraits from the last century.

Addy was letting her imagination run away with her; that was all. But every time she resisted the compulsion to return to the library, a pressure would grow into longing and longing into pain.

*What could it harm to indulge in a little fancy?* she decided. It wasn't as if she was spoiled for company. The villagers treated her with a mix of apprehension and pity. They spoke of Morecock House as one might speak of a graveyard. The only living creatures she encountered routinely were Princess and Mr. Bootle. She'd seen Mr. Evanston once to receive her wages, and the conversation had been ... puzzling.

"Anything broken yet, Mrs. Black?" he'd asked, looking haggard for a man under thirty.

"No, sir. Mr. Whittaker's collection is in superb condition."

"Splendid. But I was asking about you."

She'd blinked her confusion. "Me?"

"Any limbs broken? Burns or mishaps?"

"No, sir."

He'd nodded. "Take care to avoid injury, even if your work suffers for it."

Addy didn't quite know what to make of that.

She likewise didn't know what to make of Sir Hugh Marshal. She'd tried to imagine his voice as booming and graveled, a match for his dark scowl. But in her stubborn mind, it simply wasn't. Instead, his voice equated to an expertly played violoncello—resonant and velvety.

His manners, on the other hand, were more like a rusted gate. Lately, she'd taken to calling him Sir Rude.

*Are you a widow?* he asked during this afternoon's reading of *Ivanhoe*.

She poured more tea and slanted him a glance. "Rather a presumptuous question."

*Answer me. Plainly, you are unwed. Widow or maiden?* His command rang with the arrogance she now found vexingly familiar.



She sipped, wincing as hot tea burned her tongue. “It’s customary for housekeepers to be addressed as Mrs., whether or not they’ve ever been married.”

*Maiden, then.*

“For the love of ...” She closed her book with a snap. “Yes, my gallant Sir Rude. I am an untried maiden with nary a single lusty impulse. Vestal virgins are trollops by comparison. Now, may I resume reading?”

Minutes passed. *You labor as a servant. Yet, you read.*

“As I’ve explained *several* times, reading is my favorite activity. Particularly when I’m allowed to do so in peace.”

*Who taught you?*

“The best man I’ve ever known.”

More silence. *His name?*

A pang pierced her heart. “I called him Papa.”

*Your father tutored you when he should have seen to your marriage.*

She glared up at his portrait. “I was fourteen when he died, so I beg to differ.”

Princess entered, crossed to display her backside to Sir Rude, then leapt onto Addy’s lap. Setting aside her book, Addy used both hands to scratch gently beneath the cat’s furry chin.

“Who’s the best companion in the whole, wide world?” she cooed. “Certainly, the best in this room?”

Princess purred in ecstasy.

“That’s right, it’s the Princess of Pillownia, Her Royal Highness of the Plumper Tufted Hills, the Duchess of Dawdleton, the Marchioness of Missingmice—”

*Cease this prattle, woman. You know how it tries my temper.*

Yes, she did, which was why she continued, “The Countess of Countingfish, the Viscountess of—”

*You’re making a fool of yourself.*

“—Voracityville, the Baroness of Birdwatch Bridge—”

*’Tis a bloody cat.*

“—the Lady of Lackadaisica—”

*And it’s male.*



## Chapter Two

*November*

FOLLOWING THE SHOCKING revelation that the Princess of Pillownia hid a set of ballocks amid her—or, rather, his—long orange fur, Addy wondered if she might be going mad.

How had he known?

Or, rather, how had she? Perhaps she'd spotted the anatomical anomaly in passing but failed to register it until that afternoon. Yes, that was it.

Sir Hugh was a figment of her imagination. He must be.

With her dust cloth hovering over the bosom of the overendowed Greek goddess, Addy muttered to herself, "He's not real." *Swipe, swipe.* "He's not."

She dragged the stepladder into the billiard room, where Princess—who refused to answer to a more dignified name—chased a ball into one of the billiard table's pockets. The cat's ballocks now mocked her incessantly.

And the pressure to return to the library grew hour by hour, day by day.

Just as she finished polishing the elephant tusks, the pressure reached a fever pitch, as though he roared her name from three rooms away. Moments later, she unlocked the library door and swept inside. "Leave off, you insufferable blunderbuss!"

*Where have you been?* he bellowed.

"Here! Cleaning!"

*For a bloody fortnight?*

"Keep shouting at me, and it will be a year!"

He quieted. *Calm your temper, woman. You're turning ruddy.*

Heaving, she glanced toward the ornate mirror above the fireplace. Normally, she was paler than a sheep in a blizzard, and her black hair made her appear even whiter. But now, her face glowed red. Only fury turned her this color, which happened so rarely that it might as well never happen at all.

The same might be said of her ranting at someone. Addy avoided conflict at all costs. She couldn't afford the risk.

Squinting up at his portrait, she saw only layers upon layers of oil paint surrounded by dark wood. "I'm imagining this." She swallowed. "I've descended into madness."

*A fanciful nature isn't madness. Read less and cease indulging in daft titles for the cat, and mayhap you'll find a husband.*

Once again, his rudeness sparked her ire. "Firstly, I'd sooner wed my cat than a man, and seeing as you're in my head, you should know why. Secondly, my madness produced you. Naturally, you'd wish to deny it."

*Deny it? He laughed. Proof enough that you know nothing of the state. Madness is a paradise compared to sanity. The only troubling thing about it is that it never lasts long enough.*

Stricken, she stared at the fierce, dangerous warrior above her. He looked like a man who would drive others to seek refuge, not seek it himself. Shouldn't her own invention match her expectations more than he contradicted them? She loathed confrontation, loathed being interrupted while reading, loathed domineering men with an unnatural fixation on her unwedded status.

Her dream knight would have been gallant and courtly. At the very least, she would have made him more pleasant than a rusted spoon scraping good china.

"How—how did you know Princess is male?"

*I have eyes.*

Her breath quickened as she examined those eyes more closely. They were green. “Who painted you?”

*Nobody.*

She traced a finger over the frame, felt the hashed symbols and writhing knots. “Are you real, Sir Hugh?” Her voice shook.

For an eternity, she didn’t think he would answer. Then he did.

*Aye. Though, I wish to God I weren’t.*



*December*

“ARE YOU A ghost?”

*No.*

Addy laid another medieval history tome on the growing pile. “A demon?”

*No.*

“An angel?”

The sound in her head was half grunt and all scoff.

“We’d save a great deal of time if you would simply tell me what you are.”

*Silence.*

He’d been far too silent of late, refusing to answer her questions, ignoring her litany of cat titles, forgetting to disrupt her reading. He hadn’t shouted at her in weeks. Apart from a raw request that she read aloud when she was near him, he scarcely spoke at all.

But that was his mistake. The quieter he was, the more determined she became.

She crossed the room to search the walnut secretary. Someone—likely Mr. Whittaker—had stashed research materials about Sir Hugh Marshal in every corner of this

library. Addy meant to find them all. She bent in half and twisted to look for hidden levers.

*What are you doing?*

“Secretaries often have clever little crevices. One merely needs to know where to apply pressure.” Her fingers found the tiny latch. *Click*. A small panel at the back popped open. “Ah, yes.” She grinned at him over her shoulder. “There’s the spot.”

A warm, ticklish sensation touched her nape. She brushed it away.

*Cleaned a great many secretary desks, have you?*

“Not really. My father was a cabinet maker.” She withdrew a pile of papers and sorted through them until she found what she’d been looking for—a letter from a scholar at Cambridge describing his findings about a certain portrait. “That’s everything Mr. Whittaker mentioned in his journal.”

Her employer’s research about Sir Hugh Marshal was sparse. Whittaker had purchased the portrait from an estate in Sussex following the previous owner’s drowning death in a garden fountain. Before that, the painting had hung inside a notorious gaming hell and brothel, which had burnt to the ground while the portrait remained unscathed. Before that, the painting had survived a shipwreck off the coast of France.

According to Whittaker’s rushed, sloppy notes, provenance for the painting went back at least two centuries, perhaps more. Its past was murky, and information about its subject murkier. Even the descriptions changed from time to time, causing Whittaker to speculate that there might be more than one infamous portrait of Sir Hugh Marshal.

Addy nodded toward the pile of papers and books on the desk. “Are you certain you won’t tell me your story before I embark on this odyssey of unnecessary research?”

Sir Hugh maintained his brooding silence.

She sighed and glanced out at the swirling snow. “Very well. I shall return in a few hours.”

*Where are you going?*

“To the kitchen. It’s Christmas, you know.”

More silence.

“Princess will be positively unbearable if his meal is delayed. He’s quite the demanding sovereign.”

Two hours later, she returned carrying a large tray laden with all her favorites: roasted goose with a marmalade glaze, buttered parsnips, mince pies, plum pudding, and spiced wine.

“I’ve no earthly idea how I’m meant to eat all this alone,” she announced as she placed the tray on a table, dragged the table in front of his portrait, and retrieved a chair. “Perhaps you’d be so kind as to keep me company, Sir Hugh.”

*What happened to your hand?*

She glanced at her linen-wrapped left palm. “The knife slipped while I was preparing the parsnips.”

A tense pause. *You’re bleeding.*

Indeed, the bandage was spotted red. She closed her fist. “It’s nothing. I’ll heal in a few days. Now, you haven’t answered me. Will you join me for dinner?”

He sighed. *Have I any choice?*

“No. But, as my father was fond of saying, our worst hardships can become our greatest triumphs if we attend undesirable duties with the same vigor as the desirable ones.”

He didn’t respond at first, but after a long minute, he grumbled, *Eat, woman. Your food grows cold.*

She sat, took a bite of the goose, and moaned in pleasure. “Forgive me.” Dipping another forkful into the tangy orange glaze, she chuckled. “I’m famished.”

Between bites, she spoke as she might with a friend—if that friend required her to carry both sides of the conversation. “Where am I from? I’m so glad you asked, Sir Hugh.” He

hadn't, of course. "I was born here in Lancashire, twenty-two years ago today. Yes, I was a Christmas babe. And you?"

No answer. Perhaps he suspected her aims.

"Apart from rainy autumn mornings, this might be my favorite weather. The snow makes the world feel soft and clean, don't you agree?" She had no idea if he could see the windows from there, but as she was conversing with herself, she supposed it didn't matter. "Did you celebrate Christmas with a feast, Sir Hugh? I confess, much of my knowledge of the medieval period comes from fiction. Of course, that presumes you hail from that time. Please do feel free to correct me."

He held his silence, but she sensed his vexation growing.

She bit into a mince pie, humming with pleasure. "Good heavens. Mr. Bootle's new spice merchant is exceptional. The cloves fairly dance on my tongue."

Ticklish heat washed across her skin as though someone held a candle too close. She brushed away the sensation, tracing her fingertips across her throat and jaw. It moved to her lips. She dabbed them with her napkin.

"Curiously, there's been no corresponding increase in the monthly bill," she continued, refolding her napkin several times to disguise her sudden nerves. "I think he's developing affections for me."

Unexpectedly, this prompted a response. *Who?*

"Mr. Bootle."

*What makes you think so?*

"Little things. He compliments my hair. I can't imagine a plainer color than coal black. He adds small gifts to my orders and pretends they're errors. Last Friday, it was a bottle of rosewater. The week before, a salve for my hands, which he'd noticed were chapped from the cold. I suppose those might be mere kindnesses."



His silence felt thick and heavy in the room. Perhaps Sir Hugh didn't believe her.

She continued, "He invents unnecessary tasks as an excuse to linger. Unfortunately, I can't convince him to enter the library, let alone help me move your portrait, so it hasn't proven useful." She finished her pie and confided, "Last Sunday, Mr. Bootle argued with Mr. Evanston over which of them would walk me home from church. In the end, they both did. Fortunately, they're young and fit, so I wasn't slowed too much."

*How young?* The words sounded grinding. Dark.

"Under thirty, I'd say."

*Has either offered for you?*

"Offered ... marriage?"

*Aye.*

"Heavens, no. As I've said, I don't want a husband."

*Foolish woman. 'Tis not about wanting. 'Tis about protection. If you tempt a man long enough, he will break.*

"Don't be silly. I'm hardly a beauty. Mr. Evanston is a gentleman. And Mr. Bootle has many fine young ladies in the parish to choose from. He's quite handsome. Goodness knows what he finds fetching about me." She shrugged. "I'm certain their interest will wane once they realize—"

*God's bones, how you try my patience. Have you ever met a bloody male?!*

It was his first bellow in forever. She blinked at the portrait. Had the sky above the castle always been forked with lightning? And when had a second sword attached itself to his hip?

Princess entered the library, providing a welcome distraction. The cat wound around her feet. She gave him a stroke. He rewarded her with a purring arch. "Mew."

“Oh, dear, you need a pillow, don’t you?” She stood to retrieve one from the sofa and plopped it on the floor.

After settling on his rightful cushion, Princess nuzzled her ankle repeatedly and purred louder. “Mow.”

“You’re most welcome, Your Highness.”

After his outburst, Sir Hugh descended once again into brooding silence. Cold settled in with the night’s dark, making her shiver. Addy drank her wine by the fire and attempted to lead him into a discussion of period-appropriate painting techniques.

He would only say, *I know nothing of this, woman. Leave me be.*

Nodding, she carried her tray to the kitchen and washed up while Princess attended his business outside. She brushed away the snow from his fur upon his return, urging him to lie in his bed near the hearth. Then she ventured upstairs to the library, moved the table and chair back into place, and banked the fire.

Lifting her lantern high, she said softly, “Goodnight, Sir Hugh. Happy Christmas.”



*January*

“DO YOU HAVE all your parts?” Addy dipped her ginger biscuit into her tea and took a nibble. “This book claims you were beheaded by Henry VIII and are now seeking eternal vengeance.”

*Then your book is rubbish.*

Slowly, she dusted the crumbs from her fingers and hid a smile. There he was. Finally. “I thought you had decided I was unworthy to be in your exalted presence.”

*Nothing unworthy about you, woman. I was training.*

“Axe or sword?”

*Both.*

She reached for another biscuit but stopped when her shoulder screamed. Hissing in a breath, she cupped the injury.

*What's amiss?*

She shook her head. "A small accident. I tripped over Princess this morning and took a bad fall. Luckily, he wasn't hurt."

*But you were. Show me your injury.*

"Don't be silly. It smarts a bit when I move. Or breathe. Or think about it too much." She waved dismissively. "I'm fine."

*Show me.*

"Tell me what year you were born."

Silence.

"Very well. I shall resume my research."

Not that her research was getting her very far. Nobody knew who had painted the portrait. Nobody knew who Sir Hugh Marshal was, let alone why his portrait was associated with so many disturbing occurrences.

The Cambridge professor's letters named several possible Sir Hugh Marshals from different periods. One was an eighteenth-century landowner who'd bankrupted himself while constructing a "towered castle" in Kent. That Hugh Marshal lacked both a knighthood and good sense.

Another was a fourteenth-century English knight known as the Scourge of Scotland for leading brutally brief sieges during the Scottish Wars of Independence. Little was known about him apart from a few mentions in reports to King Edward III.

Despite the portrait's armor being "reflective of the High to Late Middle Ages," the professor argued that Sir Hugh's identity was "far more likely" an obscure, Tudor-era nobleman by the same name. Given the painting's rococo influences, he surmised an eighteenth-century artist had viewed the nobleman's execution as an injustice and portrayed him in a

more heroic guise to convey “covert dissatisfaction with monarchical tyranny.”

Obviously, Cambridge professors weren’t as astute as one hoped.

She put away the useless volume of Tudor history and opened an account of the Scottish Wars of Independence. Just as she began a chapter on the Battle of Bannockburn, Sir Hugh returned to interrupt her reading.

*You must leave this place,* he said grimly.

“No, thank you. I quite like this position.”

*I’m in earnest, woman. Leave and do not return.*

She clicked her tongue. “You’d say anything to avoid answering a few simple questions.”

*If I satisfy your curiosity, will you leave?*

“No. But I shall consider your arguments for why I should.”

She could almost hear the jangle of his chainmail as he paced. *Ask your questions.*

“When were you born?”

*All Saints’ Day.*

Rolling her eyes, she clarified, “The year, Sir Rude.”

*I never asked.*

“Surely you know the century.”

A pause. *I became a page in the year of our Lord 1308.*

She’d read that most knights began their training as pages between ages seven and ten, which put his birth around 1300. She glanced down at her book. “Were you at the Battle of Bannockburn?”

*If I were, we would not have known defeat.*

Arrogant man. “Were you the Scourge of Scotland?”

*Scourge? Mayhap. I only heard the Scots call me by one name.*

“What was that?”

*Death.*

It took a moment to catch her breath. He was real. A real knight. A real medieval warrior. A real man. “H-how did you die?”

*I didn't.*

“Why are you still alive, then?” She shook her head. “And living inside a painting?”

*'Tis not a painting.*

“What is it?”

*A prison.*

She stood and moved closer to him. Tracing a curious finger over the frame, she gazed up at the hand that gripped the axe. Long arms thick with muscle seemed capable of crushing full-grown men. Broad, straight shoulders seemed impossible to bend. A rocklike jaw bespoke a will of granite. Green eyes promised death to all foes.

He looked indomitable. She couldn't imagine this man being caged.

“What happened to you, Sir Hugh?”

In stark tones, he told her his story. It began in summer, at the start of the second War of Scottish Independence. Tasked with capturing a strategic stronghold adjacent to both a river and the sea, Sir Hugh had lain siege to a castle held by the MacLellan clan.

He and his men killed the castle's chieftain on the first day, leaving the man's widow to lead the Scots' resistance. On the third day, English forces breached the walls. Sir Hugh took the castle in less time than it had taken him to travel there from England.

He imprisoned the widow in one of the castle's towers. She'd be a valuable hostage, should negotiations become necessary, he thought. But she was a highborn woman, proud and delicate. He offered her every comfort to which she was accustomed: her bed and furnishings, books to read, her favorite foods, any materials she required for her interests. She wasn't permitted to leave her chamber or speak to anyone but him. Otherwise, she was treated more as an honored guest than a prisoner.

Sir Hugh held the castle for three months. During that time, he conversed with the widow rarely, as her grief and rage unnerved him. She tore out half her hair. She attacked his guards until her hands bled. She ranted and wailed at all hours.

Finally, on a cool September morning, she went silent. Her attacks ceased. Her demeanor transformed into that befitting an educated woman of noble birth. Now, when she summoned him, she was subdued but courteous. She apologized for her madness, vowing to trouble him no more. Evincing a new interest in healing those who had survived the siege, she requested herbs and ingredients for medicinal remedies.

Hoping his hostage had found a more peaceful pastime, Sir Hugh granted her any substance she asked, provided it wasn't poisonous.

Forty days later, on All Hallows' Eve, he awakened inside his prison—an exact replica of the castle he'd conquered. This castle, however, was devoid of life. No birds. No people. No cats or horses or insects. Nothing breathed except him.

He had every comfort he was accustomed to: his bed and furnishings, whatever food he desired, his armor and weapons, a library filled with books and maps. Acres of wooded grounds surrounded the castle, though nothing existed beyond them.

In the great hall stood an enormous pane of polished black glass through which he could view his old chamber and the confusion of his men upon discovering his disappearance. None of them could hear him, though he raged and roared.

Nothing could break the glass, though he pounded with all his strength.

For weeks, he thought he'd died and landed in purgatory.

Near the end of December, he discovered the truth when the MacLellan widow appeared on the other side of the black glass. Calmly, she explained that the Douglases had retaken the castle for the Scots, slaughtering his men without mercy. And Sir Hugh's curse was to watch from his cage while history forgot him.

She said she'd given him every kindness he'd given her, and she would take every precious thing he'd taken from her. All hope. All kinship. All freedom. She described the terms of his curse, explained that hope would return every hundred years, only to be snatched away again.

Eyes glowing with a mad fever, she ordered her men to load the framed tapestry onto a boat headed for France.

His last glimpse of her was her nose dripping blood into a gleeful grin. She turned ashen. Collapsed. And the MacLellan widow went to join her husband in her own eternity.

He saw centuries pass, witnessed the world beyond the glass change in bizarre ways. His library continuously acquired new volumes. Any book the world outside could offer, Sir Hugh need only request it. He watched and listened, read and studied. His language changed. His knowledge grew. But so did his despair.

Every hundred years, he hoped the curse might break.

This time, surely it would break.

It never did.

Addy collapsed into a chair. "How—" She covered her face and gasped to catch her breath. Her hands fell away. "How do we break it?"

*We? There is no we.*

"Of course there is. Just tell me what I must do."

*Run as far away from me as you can. Forget I exist.*

“No.” Tears choked her. She shook them away. “Leave you imprisoned? No. I won’t.”

*You must.*

“Why?”

The room filled with a thunderous pall. *Because every person who’s ever tried to help me is dead. If you don’t leave, you’ll be next.*





## Chapter Three

*February*

ADELINE BLACK REFUSED to leave him. And Hugh wanted to wring her neck—or kiss her.

He hadn't decided.

This morning, he practiced swinging his axe to pass the time until she arrived. The weapon's whooshing slice and familiar weight calmed him. A step, a feint, a swing. Switching hands, he pictured the curse as a man who had bruised her shoulder and cut her palm. With an explosive heave, his axe flew end over end, arcing toward the far wall. *Thunk*. It embedded in the wooden training pell near the great hall's fire.

Breathing heavily to clear his fury, he wiped sweat away with his shirt's hem and checked the window for signs of her. The orange cat sauntered past before turning to flaunt his hind end in Hugh's direction.

He nearly chuckled. Every bloody time.

Hugh supposed he shouldn't complain. His own routine consisted of watching Adeline, waiting for Adeline, distracting himself from thinking about Adeline, and fantasizing about bedding Adeline until neither of them could walk.

He was beginning to suspect he had a problem.

"Good morning, Sir Hugh," she sang as she swept into the library.

He glared down at his body. Predictable as the sunrise. Granted, he hadn't had a woman in five centuries. But this was bloody embarrassing. It wasn't as if she was the loveliest woman he'd ever seen.

Her skin looked like fresh, warm cream, that was all. Very well, her hair was also pure onyx. Her fingertips had the daintiest little calluses he'd ever seen. And her waist was curved precisely to fit his hands.

It wasn't as if her every breath made him harder than his lance. Very well, it was. But it wasn't *her*. He was simply starved for a woman. Any woman would do.

As long as she looked like Adeline. Spoke like Adeline. Was Adeline.

Bloody hell, he had a problem.

“Oh, you're a bit dusty today. Here, let's tidy you up.”

His mouth went dry. Not this. God, not this.

She dragged her ladder into place, climbed to the top rung, and stretched to reach his frame.

Which put her bosom squarely on display. Pressing. Mounding. Plumping above her modest neckline. She diligently pursued every speck of dust into every crevice imaginable. Wriggling. Stretching. Huffing.

“... asked Mr. Bootle for his assistance again after church, but he's dreadfully superstitious.”

Her hips swayed back and forth like a pendulum with every swipe. *Swipe, swing. Swipe, swing. Swipe, wriggle, swing.*

“... discovered a note about Scottish curses in a traveler's guidebook to the Cape Colony. I shall never understand Mr. Whittaker's atrocious filing scheme. Who puts an insulting letter from a cousin in the same drawer as an unpaid night soil bill?”

If Hugh could reach through the glass, he'd pull her into his arms and take her on the floor. Mayhap she'd forgive him for rushing her. Mayhap she'd claw his neck and demand more.

Mayhap he could quench himself enough to stop thinking about her.

She sighed sweetly and climbed down to beam up at him with those comely gray eyes.

Mayhap one bout of quenching was overly ambitious. Floor quenching followed by a round or two more in his bed and several more in the river. A much more sensible beginning.

“Will you take tea with me, Sir Hugh?”

For what felt like the thousandth day in a row, he battled himself and lost. “Aye, woman. But only if you read to me.”

Her grin could light a bonfire. “Done.”



### *March*

“YOUR *FATHER* MADE the secretary desk?” Hugh sat facing the black window, absently polishing his sword. But this new revelation made him pause. He first examined the impressive piece in question then eyed the woman petting her cat with slow, lazy strokes of her callused fingers.

“Mmm.” She sipped her tea with perfect nonchalance. “He had a fondness for walnut. The grain, you know. He also made the dining table and fourteen chairs. I’m not certain where Mr. Whittaker purchased the remaining six, but he was fleeced. Those are stained birchwood, a cheap imitation at best.”

Hugh glanced behind him at his own furnishings, each piece constructed from trees he’d felled and milled himself. They were the equal of her father’s work, but it had taken him a century to master the necessary skills.

“Why didn’t you say he crafted such fine pieces?” he asked.

She shrugged. “It didn’t seem important. You’ve likely never heard the name Thompson and Black. His business

partners moved the workshop from Lancashire to London years ago.”

Business partners? “He was prosperous, then.”

“One might say so. He furnished many of the finest homes in England, Scotland, and Wales.”

This explained her education, her refined speech, her love of reading. A wealthy man would want to give his daughter the advantages afforded to gentlewomen. But why was she laboring as a housekeeper?

“Does his company still exist?”

She kept reading, ignoring his question.

He took another tack. “Is your mother still alive?”

Her delicate jaw flexed. “No.”

“I take it your father neglected to provide for you upon his death.”

He wasn’t prepared for her response. Mottled crimson bloomed from her collarbone to her hairline. She lifted her gaze, glaring at him with scorching fire. “My father was a saint in a world packed to the rafters with liars and thieves. He would *never* countenance leaving his wife and daughter destitute.”

Sheathing his sword and retrieving his dagger, he endeavored to calm her fury. It arose so rarely, he forgot she was capable of it. “I wasn’t impugning his honor, only curious about your circumstances.”

Her lower lip trembled before she firmed it back into place. “There is no shame in honest labor. If my father left me with anything, it is that assurance.” Flush receding, she softened her tone. “I’m sorry if my response was overwrought. I miss him very much.”

“Do not apologize to me, woman. If we beg each other’s pardon for every slight, I shall spend half of every hour on my knees.”

Her lips curved into a teasing smile. “I’d like to see that, Sir Rude.”

Quiet fell as she resumed reading. He eyed the slender leg propped on a footstool. Her swollen ankle was bandaged for bracing.

“I slipped,” she’d explained earlier. “Bit of a strain. It’s nothing.”

He was weary to death of her insisting her injuries were nothing. But roaring at her to leave only made her more determined to stay.

“Listen to this,” she said, straightening to read from the book in her lap. “*That which we celebrate as All Hallows’ Eve and All Saints’ Day is, in the traditions of Gaelic-speaking Scots, called salmon.*”

Hugh stopped polishing his dagger to frown at her.

“*Folklore suggests the veil between the world of the living and the dead thins as one draws closer to salmon.*”

He cleared his throat. “Saw-win.”

“Bless you.”

Stifling his amusement, he clarified, “’Tis pronounced differently than it appears. *Samhuinn* is the day. Salmon is a fish.”

“Oh. Saw-win. Thank you.” She smiled at him and took another sip of tea. “The author claims some Britons and Celts performed mystical rites such as prophesying or casting enchantments during *Samhuinn* to increase their potency a hundredfold.”

“You’re wasting your time with that nonsense.”

“I disagree.”

Of course she did. Her stubbornness rivaled that of the most dogged Scots he’d ever battled. “Have you begun seeking a new position yet?”

Once again, she ignored his question. “Here, it says that the diminished barriers facilitate communication from both directions, making contact between this world and the otherworld particularly acute through the first of November. Afterward, however, the barrier strengthens to its utmost.”

“If you don’t intend to marry, you must secure a new position. This is important, woman. Your safety relies upon it.”

She read silently.

“Adeline.”

Swallowing, she finally glanced up.

“Please.”

A mournful crinkle appeared between her brows. “I’m afraid I can’t do that, Sir Hugh. My heart cannot bear to leave you.”



*April*

“HERE WE ARE, Mr. Bootle,” Adeline told the strapping blond man she was coaxing through the library doors. He was younger and handsomer than Hugh had expected. Whenever Adeline wasn’t watching, his eyes strayed to her bosom.

Hugh’s hand flexed into a fist. Where was his axe? He had a sudden yearning to swing it into something skull-like.

“See? Perfectly normal,” said Adeline brightly. “Nothing to fear whatsoever.”

“If you say so, Mrs. Black.” Bootle nodded toward Hugh. “Is this the painting you wish me to move?”

“Yes. Just over to that wall there. I want him to have a view of the windows.”

“Him?”

A shaky smile touched her lips. “The portrait will show to better advantage in good light. That’s all I meant.” She

fingering her keys. “Dusting will be easier, too.”

Bootle nodded. “Aye, then. Let’s have done with it.”

Minutes later, Hugh could see less of the library but all five windows.

Adeline beamed. “Well done, Mr. Bootle! Well done, indeed.”

Panting, Bootle gave her a sheepish grin. “Perhaps you’d consider takin’ a ride with me on Sunday? My mother says she won’t mind actin’ as a chaperone.” He held a hand over his heart. “You’re the best girl in Lancashire, Mrs. Black. Miss Glover might be prettier, and Miss Hemmings’s father says if I wed his daughter, I can have all his cows. But no girl is finer than you.” Swallowing hard enough to bob his Adam’s apple, Bootle made sickly sweet calf eyes at Adeline.

Hugh stalked to his wooden training pell and yanked his axe free. His first swing beheaded the thing. His second severed the trunk from the base. He wished it had ballocks. Those would have been the first thing to go.

Bootle stuttered, “I—I’d be the luckiest man in Morecock Green if you’d consent to—”

Hugh hacked apart the pitiful remains of the training pell until nothing was left but splinters.

“Oh, dear,” said Adeline. “Was that a knock at the kitchen door? I’m afraid I’ve been neglecting my other duties.” She thanked Bootle for his help and steered him out the doors with the assurance, “I’ll see you on Sunday.”

Hugh eyed the gleaming blade of his axe through a haze. He’d killed his share of men. But never had he wanted blood this badly.

When she returned, she was as calm as ever. Hands on hips, she chided, “Was it you causing all that racket?”

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t. Violence still pulsed with every heartbeat.

“Sir Hugh?”

He scraped a hand down his face. “I’m here.”

“How do you like your new perspective?”

“’Tis better. My thanks.”

Another beaming smile. She glanced around the room and nodded. “This way, I can sit nearer the fire and be close to you at the same time. We’ll be so much cozier.”

Slowly, he paced to the weapons cabinet he’d built a decade ago and stored his axe away. Then he returned to the window. Bracing his hand against the frame, he watched her pottering about the room, moving her favorite chair and footstool into a “cozier” position. It didn’t take long for the last of his rage to drain away.

“You’re so quiet today,” she commented, plumping a pillow for her chair and one for the cat. “Have you decided to divulge what you know about breaking the curse?”

He huffed a dry chuckle. She didn’t lack persistence; he’d grant her that. “No. I haven’t completely lost my senses in the twelve hours since you last inquired.”

She clicked her tongue. “How is it senseless to help me free you from your prison?”

“Adeline. I don’t wish to quarrel again.”

“If I’m able to break the curse, then it can’t harm me any longer. You’d be free, and I would be safe.”

“The curse wasn’t meant to be broken. It was meant to punish me with false hope.”

“How do you know that?”

He debated lying to her or simply refusing to answer. But nothing he’d said thus far had persuaded her. Perhaps the truth would. “Would you like to hear what happened to the first man who tried to help me?”

She blinked. “I suppose so.”



“He was loading me onto his cart. One leg was trapped inside the wheel. The other had somehow threaded itself through a nearby fence. Lightning struck out of nowhere. The carthorse bolted. He was torn in half.”

Gray eyes rounded in horror. Callused fingers hovered over her soft gasp. “Th-that’s gruesome.”

“Aye. Even more so to watch it happen to a dear friend.”

She brushed at her skirts and gathered her composure. “That doesn’t mean—”

“Shall I tell you what happened to the second person who tried to help me?”

Only a nod.

“A Florentine collector. Jovial fellow. Dreadful taste in women. His mistress went mad and ran him through with a fire iron.”

She swallowed hard.

“Then she burned his villa to the ground to disguise her misdeeds. My portrait was the only thing that survived. His brother transported me to a vault, where I remained for the next fifty years.”

He didn’t want to do this, but he needed her to understand.

“Care to hear about the third person who tried to break the curse?”

This time, she didn’t bother nodding.

“Bloody good man for a Frenchman. He managed to get further than anyone before had. Loaded me onto his ship. We sailed for Scotland, thinking we’d defeated it. How could we fail? We were so close to victory.” He shut his eyes, recalled Jean-Claude’s rollicking laugh. He’d been the happiest drunkard Hugh had ever known. The bravest friend. “A squall came out of nowhere. The ship sank. I watched him drown while he tried to save me.”

The vacant stare. The pressure of deep water. Two years of ocean before he saw the shore.

Hugh scrubbed his face and focused on her. Always her. “Look at me.”

When she did, her eyes were swimming.

“This is what awaits you if you persist. The Scots called me Death. To you, that is all I will ever be.”

Rather than retreat, as any sensible woman would do, Adeline Black swayed softly toward him. She reached out to lay a callused hand against his window. Through her tears, she smiled. “As usual, I’m afraid I must disagree.”



## Chapter Four

*May*

“**W**ED MR. BOOTLE?” Adeline laughed. “Don’t be silly. I’m not marrying anyone.”

Hugh had never been more frustrated. The thought of encouraging her to marry that gawping dullard sickened him. But he’d tried everything—a week of silence, a week of raging, a day or two of arguing, and his current stratagem of convincing her to pursue another man. Nothing worked.

She continued her “research.” Continued pretending the bruise near her temple from a “minor scrap with the scullery door” didn’t hurt. Continued chatting away as if he were a sullen youth who would eventually emerge from his black mood.

“You’ve declared your opposition to marriage before,” he said.

“Yes.”

“That’s a precarious position to take.”

She smoothed her skirt and arched a brow. “Not for me.”

“Care to explain?”

Sighing, she plucked a geographical reference from a nearby shelf and sank into her favorite chair. “Do you know what happens to a woman after she marries, Sir Hugh?”

A thousand visions flooded his mind—most of them involving Adeline lying beneath him, gasping in rhythmic pleasure. He braced an arm beside the window. “I’ve a rough idea.”

Paging through her book, Adeline said, “She disappears.”

That wasn't what he'd been thinking.

“When a man marries, he gains a wife but loses nothing. He may even be offered all of Mr. Hemmings's cows to sweeten the bargain.” She calmly turned a page. “A woman, on the other hand, loses her very identity. She is now merely an appendage of her husband, so everything that is hers becomes his, legally speaking. In a good marriage, this is no matter. A husband cares for his wife and her property as he cares for his own beating heart, knowing that to injure her is to injure himself.”

She lifted her gaze to lock upon him, steely gray and immovable.

“But not all men are good, Sir Hugh. Some whisper false assurances. ‘I'll care for you,’ they promise. ‘Don't worry, dear. You haven't a head for numbers. Let me handle everything.’ Some men view a woman's vulnerabilities as targets. They lay siege, take what doesn't belong to them, discard what they no longer have a use for, and boast about their new fortune at a neighbor's soiree.”

He'd known there was something in her past, a kernel of bitterness that emerged from time to time. “Who did this? Did he hurt you?”

Her gaze fell. “Not me. My mother.”

After her father's death, she explained, she and her mother had inherited shares of his cabinet-making business. As Adeline was only fourteen, her shares were placed in a trust managed by her mother.

“Papa always took care of us. Even after he was gone.” She smiled fondly. “He asked his partners to advise her, left instructions and funds. We had our home and an ample income. But Mama was ... weak. She hated being a widow, having to make so many decisions on her own.” Adeline turned to gaze out at the morning rain. “She was a ripe target for a man like David Oxbridge.”

Adeline described how Oxbridge had ingratiated himself with her mother over the course of months, offering “assistance with any tasks she found too burdensome.” Meanwhile, using the fortune he’d acquired from his first wife, Oxbridge had purchased a five-percent share of Thompson and Black from one of the business partners, granting him access to all the company’s ledgers and accounts. He’d used this knowledge to win her mother’s confidence, and before long, she was favoring his advice over that of the other partners.

“Then they married,” Adeline continued, “and soon, the ruse became obvious. He treated her no better than a potted plant.” She released a bitter huff. “Worse. I think he might have watered a plant.”

“What happened?”

“My mother fell ill. He ignored her. Why bother with a sickly wife? Why spend funds on a physician?” Her hands fisted in her lap. “She died in summer. For the rest of my life, I don’t think I shall ever smell honeysuckle without remembering that day.”

His arms ached to hold her. He pressed his forehead against the glass, feeling the unnatural, pulsing hum. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

She nodded and blinked away tears. “Upon her death, I became David’s ward. As my stepfather and her husband, he took command of my trust and, of course, her shares were his. But he had a problem. The trust my father had constructed for me expired upon either my twenty-first birthday or upon my marriage. At that point, the shares became fully mine in the first instance or my husband’s in the second.”

Hugh didn’t like where this was going. “He sought to marry you off.”

A slow smile. “Now you’re thinking like a marauder. Clever man. Yes. He selected an elderly gentleman who’d lost his faculties, someone he could control easily.” Her grin broadened. “Unlike me.”

“Gave him trouble, did you?”

She laughed. “I like to think so.”

He shoved away from the glass to pace. “When did you leave?”

“Three months after my sixteenth birthday. It was the night of my engagement ball. I must admit, I relished the thought of his humiliation. It almost made ceding my inheritance worthwhile.”

“Did he pursue you?”

“A few halfhearted efforts. But David is fundamentally a lazy man. He had what he wanted. And I contented myself with knowing he would always wonder when I might reappear to spoil his party.”

“Why haven’t you?”

She went quiet. Her eyes slid away.

“Those shares are yours by right. Your father wanted you to have them.”

“I know.” Her voice weakened to a whisper. “But it would be a hard fight. David has every advantage—funds, solicitors, a majority share of the company, years to plan and bolster his position. He has my house, for goodness’ sake. Who am I? A glorified chambermaid. I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

Hugh felt all his old warring instincts come alive. Finally, a battle he could help win. “Look at me, Adeline. Come, sweetheart. Look at me.”

She swiped a knuckle beneath her eye then focused on him.

“We begin where any good battle starts. We’ll map our ground. Plan our attack. Learn our enemy down to the blisters on his feet.”

“Oh, Hugh.” A tear slipped free. “Of course you would say that. Fighting is what you do.”

“True. But you’re stubborn to the point of lunacy. That’s an advantage most foes can’t plan for. Holding ground when saner warriors would lay down their arms? Refusing to surrender when all signs point to your bloody demise? You’ll drive him to the edge, woman. He won’t know how to deal with you.”

She chuckled and traced a finger over her side of the window. “That’s different. When I fight for you, it’s easy.”

“Because I’m so charming?” he said dryly.

“No. Because imagining myself without you is a pain too hard to bear.”



### *June*

HUGH BURIED HIMSELF in stacks of dry estate law—literally. He was forced to step over a pile of legal tomes just to fetch a cup of ale.

“Twenty-two years as of last Christmas, aye?” He took a drink and frowned at the labyrinthine text.

“Yes,” Adeline answered, coughing at a cloud of dust from the draperies.

“Among your father’s old solicitors, are there any you trust?”

“One or two, perhaps. But I don’t know if either will remember me.”

“Which one is more intimidating?”

She took longer than usual to answer. “Mr. Brown. Very stern. He’s even taller than Mr. Bootle.”

Hugh stifled a visceral flinch at the mention of Bootle’s name. “Seek out Brown first. If he’s reluctant, move to your second choice. Ideally, retain both men. You want to begin with a show of force.”

Her attention wandered as she busied herself opening every window in the library. “It’s stifling in here.”

Indeed, her cheeks were flushed, though the rest of her was her customary white. Now that he looked closer, he thought her lips might be paler, too. She covered a sneeze with her dust cloth then used it to fan herself.

The cat entered to wind around her feet. “Good afternoon, Your Highness,” she said, her words slurring strangely. “I’m surprised you’re not outside menacing the birds.”

The cat yowled for attention.

Adeline stooped to pet him as she’d done countless times. Her eyes fluttered. She listed to one side and caught herself against a desk.

Hugh shoved his book away and leapt to his feet. The ale spilled. The tome pile toppled. He didn’t care. “Adeline? What’s amiss?”

She straightened with a raspy chuckle and waved him off. “A bit dizzy, that’s all.”

Instincts screaming, he stalked to the window. “Sit down, woman! Tell me what you’re feeling.”

“Nothing.” She staggered to her chair, sitting with a heaviness he didn’t like. “So hot. Aren’t you hot? It’s stifling in here.”

He glanced at the open windows. Trees fluttered on a gentle breeze. The sky was overcast. “Something is wrong. Adeline, you must summon a physician. Do you hear me? You’re ill.”

She didn’t hear him. She slumped against her chair’s wing. Her eyes closed. Her breathing shallowed.

“Adeline!” he roared. He pounded the window. “Wake up! Adeline!”

For hours, he pounded and raged, his fists bloody, his throat raw, his voice gone. He begged her and begged her and



begged her to open her eyes.

She didn't. Not that day or that night. Not the following morning when Bootle found her.

"Fetch a physician, man!" Hugh shouted, though it was only a harsh whisper by now. "God, please!"

Bootle scooped her up, kissing her forehead and murmuring assurances. Then he carried her out of the library. Out of Hugh's sight.

And left Hugh on his knees begging for mercy that would never come.



### *July*

THE FIRST MONTH without her, he couldn't leave the window. Not to sleep or eat or bathe. Not even to change his shirt. Half of him wished he could die, but that had never worked before. Trenchers of food, piles of clothing, and pitchers of ale appeared against his wishes. His prison liked to keep him alive for his punishment.

Princess visited each day, curling up on Adeline's chair and demanding to know where she'd gone. The visits stopped when Evanston closed up the library and locked Hugh inside.

He feared the madness might come again, and he'd never learn if she was alive.

He feared the madness might never come again, and he'd have to live with the certainty that she wasn't.



### *August*

TWENTY-EIGHT DAYS INTO his second month without her, keys jangled outside the library doors.

Hugh straightened in his chair, toppling a trencher.

The lock clicked. The doors opened.

He surged to his feet. Ran to the window. And reeled to a halt.

Dear God, she was thin. Her cheeks were sunken, her eyes marked by harsh shadows. The light behind her white gown revealed the devastation wrought by her illness—bony hips, emaciated arms, stooped posture. A stiff wind could blow her away.

He couldn't imagine anyone more beautiful.

“Adeline.” It was only a whisper, for he had nothing left except her name.

But she heard him. Her eyes filled. She braced a hand against the casing. Her fingers hovered over pale lips. “Hugh?” Her key ring clattered to the floor. She staggered toward him, steadying herself against the furniture. “Hugh!”

“Adeline.” This time, it was a deep, raspy groan. He pounded the window's frame, wanting to reach her, needing to hold her. “Sweetheart, tell me you're all right.”

She laid her head where his heart would be. “I'm alive. For now, that's sufficient.”

They stood this way until she grew too weak to remain on her feet. He urged her to sit and rest then asked about her illness.

She shook her head. “I don't remember much. It was a fever. The physician said I was insensible for a long while. By the time I awakened, I was too weak to leave my bed.” Her gaze dropped to her hands. With a small smile, she confessed, “All I could think about was returning to you.”

All she could think about was him—while she lay dying.

His legs gave out. He collapsed to his knees and hung his head. Everything he'd feared, everything he'd warned her about was here. Her death was coming unless he stopped her.

“It's going to kill you, Adeline.” He had to force air past his throat, force unspeakable words from his lips. “It came too close this time. It won't miss again.”

She absorbed his statement silently.

“I am begging you, sweetheart. Please.” His voice ground inside his chest, echoing off the stones of the great hall. “Please leave me before it kills you.”

Tears spilled down her white, thin cheeks.

“If you live, I can last another five hundred years. Knowing that your life was full, that you were loved, that you had babes and a dozen more ridiculously titled cats. That will see me through.”

She wrapped her arms around her middle and rocked back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth.

“But if you die because of me, I will disappear into the madness and never return.” He pressed his forehead to the glass. “Do you want that?”

She shook her head.

“You must go. Please. You must.”

With agonizing slowness, his beautiful woman struggled to her feet. She laid a kiss upon her callused fingers and touched where his head was bowed.

Without another word, Adeline Black walked out of the library and left Sir Hugh Marshal to begin his eternity without her.



## Chapter Five

*September*

ADDY WAS SURPRISED by how much her body had recovered considering her heart was missing. Four weeks after conceding to Hugh's plea, she stood in her small chamber near the kitchen, folding her last few garments into a valise. She was still exhausted after walking into the village earlier that afternoon. But she'd wanted to say goodbye.

Her deepest regret was for Mr. Bootle, who was a fine man deserving of love. Sadly, she had none to give. She'd encouraged him to pursue the adoring Miss Hemmings. The girl's cows were only her third most attractive feature.

Princess protested Addy's closed door, so she opened it for him. Immediately, he leapt onto her bed then stretched out on her neatly folded stockings. She didn't have the heart to admonish him. Instead, she plucked him up and snuggled him for as long as he would tolerate. Finally, she went through the motions of their bedtime ritual.

She prayed this night would be different, that she wouldn't ache quite so badly or weep for quite so long. But as Princess's purring warmth cupped her back, Addy lay in bed staring at her packed valise and swiped away a tear.

Daft tears. What did they solve?

Tomorrow was the first of October. Starting in the morning, she would take the letter of reference Mr. Evanston had given her and begin again somewhere new. Perhaps Bedfordshire. Or Hampshire. She'd heard lovely things about Hampshire.

She wiped her cheeks on the edge of her blanket.

All this moping over a man who lived in a portrait. “Such nonsense,” she said, sniffing through a clogged nose. “He doesn’t have arms to hold me. Or a mouth to kiss me. Or eyes to see how much I ...”

She curled into a ball, aching unbearably. This couldn’t go on. It felt like death had already come for her; she just kept moving through her days as if it hadn’t.

“Perhaps we need one last visit, Princess. For finality.” Her breath quickened as she contemplated her new—and brilliant—idea.

Would he be as she remembered? Would she hate him now? Perhaps their time apart had diminished her affections for the man. His beard, for example. Would it tickle when he kissed her? Perhaps she would loathe the sensation. Who could say? She hadn’t contemplated the question more than a few dozen times. A farewell visit could be just the thing she needed to break away without regrets.

She tossed aside her blankets and stuffed her feet into a pair of slippers. She didn’t bother with a dressing gown or a cap for her wild hair. She had a bearded man to fall out of love with, and there was no time for dawdling.

Pausing only long enough to light a candle at the kitchen hearth, she hurried through the dark house and up the staircase. She took the long gallery at a near run. Halting at the library doors, she rested a hand over her galloping heart.

How strange to feel it beating again.

She thrust open the door and strode inside. His portrait was there, but she didn’t sense him nearby. Disappointing. Yet now, she could examine him for flaws without him being present.

Yes! Her second brilliant notion of the night.

Setting her candle on the corner desk, she peered up at his beard. It was long enough to be dark and thick but trimmed neatly enough to be handsome.

Drat. She still found the beard dashing.

What of his eyes? She dragged the footstool in front of the portrait and climbed up to examine them more closely. A perfectly ordinary color. Grass was green. Leaves were green. Grass and leaves were positively everywhere. She tilted her head. She supposed his eyes were more like evergreen boughs. With steel spikes. And morning sunlight. Spikey evergreen boughs on a sunny morning. Before a battle. Requiring a man of strength and heart.

A man like no other.

She sighed and traced a finger over his lips. Even they were attractive. Not perfect, mind. A scar split the lower one. It only made her want to kiss him more.

*Adeline?*

Quickly, she withdrew her fingers.

*You shouldn't be here.*

She tucked her hands behind her back, feeling like a thief caught in the act. "I came to bid you farewell. I'm leaving tomorrow."

A lengthy pause. *What are you wearing?*

She glanced down. Her chemise was translucent in the candlelight. He could probably see her nipples. Strategically, she draped her hair over her bosom. "I—I was in a rush."

*You might as well be naked, woman.*

"Nobody is here. Well, except you. And Princess. He doesn't give a fig for my appearance." She glanced behind her as the cat in question padded into the room. "Isn't that right, Your Highness?"

"Mow. Rewl."

She reached up to fuss with her hair. She must look like a wild creature with her hair falling loose to her waist.

Another lengthy round of silence. Was that a groan?

She cleared her throat. “I’ve arranged with Mr. Evanston to transfer you to the south drawing room. There are no locks on those doors, so you’ll be tended regularly, and the view is vastly superior.”

*Are you chilled?* His voice sounded raspy. *You look chilled.*

She frowned. A roughened voice. Signs of delirium. Could a man in an enchanted prison fall ill? “I’m much improved,” she assured him. “My recovery has been remarkably swift, in fact. The physician called it ‘miraculous.’”

*Aye. You appear hale and ... bounteous. By God, woman. You are a ceaseless torment.*

Her head snapped back. “That’s a fine thing to say to me —”

*I didn’t mean—*

“—after I troubled myself to come here in the dead of night—”

*’Tis only that you’re standing there on full display—*

“—to visit a prisoner in his cell before my departure—”

*—and I’m not made of stone.* He paused. *Despite appearances to the contrary.*

She raised her chin. “My aim was to fall out of love with you. Congratulations. You’re helping immensely.”

Silence.

“It wasn’t even necessary to dislike your beard.”

*My beard?*

“Likely it would chafe when we kissed, anyway. I’d walk about constantly flushed and swollen from the friction.” She sniffed. “Really, it’s a good thing you drove me away. My skin thanks you.”

*I didn’t drive you away—*

“Well, it certainly wasn’t my choice.”

*'Tis for your safety. You know that.*

“My safety would be secured if you would simply tell me how to break the curse.”

*I'm not having this argument again.*

“It's the most rational course. I know the remedy has something to do with transporting you to Scotland. But there's more to it. Why won't you tell me?”

*Because of this. You'll never let go if you believe you can save me.*

She threw her arms wide. “Precisely! You said yourself that you admire my persistence.”

*Admire? Woman, you'd terrify any sane man.*

“Now I recall why I dubbed you Sir Rude.”

She sensed him beginning to pace. *Mayhap you could find a wrap. A blanket. Anything.*

“I'm sufficiently warm, thank you.” In fact, her right side felt warmer than usual.

*Have you retained a solicitor yet?*

“No.”

*You must, Adeline. You'll need allies.*

She glared at him, her fury rising. “Why should I fight? You're supposedly a mighty warrior, the Scourge of Scotland, the bringer of death. And yet, you're content to forfeit our most critical battle without so much as a volley.”

She wondered if it was her rage making the room seem brighter. Hotter.

“If a legendary knight cannot overcome his cowardice, then why should I?”

*Do not bloody speak to me of cowardice. You haven't lost the battles I've lost. You haven't watched good friends die before your eyes.*



“I am not your *friend!*”

*Then what are you?*

“The woman who loves you! The woman whose heart you’re tearing asunder by refusing to fight!”

*Adeline*, he said hoarsely. *Surely you know that in tearing your heart asunder, I am grinding my own to dust.* His voice sounded close, as if he stood a breath away. *I love you beyond all sanity, you mad, stubborn, beautiful woman. If I thought we had a chance of winning the fight, I would ...* He paused, his energy shifting ominously. *Adeline, why is the room brighter?*

She frowned. Turned. And recoiled in horror. “Dear God. It’s on fire.”

Finally, the smell of smoke registered. It was a thick, black monster writhing against the ceiling. The heat she’d dismissed earlier blazed like a blacksmith’s furnace. Flames raced to the top of one wall and engulfed most of another.

Frantically, she scanned the room. “Princess!” she cried. “Princess, where are you?”

He was nowhere to be seen. But he’d been there. The brass candleholder she’d brought with her lay toppled on the floor next to a pile of bubbling wax. The fire had spread from the corner desk, using a pile of pillows and a bookshelf as kindling.

*Get out, Adeline! Hugh roared. Go now! Run!*

She shook her head, panic seizing her throat. “I can’t. It’s already in front of the doors.”

*The windows, then. Open the windows.*

“It’s thirty feet to the ground.”

*No matter. A broken leg won’t kill you, but fire will.*

She scrambled off the footstool and edged closer to the nearest window. As if the flames sensed her intentions, they snaked their way along the wall like an undulating dragon.

Heat burned her skin to a blistering point. She reeled as it drove her back toward Hugh.

“It’s no use,” she panted, wincing at the pain in her hands. “I can’t reach it.” Surrounded on all sides but one—the side with his portrait—Adeline realized this had always been her fate. It arrived with utter terror, but also something more.

Love.

She turned to face him. “Don’t watch, my darling.” Her eyes filled. “I would do nothing differently.”

*NOOO! God, please, no!* The concussive noise of his pounding took on a metallic pang, as if he struck a steel wall with his blade over and over.

She flattened herself against him, laying her cheek where his heart would be. Flames licked closer, seeking to devour. Seeking to kill.

“It’s all right. This is not your fault. I would die ten thousand times if it meant I had a chance to love you.”

Incoherent roaring sounded in her head. She wasn’t certain whether it was the fire or him.

“Close your eyes,” she whispered. “Don’t watch.”

A strange sensation hummed beneath her cheek. An anguished, gritted roar sounded in her ear. Her hands felt cooler, as though they rested against glass. Then they hummed, too.

What an odd feeling, she thought. Like sinking into cool, rushing water.

A vise gripped her wrist. Her body wrenched forward through what felt like a waterfall. Suddenly, she was being squeezed from head to knees against something powerfully muscular. And very, very loud.

“... mad, impossible woman!”

She blinked. Her head was being taken between a massive pair of hands. Hugh crushed her lips with his own. Her chin

tickled by a dashing dark beard.

Red, frantic eyes caught hers as the mouth and beard retreated. No, not red. Bloodshot evergreen.

She began to shake. Blinking up at the man she'd only ever imagined, she reached up to stroke his beloved face. "H-Hugh? Am I dead?"

"No," he growled. "But I might kill you for being so bloody reckless." Then his mouth claimed hers again, and Adeline decided it didn't matter.

Living or dead, she'd landed in heaven.



HUGH WASN'T GOING to make it to the bed. He wasn't even sure he could avoid disgracing himself before he managed to strip away her flimsy night rail.

She felt softer, tasted sweeter, and aroused him more than he'd predicted. More than his Adeline-starved senses could stand.

He thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, earning himself a feminine gasp and a hitch of surprise. His hands roamed from her delicate throat to her collarbone, instinctively feeling for injuries. She had none.

But she did have bosoms. Lovely, ripe, sweet bosoms with hard, pouting nipples. He groaned against her lips and cupped one in a shaking hand.

He wasn't going to make it. God's bones, he wasn't going to make it.

She moaned and clasped his hand tighter, rubbing against him to increase the friction. "Hugh ..." Her breath washed hotly against his beard. "I think I'm ..." She clasped his other hand, tugged it over her other breast, and forced him to squeeze. "Ooooh," she moaned. "That's so—heavens—much better."

He didn't mean to shock her. Later, he'd be appalled with himself. But an urgent, lustful haze made chivalry seem ridiculous. He lifted her without warning, stalked to his pallet of sheepskin and woolen blankets, and dropped to his knees.

She squeaked, gripped his neck hard with both arms, and opened her mouth to another invasion. She even sent her tongue out to dance with his. God, she was delicious.

He only allowed a momentary separation to strip her night rail from her luscious body and pull his shirt off over his head. Her eyes flared upon seeing his nakedness, so he quickly distracted her with more kissing.

His palms slid over her firm, plump breasts, chafing and squeezing a pebbled pair of raspberry nipples until she moaned for him again.

He wasn't going to make it. He felt the urgent pain in his groin, the agony of all the centuries he'd spent waiting for her. His Adeline. His sweet, impossible woman.

Laying her flat beneath him, he frantically kissed a path down to those responsive nipples, flushed and swollen for his tongue. He suckled and stroked, nibbled and laved. All the while, he hoped it was enough to prepare her.

He shoved down his hose and pulled out his cock, which raged like a starving monster. Spreading her thighs wide, he used the blunt tip to test her swollen folds hidden within inky curls.

Slick.

Wet.

She was gasping, panting like a bellows. Her nails scored his neck. Her back arched high.

He wasn't going to make it.

He pressed against her tight, virginal opening, letting her feel his size, understanding her flare of alarm.

He wasn't going to make it.

He surged past the tiny barrier, taking her flinching grunt into his mouth. He sank into his woman with ecstatic triumph. His. She was his. No victory could be sweeter.

He wasn't going to make it.

She closed around him, fist-tight and rippling with uncertain welcome.

He wasn't going to make it.

He went deeper because he *needed* to be deeper, even though he knew it pained her, as any virgin would be pained. Even though she gritted her teeth and wriggled her hips and tried to reposition herself to take him more easily. If he could speak, he would have told her there was nothing easy about this.

He wasn't going to make it.

A stroke. Another. Another. She relaxed a bit. Widened her thighs.

He wasn't going to make it.

His thrusts quickened. Her teeth gritted harder, and her thighs tensed again, her knees bending.

He wasn't going to make it.

“Hu-Hugh.”

He wasn't going to make it.

Deeper. Deeper. He yanked her thigh higher on his hip and took her nipple deep into his mouth. A hard suck. A firm thrust.

He wasn't going to make it.

“I think you ... uh ... oh ... hmm. I think it would be better if you simply finish without ... ooooh.” She gasped. Angled her hips in a way that primed his ballocks to fire. “That's ... oh, my ... different.”

He approached the brink. Truly, he wasn't going to make it.

Between her rhythmic grunts as he pounded faster, he felt the first fluttering squeeze. A breathless pause. She stared up at him in wonderment. Her eyes rolled back in her head. Her mouth opened on a long, low moan. And a seizing cataclysm exploded inside his woman's sheath.

He made it.

Just barely.

An instant later, his own explosion ignited in wave after wave of unimagined bliss. He filled her as she milked him, kissed her as she petted him, loved her as she loved him.

And five centuries of waiting suddenly seemed a small price to pay for the treasure in his arms.



## Chapter Six

*October*

ADDY'S FIRST FORTNIGHT with the man she loved was both wondrous and educational. Who knew a woman could find so much pleasure in being ridden over a chair, let alone upon a table? Certainly not Addy. She would have guessed lying in the bed might be pleasurable enough, but standing in a river with her legs wrapped around him while his hands gripped her backside and he thrust with all his strength?

Wondrous indeed.

She also learned more about herself. How much she enjoyed a ticklish beard, for example. How good she was at riding astride. Or new and inventive uses for both her mouth and his.

Really, the surprises were too numerous to name.

Another surprise? Sir Hugh Marshal's prison had some redeeming qualities.

"Injuries heal within minutes here," he'd explained shortly after her arrival. "The prison won't let me die, so it does whatever is necessary to keep me alive."

Addy had healed just as quickly from her burns and bruises, so they'd surmised she was subject to the same rules as he was. Which meant she was immortal, like him.

And a prisoner, like him.

On a cheerful note, the food was lovely. The castle was a bit cold and drafty, and the world eerily devoid of birdsong, buzzing insects, and splashing fish. But there was some mild weather—soft rain occasionally, or increased wind—and day-and-night cycles matched the world beyond the black window.

They could wade along a saltwater beach or swim in the river or stroll through lush woodlands. They could read for hours together in the two-story library.

Hugh's prison was rather pleasant if one ignored the torturous isolation and malevolent design.

Addy couldn't ignore it. This place had driven him into alternating cycles of torturous sanity and deep, numbing madness for centuries. She saw evidence of it everywhere—his cellar full of destroyed furnishings, his cabinet full of vicious weapons, the books he "requested" from his enchanted library. No man needed three references on decapitation techniques.

So, on the thirteenth day of her fortnight with Hugh, Addy planned her escape. When he wasn't watching, she'd been testing the black window by pressing her hand against it. She'd discovered that whatever impenetrable force contained Hugh inside his prison wasn't so impenetrable for her. In fact, with enough pressure, she could send her hand halfway through the glass.

If she could breach the barrier, she could return to the outside world and break the curse. Which was why she had to deceive the man she loved into believing she intended to stay with him.

Her plan began the night before she left.

"I'm curious," she said following a spectacular round of lovemaking in front of the library's hearth. "What did the widow say about breaking the curse?"

He ignored the question at first, shifting her in his lap to lift her breast to his mouth. Nuzzling the tender flesh with his bearded chin, he chafed and chafed until her nipple readied.

Pleasure surged as always, and she cradled his head against her. "Hugh," she breathed. "Come, now. Satisfy my curiosity." She swallowed before lying. "It's not as if the truth is a danger any longer."



A master of distraction, he slipped his hand between her thighs and began a pulsating stroke. “Why do you want to know?”

“I told you. Curiosity.”

He sighed. “Stubborn woman.”

“What if I promise to perform that little trick with my tongue you enjoy so much?”

“You just finished doing that, sweetheart. I might need a short rest to fully appreciate an encore.”

“Hmm. Point taken.” She swirled a finger in his chest hair. Really, every man should have luxuriant, strokable chest hair. “Perhaps I could offer a refuge for your weary manhood while we wait for him to recover his strength.”

He grinned. “I think he likes that idea.”

She turned to straddle him, sinking to take his not-so-weary hardness inside. “Better?”

His “aye” became a groan as she squeezed.

She kissed him and whispered against his lips, “Good. Now, tell me.”

“The frame must be—God’s bones, woman—returned to the site where it was cast.”

“Which is?”

“One of the MacLellan strongholds, Dunlogan Castle. It was destroyed a century after my imprisonment, but Jean-Claude believed the old grounds would suffice. I tend to agree.”

She rewarded him with a slow, rhythmic ride. Not too much. Small, subtle strokes.

“You learn too well.” His eyes glowed fiercely as he kissed her, those huge hands threading through her hair. “I can’t resist.”

“What are the other conditions?”

“Only one.” He stroked her naked back tenderly, eyes alight with desire. “I must wed a member of her clan.”

She stopped. “A MacLellan?”

“Presumably.”

“Is that everything?”

“Apart from the timeline, aye.”

“Once every hundred years, on or around *Samhuinn*, after which the window closes for another century. Do I have that right?”

Nodding, he gripped her hips and urged her to resume. “You haven’t completed your work, woman. There’s more to do.” He gave her a hard thrust.

“Oh. Mmm. Yes.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and settled in for a bracing ride. “Never let it be said that Adeline Black neglects her duties.”



ADELINE CROSSED THROUGH the black window into the south drawing room after nightfall with only fifteen days until her deadline. This was going to be tight.

The fire had—oddly enough—failed to spread beyond the library, so Mr. Evanston had transferred Hugh’s portrait here while arranging for repairs. Her first task was to locate Princess. She found the cat in the woodpile outside the kitchen. As if eager to reclaim territory he’d lost, Princess rubbed his head over every inch below her knees. She snuggled and kissed and petted for as long as he would tolerate—a half hour longer than normal.

After seeing to Princess’s bedtime ritual and lighting a lantern, she journeyed to the green drawing room. Everything in the library was ash, which included most of Mr. Whittaker’s books. But the one she sought was an incredibly old, very costly relic from the thirteenth century—a book of maps for the British Isles.

She opened the case she'd dusted dozens of times and carefully examined the pages. There. Along the southwestern coastline of Scotland. Dunlogan Castle. The lettering was odd, but she recognized the topography. She'd spent the past fortnight there, after all.

A tight knot formed as she thought about Hugh. She'd left him sleeping in their bed. She couldn't bear to imagine how angry and confused he'd be when he awakened.

Mustn't be mired in sentiment, she thought. There was work to be done.

Quickly, she mapped out her travel route north through Carlisle, past the border at Gretna, and west to Dunlogan. She could probably make it within a day, but it would be close, especially with a loaded wagon. Which must be loaded.

She nibbled her lip and mentally girded her loins for what lay ahead. The time for reticence had ended. The time to become a warrior had now begun.

The following morning, she persuaded Mr. Bootle to grant her the use of his wagon and his strapping strength. She'd never done so much lying in all her days.

First, she explained that she'd had a "change of heart" about his courtship. Then she flirted shamelessly. Then she told him Mr. Whittaker had directed her to transport the gigantic portrait in the south drawing room to a researcher in Scotland for "further study."

Mr. Bootle questioned none of her dubious claims. He was too busy staring at her bosom and her hair. He trailed her into the south drawing room like a pup, asking only, "Are you certain you don't wish me to drive, Mrs. Black? I'd be more than pleased to—"

"Oh, that's not necessary." She turned to place a hand on his arm, giving him a soft stroke and a flirtatious grin. Apparently, being thoroughly loved for a fortnight increased one's womanly wiles. If she didn't feel so dreadful about using them on the wrong man, she might be more pleased. "I've

been driving since I was a girl. But I do need a big, strapping man of towering strength to load big, heavy things into my wagon. You're the first man I thought of."

He swallowed. Licked his lips. "The first?"

"Mmm. The very first."

Distant thunder sounded, followed by the distinctive sound of metal striking stone. A familiar bellow raged, *Woman! If you say one more provocative thing to this cretin, I'm going to slaughter him.*

He'd been shouting all morning. In fairness, she had lied to him. And left him. And done precisely what he'd told her not to do.

But it was necessary. When it came to saving Hugh, Addy had no scruples.

Using leverage, straps, and a cart, Mr. Bootle managed to load Sir Hugh onto his canvas-covered wagon, securing the portrait in place with ropes. Then Addy loaded Princess, her valise, several pillows, three blankets, and a small basket packed with smoked salmon and bread.

Mr. Bootle held his hat over his heart as he watched Addy drive away.

*Everyone you involve in this suicidal endeavor is at risk. You realize this, don't you?*

She directed the horse onto the road north. "I'm taking precautions. Aren't I, Princess? Yes, I am." She reached into the cat's pillow basket to give him a scratch. Addressing Hugh, she explained, "The less help one offers you, the more diluted the misfortune. Mrs. Crosby, for example, merely dusted you for a year. She couldn't hear you, couldn't help you in any meaningful way, and therefore suffered only a few bumps and bruises before breaking her leg. Thus, I shall spread the tasks more thinly. I'll hire someone to help me unload and a MacLellan girl to marry you."

*How are you planning to pay for all this?*

“Mr. Evanston was exceedingly generous during my recovery. He paid me thrice my wages and provided for my every need. I suspect he felt sorry for me.”

*I suspect he wanted to bed you.*

“Nonsense. Mr. Evanston is a gentleman. Those flowers and gifts were simply his way of expressing regret for my circumstances.”

He grunted. *You're mad if you believe the curse will allow itself to be broken. Every step closer is a chance for attack. How can you fail to see that?*

“I do see it. Now, go polish your sword and give me and Princess a bit of peace, hmm?”



THIRTEEN DAYS LATER, after biblical-scale flooding, a grassfire set by lightning, three fallen oaks, several urgent digestive complaints, two blizzards, one maddened bull, and five broken wagon wheels, Addy had to admit Hugh might have had a point.

Still, as they crossed into Scotland with one day to spare, she was hopeful. Persistence was its own form of power.

She entered the first inn—a fine little place called the Muckle Buck—with Princess’s basket under her arm and a belief that persistence would prevail. Hours later, she questioned everything about her life.

Princess escaped to chase, of all things, a mouse.

Nobody knew of a single unwed MacLellan lass.

Everyone thought she was deranged for talking to her wagon.

And Addy’s digestive complaint returned with a vengeance.

As she exited the privy, however, her luck took a turn. A young, freckled man with strapping shoulders hovered outside,

shifting from one foot to the other.

“Evenin’, miss.” He tipped his cap and entered the privy. She waited for him, which he found quite strange, and offered him coin to help her transport the portrait to an empty plot of land near the coast.

He resisted until she named the sum. “When shall we depart, miss?”

The following morning, at the fourth inn they entered, Addy asked the freckled young Mr. Stewart why he’d told her, “There’s nae MacLellan lasses tae speak of here, miss.” The two blind innkeepers were both MacLellans, and their daughter, Flora MacLellan, had served Addy and Mr. Stewart oversalted stew.

“She doesnae count, miss.” He took a bite and winced.

“Is she married?”

“Nae.”

“Is she a MacLellan?”

“Aye.”

“Then she counts, Mr. Stewart.”

He squinted across the inn’s taproom at Flora MacLellan before clarifying, “She’s ... unpleasant.”

Addy, in turn, clarified that she didn’t give a fig if Miss MacLellan was a shrew from the bowels of Hades. She would do.

Flora, on the other hand, took a fair bit of convincing. Nothing in this godforsaken quest could be easy. Mr. Stewart’s dislike of the “unpleasant lass” was heatedly mutual. So first, Addy assured Flora that their journey would be short and the terms generous. Flora glared at Mr. Stewart, crossed her arms, and said, “How much?”

Addy named her sum. She’d noticed the shabby state of the inn, which was well off the main roads. She’d also noticed

Flora had two blind parents and several younger brothers to provide for.

Flora's flame-red brows arched high. She darted a glance at Mr. Stewart, who was pushing his spoon around in his bowl with a mutinous expression. "A wee marriage and a quick annulment, aye? I cannae be away long, mind. The lads dinnae cope well with the supper crowds."

Addy glanced around at the empty inn. "Not to worry. We'll be done before the sun rises tomorrow."

Flora nodded. "I'll fetch my cloak, then."

Mr. Stewart drove while Flora rode stiffly beside him. Initially, both seemed hostile. But after he helped Flora down from the wagon so she could "find a wee hedge for a wee moment," the pair fell into a friendlier pattern. Flora seemed to appreciate the man's chivalry, and Mr. Stewart seemed to be judging her as less "unpleasant" than he'd thought.

Addy preferred to ride in the bed of the wagon with Hugh. He'd been quiet most of the day. Princess had been keeping him company. Rain began to fall as they drove west, but it was nothing like the storms they'd already weathered.

*I'm sorry I doubted you.*

Addy blinked. Hugging her knees for extra warmth, she pretended to speak to Princess, which most considered less deranged than talking to a painting. "Careful. Soon, I'll have to stop calling you Sir Rude."

He chuckled. *Don't be too hasty. I'm still vexed.*

Smiling, she murmured, "I know."

By the time they arrived at the barren, muddy site where Dunlogan Castle had once stood, Mr. Stewart and Flora MacLellan were chatting away and laughing like bosom friends. Addy was glad someone was benefiting from this joint-jarring ride.

Dusk arrived while they were unloading the portrait. Addy directed Mr. Stewart to lean Hugh up against a large boulder

where the great hall's gargantuan hearth had been. Then he and Flora returned to the wagon to fetch a lantern.

Addy grinned at Hugh. "We made it, my darling. We're here."

*The first thing I'm going to do is turn you over my knee.*

"Mmm. Don't promise unless you can deliver."

*Mouthy woman.*

Darkness thickened, though the moon was rising. Frowning, she glanced toward the wagon, where Mr. Stewart and Miss MacLellan seemed to be having a rather ardent conversation. They glanced up and waved. She smiled and waved back politely, saying through her teeth, "How long does it take to fetch a lantern?"

The pair finally headed back toward Addy, lantern in hand. But, she noticed, something had changed. They were holding hands.

"Mr. Stewart, you may place the lantern there," Addy instructed. "Miss MacLellan, if you would kindly step closer to the portrait and speak your vows, as agreed."

Flora's proud, beaming grin gave Addy her first chill of foreboding. "'Tis done, Mrs. Black. We're wed."

The chill spread. Swelled. Became numbness. "You're ... what?"

"Adam—that is, Mr. Stewart and I, we spoke our vows. All was done proper."

Mr. Stewart nodded and wrapped an arm around his new wife's shoulder. "Turns out Flora's had a soft heart for me since I helped her da repair the roof. She thought I'd snubbed her. Can ye imagine? The finest MacLellan lass north of the border? 'Tis a lucky lad I am."

Addy shook her head. "No. No, it's not legal. It can't be."

"'Course it can," said Flora. "Happens all the time here. Some prefer a blacksmith to bear witness, but we have you."



“I didn’t ...” Addy couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t breathe. “I didn’t witness anything.”

“Aye, ye did. Ye were, what, twenty feet away? Ye looked right at us and waved.”

“That’s not ... no.” Desperately, she turned to Hugh. “Noooo.” Swiping away a tear, she stalked to Flora, grasped the girl by the arm, and dragged her to the portrait. “Speak your vows. Do it now.”

“But I—”

“This is what I paid you to do. Now, SPEAK!”

Flora complied, though her voice had turned tremulous and wary.

Addy faced Hugh. “Now, you.”

*Adeline, stop.*

“I will not. Say your vows, Sir Hugh.”

A heavy sigh. *Very well.* He spoke marriage vows to a MacLellan lass.

And nothing happened.

The wind blew. The rain stopped. The moon rose.

And Hugh’s prison remained.

In the moments that followed, the new Mr. and Mrs. Stewart retreated toward the wagon. They likely thought she was mad. Perhaps she was. Addy’s ears buzzed faintly. She braced a hand against Hugh’s frame, wondering why the enervating hum felt stronger than before.

*Come back inside, sweetheart. We don’t have much time left.*

She nodded, blinking at the world she must leave behind. Who would take care of Princess? Perhaps the Stewarts. They seemed pleasant enough if one didn’t mind all the cooing.

Addy grieved the children she might have had with her beloved knight, grieved the thought of never seeing him

become a father or rocking her babes to sleep. But at least she would be with him. That was what mattered. And perhaps someday, they would find a way to free themselves.

Stepping forward, she placed her hands flat against the painting and pressed. She felt the hum, the cool rush. Then she felt resistance. More than before. She pushed harder, wedging her boots against the stones for leverage.

*What's amiss?*

She frowned. "It's stronger this time. I'm having trouble"—she rammed it with her shoulder, bruising herself and gaining nothing—"breaking through."

She tried everything—ramming, kicking, battering it with stones. She even recruited Mr. Stewart to shove her against the barrier. Nothing worked. It was as impenetrable as an iron door.

By the time she realized she was never going to break it, the moon was high in the sky.

*It's nearly midnight. Come close so I can hold you one last time.*

Slowly, she went to him and laid her cheek over his heart. Tears fell, though she didn't feel them. Too numb. Too spent.

*You are the most persistent, resourceful, courageous warrior I've ever known, he said gently. It has been the greatest honor of my very long life to fight alongside you, Adeline Black.*

She closed her eyes. She could almost feel him stroking her hair.

*Soon, you won't hear me any longer.*

"I'm keeping you with me. I'm not leaving you."

*Adeline.*

"No. I don't care if I must steal you away in Mr. Bootle's wagon and prop you inside my bedchamber for the next eighty

years. I cannot marry another, so don't ask it of me. I cannot have another man's children. I cannot."

*You may change your mind. I want you to find happiness.*

She controlled a sob and pressed harder against him. "You are the husband of my heart, Sir Hugh Marshal. And though I may never see you or hear you or lie with you again, I shall love you and keep you with me as my husband until my dying breath."

*And you, Adeline Black, are the wife of my heart. Though you may never hear my voice again or feel my arms around you, be assured that I am here. That I will have no other. And that I shall love you and keep you as my wife until my dying breath.*

In the distance, thunder cracked. She paid it no mind.

Lightning flashed. She paid it no mind.

Then the hum beneath her cheek grew hotter. The light beyond her eyelids grew brighter. Her hands where they pressed against the window sank toward his.

She opened her eyes.

The frame was alight in a brilliant blue glow. Feeling singed by its swelling heat, she stumbled back, catching herself against a crumbled stone wall. She had to shield her eyes as orange light spiked out in the shape of the frame's hashed symbols. The canvas caught fire.

But the fire wasn't orange. It was blood red.

The light was too much. She raised an arm to shield her eyes, feeling the same blistering heat as the library fire.

Abruptly, everything went quiet. Heat and light vanished. Thunder stopped. Addy lowered her arm to peer toward the portrait—or where the portrait had once been. Because all that remained was ash.

And a man she thought she'd never see again.

She lost her breath. She nearly tumbled off the stones.  
“Hugh?”

He was covered in ash, dusting it from his shirt, his hair, his beard. He shook himself like a dog. Ash scattered everywhere. “Bloody hell.” Coughing as he waved away the cloud, he looked around the dark landscape before riveting upon her. “God’s bones, woman. What did you do?”

She blinked. “Me? You’re the one who broke out of a prison!”

He looked around with great perplexity. “Aye, but how?”

“Does it matter?”

“A bit. I’m curious what happened to my weapons. I was fond of them, the axe in particular.”

She burst out laughing. Then weeping. She surged to her feet and launched herself into his arms.

He caught her against his chest and wrapped her up ferociously tight. “There’s my woman,” he rasped in her ear. “Back where she belongs.”



THEY DIDN’T DISCOVER why he’d been freed until they, along with the bewildered Stewarts, returned to the MacLellans’ inn. Flora’s kindly parents served them breakfast while Hugh and Addy discussed the history of Dunlogan Castle.

“The last time a MacLellan occupied the stronghold was before I—” He glanced at the blind Mrs. MacLellan, who listened intently. “Before the English laid siege in 1333.”

“Oh, aye,” said Mrs. MacLellan. “I recall the legends. The MacLellan widow held the castle in her husband’s stead for seven days.”

“Only one day, really,” Hugh muttered.

Addy swatted his arm.

“What? I’m very good.”

Mrs. MacLellan carried on, “’Twas said auld Lady Douglas cursed the man who killed her man. She was a mad one, for certain.”

Addy frowned. “Lady *Douglas*?”

“Aye, her maiden name. MacLellans wanted no part of her after she called upon the Black Douglases to retake the castle. Bad blood, there.”

Mr. MacLellan added from the taproom, “MacLellans dinnae countenance witchcraft and such.”

Addy’s scalp tingled. She caught Hugh’s eye.

“What’s amiss?” he asked.

“Do you know what my father’s name was?”

“Black?”

“Douglas Black. His great-grandfather changed the surname after moving from Glasgow to Lancaster. Our original name was Douglas.”

Slowly, he grinned. “So, when I wed you, I wed a Douglas lass.”

“I suppose you did.”

“I’ve gained a wife and my liberation from eternal purgatory. What do you gain from this union?”

“Hmm. A strapping set of shoulders?”

He glanced side to side at said shoulders. “Easily hired.”

“A beard to tickle my chin?”

“Cats are softer.”

“I have it: Strong arms to hold me and a strong heart to love me.”

He reached for her fingers and ran his thumb over her calluses. “Somehow, I think I’ve made the better bargain.”

She drew him close and kissed him tenderly. “My darling Sir Hugh. I’m afraid I must disagree.”



## Epilogue

*December 1833*

*London, England*

HUGH AND ADELIN<sup>E</sup> Marshal launched their siege of Thompson and Black a week before Christmas. Among their trusted allies were Mr. Brown, solicitor of Fleet Street; Mr. Edward Thompson, former cabinet maker of Knightsbridge; and Mr. Joseph Thompson, former upholsterer of Marylebone.

But as Addy saw it, all they needed was Hugh.

David Oxbridge had been comfortable for seven years. With her mother's twenty percent, Addy's thirty percent, and his own five percent, David's majority share enabled him to pillage the company unchallenged. Changing to lower-quality woods and faster-but-flimsier construction had driven away her father's hard-won customers and skilled craftsmen. A once-revered business became a ruined shell.

Edward and Joseph Thompson were powerless to steer their company back to a prosperous course. When Addy and Hugh arranged a meeting to propose a siege, the Thompson brothers were overcome with gratitude and determination. They'd readily agreed to the plan, offering a trove of designs and innovations they'd been developing but hadn't wanted to implement in a failing enterprise. Mr. Brown and his associates drafted the documents. Addy advised on David's vulnerabilities—his laziness, his greed, the bitterness of his victims.

Hugh and the Thompsons visited Douglas Black's finest craftsmen one by one. He demonstrated his prowess with a chisel and lathe. He described his plans to establish a new workshop in Lancashire with Addy as the primary shareholder. All ten craftsmen agreed to work for him.

Then they planned their attack on David Oxbridge's stronghold. They chose their weapons and assembled their army with Hugh as their battle commander.

"We must strike with full force and no warning," he'd explained. "Even better if we can catch our target off-balance. Mutiny from within is a weapon without equal."

Today, Addy and Hugh entered the house adjacent to Thompson and Black's workshop. The butler showed them upstairs before solemnly addressing Addy. "I admired your father greatly, Mrs. Marshal." Casting a bitter glance at the drawing room doors, he said, "May I say how pleased I shall be to see his legacy restored."

She nodded her thanks. Having worked in household service for seven years, she understood what this man was risking to help them. It was a measure of David's character that the butler had so readily agreed. Moments later, they heard the front door open as he departed.

A wave of sudden nausea panged through Addy's middle. Hugh gently braced her lower back. She glanced up and smiled.

"Ready?" he asked.

She nodded.

His eyes lit with a hard, anticipatory gleam. "For Douglas."

Laying a hand over her belly, she echoed, "For Douglas."

They found David Oxbridge precisely where his third wife had said he would be—entertaining his mistress in the drawing room. The blackguard's trousers were around his knees, a vulnerable position for any man. Wastrel eyes widened upon their entry. He scrambled to tuck himself away while his mistress's expression went from boredom to surprise to amusement.

"Jamison!" he shouted. "I said no disruptions!"

Addy's mind flashed through her memories of this man. He'd once been handsome, tall, and blessed with a false dignity that fooled many. But his face now sagged with age. His lean frame had developed a paunch. His silver-threaded hair was down to wisps at the crown. And a man struggling to fasten his trousers had no claim to dignity, false or otherwise.

It wasn't all bad, she supposed. He was still tall.

She relished his humiliation a bit more than she should. "Mr. Jamison has left your employ. He's been offered a new position in Cheshire."

While the mistress made a discreet exit, David stammered and blustered, demanding to know their names and their intentions.

"Hugh Marshal," her husband replied. "This is my wife, Adeline."

Raking a hand through his hair, David peered at her. Finally, recognition sparked. "Addy." His eyes narrowed. "Where the devil have you been hiding, girl?"

"No need to hide," she said. "Your ineptitude was ample protection."

He looked at Hugh and lost some color. "You've married, then."

"Indeed." She looped her arm through her husband's.

David eyed Hugh's superior height, superior shoulders, superior everything. His color tinged somewhere between gray and green. "I want you to leave."

"Oh, we shall," she said. "But first, we have something for you."

"What's that?"

She smiled, picturing her weary mother, her proud father, and her younger self. "Justice."

Addy hadn't expected David to weep like a girl who'd lost her pony. But in fairness, Hugh's battle plan was devastatingly



thorough. First, Addy would legally reclaim her shares. Second, she and the Thompsons would make use of an obscure clause Hugh had unearthed in the company's charter: Thompson and Black could be dissolved with a three-quarters majority. It so happened that Addy's thirty percent and the Thompsons' forty-five percent added up splendidly.

Thompson and Black would be shuttered. Its assets would be sold to pay debts. In the end, David Oxbridge's twenty-five percent would net him precisely fifty-two pounds and a cessation of all future income.

Meanwhile Addy, having befriended his downtrodden wife, encouraged Mrs. Oxbridge to seek reconciliation with her eldest son, who despised David. This morning, his wife had left him to reside with her son's family in Bath.

Additionally, several of David's swindling victims had retained the services of Mr. Brown and his associates for filing lawsuits on grounds of contract fraud.

David would be beggared within a year.

Upon delivering news of his grim fate, Addy and Hugh departed for Lancashire to resume their new venture: Marshal & Douglas, Cabinet Makers and Upholsterers of Fine Furnishings. Their specialty was libraries. As investors, the Thompson brothers took an advisory role, but Hugh and Addy ran the business. Hugh had already completed a large order for a Cheshire baroness, which had given them funds to purchase a home near Lancaster.

Technically a castle, the house was a bit worn around the edges. The tower was missing a window, the staircase was missing a banister, and the kitchen was missing a floor. But it sat between a river and the sea. Lovely woodlands surrounded it on three sides. And the library was two stories tall.

Hugh was keen to begin working on the bookshelves. Addy was keen to furnish their nursery.

On Christmas morning, she sat curled up with her husband beside the library fireplace. Nearby, Princess sprawled belly-

up on his tufted cushion. Wet snow dripped from the eaves beyond the window.

Addy sighed with perfect contentment and sipped her tea. “What if it’s a girl?” she asked.

Hugh nuzzled her cheek, tickling her with his beard. “What if it is?”

“We can’t name a girl ‘Douglas.’”

He looked pointedly at Princess.

“That’s different. He’s a cat.”

“At last, you admit the absurdity.”

She offered him a neutral “hmm” before taking another sip. “How about Muriel? It was my grandmother’s name.”

“I like Douglas.”

She clicked her tongue. “You’re too stubborn.”

His laugh was deep and rich. “’Tis a rare irony to hear that from you, woman. I’m honored.”

She laid her cheek against his chest. “I can hear your heart.”

“Aye?”

Closing her eyes, she savored the sound: *dra-DRUM, dra-DRUM, dra-DRUM*. “I think it’s speaking.”

He chuckled.

“Shh,” she admonished. “Let me listen.”

“I can already tell you what it would say.”

“What’s that?”

He kissed her hair and slid a palm over her belly. “Happy Christmas, wife. I am yours to keep.”

She moved his hand up to her heart. “And keep you I shall. For our first eternity together and all the eternities to come.”

The End

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The Secrets of a Moonlit Night (Novella)

## **Rescued from Ruin Series**

[Once Upon a Midnight Kiss \(Novella\)](#)

## About Elisa Braden

Reading romance novels came easily to Elisa Braden. Writing them? That took a little longer. After graduating with degrees in creative writing and history, Elisa spent too many years in “real” jobs writing T-shirt copy ... and other people’s resumes ... and articles about giftware displays. But that was before she woke up and started dreaming about the very *unreal* job of being a romance novelist. Better late than never.

Elisa lives in the Pacific Northwest, where you’re constitutionally required to like the colors green and gray. Good thing she does. Other items on the “like” list include cute dogs, strong coffee, and epic movies. Of course, her favorite thing of all is hearing from readers who love her characters as much as she does.

If you’re one of those, get in touch on [www.elisabraden.com](http://www.elisabraden.com), sign up for Elisa’s [free email newsletter](#), and be sure to connect with her on social media:

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# **Once Upon a Haunted Horn and Hoof**

Elizabeth Rose



# Chapter One

*Horn and Hoof Tavern*

*Glasgow, Scotland, 14 Century*

WORKING FOR MAD old Callum MacKeefe at the Horn and Hoof Tavern wasn't an easy task. Then again, Keithen was a MacKeefe now, and that alone made it a worthwhile situation.

"Come here," whispered Callum, his gaze darting around the room. He wagged a boney finger, calling him over. Callum's long, white hair stuck out in all directions, and his beard reached down to his chest. "I have to tell ye somethin' but ye must keep it a secret," he hissed through broken teeth.

The old man grabbed Keithen by the sleeve and pulled him behind the drink board. He really was an odd one, just like everyone had warned Keithen when he took the job here a fortnight ago.

"Aye?" asked Keithen, bending closer, trying to ignore the odor of garlic on the man's breath. He did not care to know his secret or anything about him, but he tried not to anger Callum since he was known to have an awful temper.

"The Horn and Hoof is haunted," whispered Callum, almost causing Keithen to laugh aloud. "It's haunted, but ye canna tell a soul. Do ye understand?"

"Believe me, I willna repeat that!" Chuckling, Keithen picked up a wet rag and headed across the tavern to wipe the tables and join his friends.

"So, brathair, how do ye like yer new life with the MacKeefes, and workin' in their tavern?" asked his sister, Yvaine who had recently married Cam MacKeefe after the death of her husband, who had been a chandler. Her first marriage had been a living hell, but this time, Yvaine said she

was in heaven. It had been nearly a year now since she'd married Cam. Yvaine looked so happy tonight that Keithen swore his sister glowed.

"It's . . . interestin'." Keithen glanced back at old Callum standing behind the drink board, ranting about a few drops of his precious Mountain Magic that a customer had spilled. The crazy old loon had a secret recipe for making the strongest whisky in all of Scotland and England combined. He also insisted not a drop be wasted. It was said that many people tried to find out how he made Mountain Magic, but Callum guarded his secret and would go to his grave without divulging that information.

"If by interestin' ye mean insane, then, aye, we understand." Cam, Yvaine's husband, sat next to her at the table with a tankard of Mountain Magic in his grip.

Keithen had once owned his own tavern in a small Scottish Lowland village, and knew damned well that no one but the Madmen MacKeefe drank whisky from such a large vessel as a tankard.

"Did Callum make his big announcement yet?" Gavin MacKeefe sat down next to his good friend, Cam. He, too, gripped a tankard of the strong drink. "He's been talkin' about it all night."

"No' yet," Cam reported. "But we have an announcement of our own to make." Yvaine smiled shyly at Cam. Avianca, Cam's six-year-old daughter from another woman, ran over and climbed atop his lap. She was Cam and Yvaine's child now, and happy about it.

"Da, Pa-papa is goin' to ring the bell," the wee lass told him, using her special name for Callum. She then stuck her fingers in her ears as Callum rang a bell that he had mounted on the edge of the drink board. The loud clanging sound filled the air, getting everyone's attention.

"I thought he took that damned bell down," grumbled Cam, swiping a stray strand of blond hair from his eyes.



“Cam, please dinna curse around our daughter,” Yvaine scolded him.

“God’s eyes, I hope he’s not makin’ another set of his silly tavern rules.” Gavin picked up his tankard and took a drink.

“Gavin, there is a child present!” Yvaine took Avianca onto her lap to keep the girl away from the cursing men. “When is Davita arrivin’?” Yvaine inquired about Gavin’s wife.

“She’s no’,” Gavin answered. “Her father had to go on a short trip, so she stayed back at Hermitage Castle. She wanted to help out in town at her family’s cordwainer’s shop until he returns.”

Davita’s family made shoes, and because of it, everyone Davita knew always had new shoes to wear. Hermitage Castle in the Lowlands belonged to the MacKeefes, and they had a camp in the Highlands as well. That was why both Storm MacKeefe and his father Ian were chieftains. With such a distance between their holdings, they needed a ruler in each spot.

“Listen up! I have an announcement to make,” shouted Callum, waving his clenched fist in the air as he made his way over to Keithen and the others. Keithen wondered if he was going to tell everyone about his supposed ghost after all. He really hoped not. For Callum’s sake. After all, his reputation already suffered, and he didn’t need another reason to be called crazy.

“We have our own announcement to make first.” Cam jumped up from the bench so quickly that he almost knocked Gavin to the floor.

“Careful, Cam. Ye ken old Callum will make me lap the whisky off the floor if we spill a single drop,” Gavin grunted, steadying himself as well as his full tankard.

“Cam, no’ yet,” whispered Yvaine, placing her hand on his arm. “Be polite, and wait for Callum to make his announcement first.”

“Nay! If ye have somethin’ to say then spit it out before I knock ye silly for interuptin’ me,” growled the cantankerous old man.

“We’re pregnant,” Cam blurted out, smiling from ear to ear.

“Yvaine, that is wonderful news,” said Keithen, reaching down and hugging his sister. “And this time, yer bairn will survive, so dinna worry,” he whispered in her ear, since she’d lost her last baby.

“That is good news. Ye’re goin’ to be a faither. Again,” said Gavin, slapping Cam on the back. Everyone in the tavern cheered and clapped. Several of the women wandered over to congratulate the couple.

“Am I goin’ to have a sister?” Avianca looked up at her mother with wide, green eyes.

“Yes. Or a brathair.” Yvaine told their daughter, giggling and hugging the girl to her chest.

“Nay, I want a sister,” protested the little girl, as if she thought she had a choice in the matter.

“Are we done with this clishmaclaver now, so I can talk?” asked Callum in a sarcastic tone. “After all, it is my tavern, unless ye’ve forgotten.”

“Nay, we havena forgotten. Ye will never let us forget that,” mumbled Gavin into his tankard.

“What is it, Callum?” asked Keithen. “Tell everyone what ye have to say.” When he was sure his employer was going to tell everyone his ridiculous story about having a ghost, he said something totally different that Keithen wasn’t expecting at all.

“When ye started workin’ here a fortnight ago, Keithen, I told ye I would hire ye, but that ye had to do somethin’ for me in return.” Callum crossed his arms over his chest.

“Aye, that’s right,” said Keithen, still smiling from his sister’s good news. “What did ye want me to do? Change the

rushes on the floor? Or perhaps help ye make that secret recipe for your famous Mountain Magic?”

“Nay!” spat the old man, his face turning red at the suggestion. “Ye are no’ goin’ to learn my secret so dinna even try. No one ever will. And the rushes are fine and dinna need changin’.”

“Then what is it, Callum?” asked Cam, sitting back down and putting his arm around his wife.

“Keithen is a MacKeefe now, is he no?” asked Callum.

“Callum, ye ken he is,” Gavin answered. “Storm invited him into the clan when his sister married Cam.”

Callum snorted. “I still dinna consider him one of us. After all, he’s yet to prove his worth.”

The mood suddenly grew solemn.

“Well, what can I do to prove to you that I honor bein’ a MacKeefe?” asked Keithen. “Just name it, and I will do it.”

“Keithen, nay,” he heard Cam’s urgent whisper. When he looked up, he saw both Cam and Gavin scowling at him, shaking their heads in some sort of silent warning not to agree to a thing.

“Anythin’?” asked Callum. He narrowed his eyes, and his long-bearded chin jutted up in the air.

“Aye. Anythin’ at all.” Keithen had no worries. After all, he was young and strong, and the old man probably needed help moving something heavy. Even if he had to muck out the stables, he’d willingly do so to be accepted into the prestigious MacKeefe clan.

Cam cleared his throat, and Gavin faked a cough. Keithen looked over at his friends again. Now they were waving their hands in the air along with shaking their heads. He wasn’t sure what was going on.

“I’m glad to hear that,” said Callum in an approving tone. “Mayhap ye’ll earn yer title of bein’ a MacKeefe after all.”

Keithen was once naught but a commoner who lived in a town in the Lowlands. He had done more than his share of jobs that most people would find disgusting or appalling. Nothing could bother him in the least. He prided himself on his ability to be adaptable, and make the crazy old man accept him along the way.

“Ye’re gettin’ married,” announced Callum.

“What?” Keithen’s head snapped around, and he stared at the old man with wide eyes. “Nay, I’m no’. I assure ye, I’m no’ gettin’ married and neither do I want to do so right now. I dinna even have myself a lass.”

“Ye do now,” said Callum.

Cam and Gavin both groaned. Keithen swore he heard one of them whisper *I told ye so*. Suddenly, the room went silent as everyone listened intently.

“Keithen, ye are in for it now,” said Cam.

“Ye never should have agreed to willingly do *anythin’* for Callum,” added Gavin. “That was yer first mistake.”

“What’s this all about?” Keithen shrugged, feeling totally confused. “I’m tellin’ ye, I do no’ have a special lass, and I dinna plan on gettin’ married for a long, long time yet.”

“Yer bride-to-be is Lorna MacNeil,” Callum continued. “She’s arrivin’ here in the mornin’ to marry ye right away. Now, be sure no’ to do anythin’ to scare her off.” Callum turned to go back to the drink board, but Keithen grabbed him by the arm.

“Wait a minute. Ye are no’ serious about this?”

“Callum never jests,” mumbled Cam.

“The MacNeils are our mortal enemies,” Gavin spoke up.

“They’ll be our allies once Keithen marries the lass,” said the old man, prying Keithen’s fingers off of his arm. “Now get back to work, Keithen. This tavern needs a good cleanin’ before yer betrothed arrives.”

All of a sudden, a scream was heard from the stairs above. It was followed by the sound of several slamming doors. Keithen looked over to the staircase to see two of the tavern's strumpets running down the stairs, half-dressed. Behind them were the men—their customers, pulling on their clothes, hopping on one foot and almost falling over as they ran after the women.

“What’s the matter?” Keithen called out.

“I’ll no’ work here ever again!” cried one of the girls, running out the door.

“Neither will I,” said another whore, following on her heels.

Keithen reached out and grabbed one of the men by the arm. “What happened?”

“I’ll find another place to bed my whores,” said the man, shaking out of Keithen’s grip.

“Wait. Why?” Keithen didn’t understand this at all.

“*He’s* what happened.” The second man looked up the stairs and nodded. Then both men ran out the door together.

Keithen heard a low moan, and looked over to see a man in white floating down the stairs. He looked transparent. Keithen rubbed his eyes, thinking he was dreaming. “What in the devil’s name is that?”

“It’s a ghost!” one of the women at a table shouted, gathering up her children and high-tailing it for the door as well. The Horn and Hoof was a place where everyone was welcome. Families with children came to eat, and the patrons consisted of Highlanders, Lowlanders and also an occasional Englishman as well.

The ghostly figure released a bloodcurdling scream and waved his arms frantically above his head. That sent the rest of the patrons running out of the tavern, tripping over each other, anxious to leave. The only ones left besides Keithen and

Callum were Cam, Gavin, and Yvaine, who was holding little Avianca tightly in her arms.

“W-who is that?” Gavin slowly stood, his hand going to the hilt of his sword.

The ghostly figure moved through the tavern, heading over toward Callum, who stood behind the drink board with a bottle of Mountain Magic clenched in his fist. The ghost’s eyes were large, dark holes. If Keithen wasn’t mistaken, the ghost’s neck was broken, since his head hung at an odd angle.

“I’m scared,” whimpered Avianca, hiding her eyes against Yvaine’s chest.

“Yvaine, get Avianca out of here. Now,” ordered Cam, jumping up and escorting his wife to the door. He closed the door after them, turning around with his sword drawn. “Are ye ready, Gavin?” asked Cam.

“I am.” Gavin drew his sword as well.

If Keithen had owned a sword he would have done the same. Instead, he picked up a stool and held it out like a weapon.

“What are we goin’ to do?” asked Cam.

“Kill it, of course,” said Keithen, taking a step forward.

The ghost heard him, and spun around. His eerie holes for eyes now glowed as he focused on Keithen. He held out a ghostly sword.

“Arrrrrrgh!” cried the ghost, aiming the tip of his sword at Keithen’s heart. Then he flew across the room, surprisingly going right through him. Keithen dropped the stool, surprised to find he wasn’t dead. Still, his breath was knocked from his body. Cam and Gavin rushed over to help him. Standing back to back, they looked around the room with their swords at the ready.

“Where did it go?” asked Cam. “What happened to it?”

“I don’t know. It just disappeared,” shouted Gavin.

“Am I dead?” Keithen’s hands went to his chest and he patted himself. “I saw his sword go right into me. He went right through me.”

“We’ve got to kill it,” commanded Gavin.

“Nay! Put down yer swords, ye fools.” Callum hobbled over to them. “Ye canna kill the ghost, because he is already dead.”

“Ye dinna seem as surprised to see a ghost as the rest of us, Callum,” said Cam.

“Nay, I’m no’.”

“Ye kent the ghost was here?” asked Gavin.

Keithen turned a full circle, still patting himself and looking for wounds.

“Of course, I did,” said Callum. “He’s been here since I took over the Horn and Hoof many years ago.”

“I’ve never heard of a ghost occupying the tavern,” said Gavin.

“That’s because I’ve seen to it that the bastard stays quiet,” explained Cam. “However, he’s been causin’ trouble lately, knockin’ things over and slammin’ doors. He has gotten out of control.”

“I’ll say,” gasped Keithen. “He tried to kill me. Why? Why does he want me dead?”

“It was probably because you spoke of killin’ him,” Cam pointed out.

“Nay, that’s no’ why.” Callum popped a cork out of the bottle of whisky and took a swig.

“Then why now? After bein’ silent all these years?” asked Gavin.

“He’s upset,” said Callum. “But I figured out a way to settle him down.”

“What does that even mean?” asked Keithen, feeling more confused than ever.

“That ghost is Lennox MacNeil,” said Callum. “The grandda of the girl that Keithen is about to marry.”





## Chapter Two

“**W**AIT A MINUTE,” said Keithen, slowly lowering himself atop a wooden bench, still trying to catch his breath. “Ye mean to tell me I’m marryin’ the ghost’s granddaughter, and he doesna like it?”

Callum shrugged. “Mayhap no’. But once we have an alliance, he’ll settle down I’m sure.”

“Well, I’m no’ sure,” snapped Keithen. “How do ye ken this isna what has him upset in the first place?”

“I dinna,” said Callum. “So, that is why ye’ve got to get rid of Lennox now, as well as marry his granddaughter for the alliance. I dinna want him scarin’ off my customers or stoppin’ this weddin’.”

“I will no’!” Keithen’s anger grew. He didn’t like his life being planned by a madman.

“Ye are a MacKeefe now, and need to prove yer worth,” Callum reminded him. “Ye will do what I say, or I’ll make ye an outcast and no’ welcomed back here.”

“Ye dinna want that,” mumbled Gavin.

“Bein’ an outcast isna a good thing. We ken from experience,” added Cam.

“Callum, isna Lennox MacNeil the man ye killed, thereby makin’ our clans enemies in the first place?” asked Gavin.

“It wasna my fault. I didna kill him. No’ really. It was an accident,” said Callum, taking another swig of whisky, looking the other way.

“What happened? I mean, how did the man die?” asked Keithen, having to know this answer.

“Lennox and I were friends at one time,” explained Callum. “He surprised me one day when I was makin’ whisky in my still out in the woods. While sittin’ atop his horse, he tried to find out my secret recipe. When he leaned over to see what I was doin’, I pushed him away. Well, the horse reared up on him. The bloody fool Lennox—who had drunk too much in the first place—fell and broke his damned neck. Honestly, I think it was his fate, since I found out afterwards he was only tryin’ to steal my secret recipe to sell it to our enemies.”

“That’s just speculation.” Gavin shook his head. “Nothing has ever been proven.”

“I say it’s true, and that is enough proof!” Callum seemed to be angered by Gavin’s words.

“Either way, I’m no’ marryin’ the man’s granddaughter, and neither am I goin’ to get rid of a ghost.” Keithen reached over and snagged the bottle from Callum, taking a swig to calm his nerves. “That ghost wants me dead!”

“Ye have to marry the girl to make peace,” said Callum. “It’s more important now than ever.”

“Make peace with who?” Keithen’s eyes opened wide. “It is no secret Lennox doesna want peace. He wants my head.”

“The betrothal is set and the girl is en route,” Callum reminded him.

“He’s right,” agreed Gavin. “If ye break the promise, our clans will have a bloody battle on our hands. It is the last thing we want or need.”

“And if I go through with it, it’ll be my blood that’s spilled instead,” Keithen ground out, wondering if anyone really cared what happened to him.

“Ye need to find a way to make Lennox leave my tavern,” said Callum. “If no’, I will be ruined. Ruined, I say! He has already scared away all my customers.”

“I agree,” said Cam. “I dinna think anyone will return after what they witnessed here tonight.”

Gavin put his hand on Keithen's shoulder. "The MacKeefe clan depends on the sales from Callum's Mountain Magic. It is our main source of income. Without it, we'll really struggle. It's up to you now to save the clan from failing."

Keithen didn't want the clan to struggle. Neither did he want the clan to fail, since he and his sister were now part of the family. Since he was a MacKeefe now, he wanted to do whatever he could to help out. And earning favor in Callum's eyes couldn't hurt him any, either.

"How do ye suggest I get rid of a ghost?" Keithen's head spun with concern, and he desperately needed suggestions. After all, this wasn't something he had ever encountered before.

Callum shrugged his boney shoulders. "I dinna care how ye do it, but just dinna let yer betrothed ken that the ghost of her grandda is trying to ruin the marriage. If she finds out, she might be the one to break the alliance instead. I warn ye, only trouble will result in either side breaking the betrothal."

"Ye think so?" Keithen felt his heart racing. He needed this marriage to work out more than the rest of the clan, because he was the one with the most at stake.

"Ye'll do it, then?" asked Cam.

"I dinna see that I have a choice," mumbled Keithen, taking another swig of whisky. "But how the hell do I kill a ghost?"

"Nay! Ye canna kill him," shouted Callum, his hands waving in the air like a madman once again. "He's already dead. Ye just need to convince him to leave, that's all. Leave here for good, and never return."

"If only it were that easy." Keithen ran a weary hand through his long, blond hair, wishing he had the skill of the Highland warriors and also the cunning of old Callum. Sadly, he had neither.

The door to the tavern burst open, and in walked a line of Highlanders clothed in dark green plaid. Since the MacKeefe's

plaid was purple, brown, and green, he knew they weren't men from his new clan.

“So, where is this man who'll be marryin' my daughter?” asked the gruff-looking man who was surely the chieftain. He held an air of pride and command about him. He also wore more weapons than the others.

“Oh no,” said Keithen.

“I thought they werena comin' until mornin',” commented Cam.

“He's right here, Laird Bhaltair MacNeil.” Callum hurried across the room, grabbing Keithen by the arm and pushing him forward. “His name is Keithen. Keithen MacKeefe. He's the groom.”

“So, ye're the MacKeefe who is goin' to marry my wee Lorna?” The man was big and burly, with a long, reddish-brown beard and thick brows. He also had the largest sword strapped to his side that Keithen had ever seen in his life.

“Aye. I am Keithen,” he said, clearing his throat. “But I'm no' really a Mac—”

“Best MacKeefe in the clan,” said Cam, slapping Keithen hard on the back to shut him up. “Go with it,” he whispered from the side of his mouth.

“That's right. Keithen will make a wonderful husband for yer daughter, Laird MacNeil,” added Gavin.

The newcomer's head snapped around, and he scowled at Gavin. “Chieftain. Call me Chieftain,” growled the man, looking no happier about this arrangement than Keithen was at the moment.

Keithen opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say a word, a beautiful lassie marched in, stopping next to Chieftain MacNeil.

“I thought I told ye to wait outside,” Chieftain Bhaltair MacNeil scolded the girl.

“If I am the one marryin’ the man, then I have a right to meet him, and no’ be kept in the dark. Well, which one is he?” she asked, looking at each of the men in turn.

Keithen was tongue-tied by her beauty. She had long, golden hair like spun sunshine. It was braided and entwined with colorful wildflowers. She held a sprig of heather in her fingers, twirling it around and around as she waited for her answer. Her eyes were bright blue like the sky, but filled with intense scrutiny, like a hawk. Her figure was curvy in all the right places. The lass’s lips were full and red, and her cheeks were rosy. Keithen had been around whores his whole life while working in his tavern. However, even with all their tricks to look enticing to men, none of them could hold a candle to this lassie’s natural beauty.

“I – I am Keithen. Yer groom,” he finally managed to say.

“Yes. I can see that.” She raised a curved brow and nodded. That was when Keithen realized Cam, Gavin, and even old Callum were all pointing directly at him behind his back. “These are my friends, Cam and Gavin, and the tavern’s proprietor, Callum MacKeefe,” he introduced the others.

“Ye seem as if ye were hesitant to admit ye are the groom,” said Bhaltair. “I warn ye, if ye ever think of lyin’ to my daughter, or doin’ a thing to hurt her, I’ll personally have yer head.” The chieftain’s beefy hand covered the hilt of his sword.

“Of course no’. Why would I even think of doin’ somethin’ like that?” Keithen asked nervously, not able to push the thought from his head that Callum told him he had to keep the ghost a secret. Wasn’t that the same as lying? God’s eyes, he hoped not! And now that so many had seen the spirit, did it even matter what he said?

“Where is everyone?” asked the girl, quickly scoping the room.

“Aye. If ye’re goin’ to support my daughter, I’d think this tavern would be busy, which it’s no’.” Bhaltair stared with

dark, penetrating eyes that went right through Keithen. This didn't feel good at all.

"It's early yet," explained Callum. "It'll be busy soon. Right, boys?" Callum glared at Keithen and his friends, as if they actually had control if customers came to the tavern or not.

"Right," said Cam.

"Sure," agreed Gavin.

Both of them just stood there.

"Well? Go see what is takin' the customers so long to get here," said Callum through gritted teeth. "Bring them in here anon."

"Yes, we'll do that." Keithen took one step forward, but his path was blocked by Bhaltair, who crossed his thick arms over his broad chest.

"I'd think ye'd want to stay here and get to ken yer betrothed, Keithen MacKeefe," said the gruff man. His intentions to keep Keithen from walking out were clear.

LORNA MACNEIL WATCHED as two of the MacKeefes ran out the front door. The one named Keithen, who she was to marry, seemed to want to leave as well, but her father stopped him. She couldn't blame her future groom. After all, her father was demanding, overbearing, and downright rude. He scared anyone who met him.

"Faither, I'm sure my betrothed would like to show me to the room where I am to stay until the weddin' takes place. I am tired from the trip, and would like to rest."

"Yer room," repeated Keithen, his gaze roaming over to Callum who nodded slightly. "We happen to have a few rooms vacant upstairs, but perhaps ye'd be more comfortable stayin' elsewhere."

"Elsewhere? Like where?" asked Lorna. "Do ye have a castle nearby that I can stay in?" She knew full well the answer, but was just trying to get the man to talk so she could

get to know him. After all, he would soon be her husband, and he'd barely said much to her at all. She actually preferred the silent type, since her father was so boisterous that it was a nice change. Still, her husband should be strong, able to stand up for and protect her. Keithen didn't look like the rest of the Highland warriors, and he wasn't even wearing any weapons other than a small dagger.

"Nay, the MacKeefes only have a camp in the Highlands," Keithen informed her.

"Hermitage Castle is ours, but it's too far for ye to journey there before the weddin'," said Callum. "I've made plans for the ceremony to happen right here at the Horn and Hoof in three days' time."

"Three days?" Both Keithen and Lorna said together.

"That soon?" gasped Keithen, sounding as if he wasn't fond of the idea. Actually, she wasn't sure she liked it either.

"We havena even posted weddin' banns yet," Lorna pointed out. "And Keithen and I dinna ken each other."

"No need for postin' banns. And ye'll get to ken each other once ye're married," Callum told them. "Now, the marriage should happen right away. Our clans have been enemies for too long, and it is time for an alliance. Chieftain MacNeil, come to the drink board with yer men. I'll pour ye some Mountain Magic. No charge." He extended his skinny arm, showing the way.

"I have heard good things about yer whisky, though I've never tasted it for myself," said the chieftain.

"Nay? Why no'?" asked Keithen with a chuckle. "I thought everyone in Scotland has had it at one time or another."

"My faither died over that whisky," said Bhaltair through clenched teeth. "On second thought, I dinna think I want any at all. Mayhap this whole alliance was a mistake."

“Nay! Nay, it’s no’ a mistake. I have to marry yer daughter,” said Keithen, sounding a bit desperate for some reason.

“Ye *have* to?” questioned Bhaltair.

“Want to. He meant that he wants to marry her,” said Callum, throwing Keithen a look that could kill.

Lorna didn’t want trouble between the clans. She just wanted to be married, and who better to wed than one of the strong MacKeefes? “Please, Da. Just have a drink. To celebrate my betrothal.”

While her father was a hardened, headstrong man, Lorna was usually able to get him to bend to her will. Since she was his only daughter, her father favored her, and sometimes Lorna took advantage of that.

“Well, mayhap just one drink.” Her father and the other men of the traveling party headed over to the drink board with Callum, leaving Lorna alone with Keithen.

“Well, will ye show me to my room now?” asked Lorna. She walked over to the stairs with Keithen, looking up to see a man watching them from the upper floor. As soon as she noticed him, the man ducked down the corridor and disappeared. “Who is that man above stairs who seems to be watchin’ us?”

Keithen stopped so fast that she went crashing right into the back of him. He turned and caught her, keeping her from falling. His arms felt strong around her. She looked up into his oaken eyes, noticing the scent of woodsmoke and whisky on him. A heat engulfed her from just being touched by this handsome man.

“Mayhap I’ll show ye the kitchen first, since I’m sure ye’re hungry from the journey,” he suggested.

“Nay.” She reluctantly pushed out of his arms, knowing if she stayed with him another minute, she’d want to kiss him to see how it felt. That wouldn’t bode well with her father watching. “I’d prefer to go to my room for now.” She looked



up the stairs again, and once more she saw the flash of a man hiding at the top landing. He was dressed all in white, and looked very pale. “That man up there is actin’ odd. Is it safe for me to stay here?”

“What man?” growled her father from the drink board.

She was about to tell her father what she’d seen when Keithen interrupted.

“No one, Chieftain. There is no man, nor anyone else up there, and no need to worry,” Keithen blurted out. “Come, Lorna, let me escort ye to the kitchen.” He put his hand on the small of her back and led her away.

It felt good to be touched by him, and Lorna quickly forgot about the strange man upstairs lurking in the shadows. Since it made her feel uncomfortable, she decided to stay with Keithen for now. After all, the only thing that really mattered at the moment was getting to know the man, since she would be his wife in just a few short days.



## Chapter Three

KEITHEN HADN'T SLEPT well at all, tossing and turning all night long, worrying about his future with the MacNeil lass. He thought he heard a noise, and woke to find the ghost of Lennox MacNeil standing over him at the foot of his pallet.

“Aaaah!” Keithen bolted upright, grabbing for anything he could to ward off the spirit who seemed to want him dead. Unfortunately, the closest thing to grab was his shoe from next to his pallet that sat directly on the floor. “Get back, or I’ll do somethin’ ye’ll regret,” he spat, realizing as soon as the words left his mouth how stupid the threat sounded. After all, MacNeil had a sword strapped to his side, and Keithen only had . . . a shoe.

The ghost laughed deeply, his body bobbing up and down in the air like a boat on the water.

“Ye are the one marryin’ my granddaughter are ye no?” His eyes were no longer big, gaping holes, but still looked dark and void of life.

“I—I am,” said Keithen, scooting to the end of the pallet, terrified to know the ghost could speak. Slowly, he stood. His eyes flashed over to the table where he’d left his dagger, and he carefully side-stepped his way toward it.

“I dinna want a MacKeefe marryin’ her. The MacKeefes canna be trusted.”

“I heard about how ye died,” said Keithen, trying to keep the ghost talking so he wouldn’t realize he was going for his dagger.

“The Madman MacKeefe killed me!” This thought only seemed to rile the ghost, and now Keithen regretted mentioning it.

“Now, calm down,” said Keithen, holding up his hands. “I ken old Callum is crazy, everyone kens that. But I assure ye, he didna mean to kill ye. I mean—ye were his friend.”

“A friend would give me his secret for makin’ the best and strongest whisky in Scotland.”

“And sell it to the enemy as well?” he mumbled.

“What did ye say?”

Keithen suddenly regretted voicing his thoughts aloud. “I assure ye, Callum will no’ even tell his own son how he makes it. Dinna take it personally.”

“I want to ken how it’s made, and ye’ll find out for me or ye’ll no’ marry my granddaughter—and ye’ll be the one to suffer. Do ye understand?” His head hung at an odd angle as he spoke, only reminding Keithen of broken necks. His hand went to his own neck in a form of protection.

“I would if I could, but he willna tell me!” Keithen could see his situation getting worse and worse, and he was helpless to change a thing. “I am only marryin’ Lorna to make an alliance with our clans.” He made it to the table. With his hand behind his back he reached out for the dagger. The ghost was getting so angry that Keithen was sure he’d try to take off his head again, and he needed a way to defend himself.

“Do it!” screamed Lennox, just as Keithen was about to close his fingers around the dagger. But before he could, the ghost waved his hand through the air and an invisible force pushed him down. His dagger went flying.

Keithen’s eyes widened as he saw the door to his room open, and the dagger embed itself into the wood right next to Cam’s head.

“What in the bloody hell are ye doin’?” Cam jumped to the side. Gavin was right behind him.

“I didna do that,” protested Keithen, getting to his feet. “It was him.” He pointed to the ghost, but Lennox MacNeil was gone.

“Who?” asked Gavin. “I dinna see anyone here but ye, Keithen.”

“It was the ghost,” said Keithen, walking over and yanking his dagger out of the wood. “He was here, and he threatened me.”

Gavin looked out to the corridor and then quickly closed the door. “Dinna talk so loud. We dinna want Lorna to hear ye.”

“Or her faither,” said Keithen with a nod.

“Thankfully, her faither left with most of his men to get supplies for the weddin’,” Cam told him. “He said Callum didna have enough food for all the guests he invited. He’ll be back on the day of the weddin’.”

“He left only a few guards, who are still sleepin’ down in the tavern,” Gavin told him.

“What about Lorna?” asked Keithen.

“Yvaine and Avianca went to Lorna’s room to help her prepare for the day,” said Cam.

“I hope she didna hear the ghost.” Keithen hurriedly dressed as he talked to his friends.

“What did Lennox say?” asked Cam.

“He wants me to find out and tell him Callum’s secret of how he makes his Mountain Magic better than anyone else’s whisky.”

Gavin laughed. “Callum will die before he gives up that information.”

“And so will I if I dinna give the ghost what he wants.” Keithen sat on a chair to don his boots. “Plus, he said he didna want me marryin’ his granddaughter.”

“What are ye goin’ to do?” asked Cam.

“I have to find out Callum’s secret and tell Lennox before the ghost kills me. Then I need to marry Lorna before her

faither kills me. No' to mention, I need to bring back business to the Horn and Hoof before Callum kills me, that's all." Just saying this aloud brought a knot to Keithen's stomach.

"That's a tall order to fill." Cam chuckled.

"Ye two are goin' to help me." Keithen told, didn't ask, his friends.

"Nay, no' me," said Gavin, holding up a halting hand.

"I'm no' gettin' involved either. I'm a married man now with a bairn on the way," said Cam. Both men shook their heads and looked in the other direction.

"I'm yer family now," Keithen pleaded with them. "My sister has already seen her first husband die. Do ye think she wants to see her brathair die as well?"

Cam looked back over his shoulder without really turning his head. "Now, that's no' fair."

"Neither is the position I'm in fair to me. Have ye two been able to bring back the customers yet?" Keithen inquired.

"No' yet," said Gavin. "They're pretty scared by what they've seen. It's goin' to take a lot of convincin'."

"Damn it, ye've got to try harder." Keithen rubbed the back of his neck, already feeling Lennox's blade against his skin. He wasn't sure if a ghost could really kill him or not, but he wasn't willing to find out. He rather liked having his head mounted on his shoulders.

"What about ye?" asked Cam. "What are ye goin' to do to help?"

"I'm goin' to go to that old barn where Callum makes his whisky," Keithen told them his plan. He stood and put on his belt, slipping his dagger through it. "With any luck, mayhap I can figure out Callum's secret, and tell Lennox without Callum ever finding out. At least that would solve one of my problems."

“Did Lennox agree to leave the tavern for good if ye gave him this information?” asked Gavin.

“Well, nay. I didna think to tell him that,” Keithen admitted.

“Ye need to make a deal with him,” said Cam. “Tell him if ye give him what he wants, he has to promise to leave here and never return.”

“And to let the weddin’ progress as planned,” added Gavin.

“Aye. I’ll do that as soon as I see him again.” Keithen wasn’t looking forward to another encounter with the ghost, and neither was he excited about having to sneak into the barn where Callum kept his still. Either of these things was more dangerous than anything he had ever done since hiding the fact that his sister had killed—or thought she killed—her own husband. “Make sure Yvaine keeps Lorna busy until I return. And tell Callum I went to town but will be back soon.” Keithen got to the door and stopped. “Oh, and try yer hardest to get the customers to return and stay quiet about what they saw. We wouldna want any of the MacNeils findin’ out about the ghost before the weddin’.”

“Anything else, yer highness?” asked Gavin sarcastically. Both Cam and Gavin glared at him. Keithen had no right to tell anyone what to do, especially not a Highlander. But in this situation, he had no choice.

“Aye,” said Keithen, flashing a quick smile. “Make sure neither Callum nor Lennox follow me. And if I live through this, I want ye both to train me to wield a sword, because about right now it would certainly come in handy.”



“ENTER,” LORNA CALLED out, hearing the knocking at her chamber door. She had just finished dressing, and was about to go look for Keithen and start her day.

A woman poked her head around the door. "Hello, I am Yvaine, wife of Cam MacKeefe. This is our daughter, Avianca." She pushed the door open wider to reveal a young girl standing next to her. "May we come in?"

"Yes, of course. I am Lorna MacNeil. I'm happy to meet ye."

"Come on, Avianca," said Yvaine, entering the room, but the little girl stood at the door, not wanting to enter.

"I'm afraid the ghost is in here," said Avianca.

"Ghost?" asked Lorna with a chuckle, thinking it was just a childish fear until she saw the look on Yvaine's face.

"Shhh, Avianca," said Yvaine, with a finger to her lips. Then her eyes flashed over to Lorna. "I'm sorry. Ye werena supposed to hear that." Yvaine grabbed her daughter by the hand and pulled her into the room.

"Is there really a ghost?" questioned Lorna, her eyes moving back and forth from the woman to the child.

"He was scary, and chased all the customers away." The child looked at her with frightened eyes.

"Avianca!" Yvaine pulled her daughter closer.

"It's all right. Ye can tell me," said Lorna. "I'm no' afraid of ghosts."

"Ye would be of this one," said Yvaine, looking out to the hall and then quickly closing the door. "I'm sorry. My daughter never should have told ye. We were warned to keep quiet."

"Whatever for?" Lorna chuckled again.

"Because the ghost is yer grandda," admitted Yvaine.

"And Callum is the one who killed him." Avianca got another nasty glare from her mother.

"What?" Lorna's smile faded. "Is this true?"

“Well, yes and no,” Yvaine quickly answered. “The ghost is real and he is yer grandda, Lennox MacNeil. That part is true.”

“Nay,” gasped Lorna, holding her hand to her mouth. She slowly lowered herself atop a chair.

“However, Callum swears the man’s death was an accident. Lennox fell from his horse and broke his neck while Callum was trying to keep him from learning his secret.”

“Secret? What secret?” asked Lorna.

“How to make Mountain Magic,” said the little girl.

“Do ye mean the whisky?”

“That’s right,” answered Yvaine. “Callum has kept it a guarded secret all these years, and never told a soul. Not even his own son.”

“Well, I hardly think something as silly as that is worth dyin’ over.” Lorna couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She knew their clans were enemies, and it had something to do with her late grandfather, but her own father had never wanted to talk about it or even tell her more.

Yvaine continued. “The MacKeefes dinna think their coveted whisky is silly, I assure ye. And honestly, every clan in Scotland would like to get their hands on the information of how to make it, because it brings in a lot of money. I’ve heard from my husband that Lennox was goin’ to steal the secret and sell it to an enemy of the MacKeefes.”

“Does my da ken his own faither is a ghost?” asked Lorna.

“Nay. And neither do the MacKeefes want him to find out,” answered Yvaine, seeming very worried now. “Oh, please, Lorna. Dinna tell him. And dinna let anyone ken that Avianca told ye, or I will be in a lot of trouble.”

“Of course no’,” said Lorna, putting her hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Yer secret is safe with me. Now, let’s go find somethin’ to eat. And I want ye to tell me all about yer



brathair. After all, if I am goin' to be marryin' the man in a few days, I'd like to ken how brave and strong he is."

"Uncle Keithen is no' a Highland warrior like my da," blurted out Avianca.

"He's no'?" asked Lorna.

"What she means is that Keithen doesna wield a sword like the others," Yvaine quickly spoke up.

"He doesna? Why no'?" asked Lorna.

"Oh, please dinna ask me that." Yvaine wrung her hands together.

"Nay. I need to hear the answer," said Lorna, wondering what else the MacKeefes were hiding from her.

"Lorna, I hope this willna cause ye to change yer mind about marryin' my brathair. I mean, he's one of the nicest, yet bravest men, ye'll ever meet," continued Yvaine.

"Tell me," she demanded.

"My brathair and I were naught but commoners until I married Cam MacKeefe, and their chieftain allowed Keithen into the clan as well."

"So, he's no' a warrior then?"

"Nay. I was the wife of a chandler, and Keithen owned a tavern close to Hermitage Castle."

"I see," said Lorna, knowing her father wouldn't be happy about this. "So, Callum MacKeefe deceived my da, by makin' the alliance."

"Nay! Never. I'm sure it just never came up, or Callum would have told him. This marriage is important. For peace between yer clans. Please, dinna let this change yer mind about my brathair."

"Where is Keithen now?" she asked.

"I—I'm no' sure," said Yvaine.

Through the open window, Lorna heard voices and the sound of a snorting horse. She walked over and looked out to see Keithen mounting a horse, talking to his friends.

“Excuse me,” said Lorna. “I want to catch up with yer brathair.” She ran out the door, exiting through the kitchen to avoid her guards, who were in the tavern area, probably still sleeping. She entered the barn, but Keithen was already riding away, and his friends had left as well.

“I need my horse saddled, anon,” she told the stableboy.

“I was told by yer faither no’ to let ye leave,” said the boy, stepping in front of her.

“I do no’ take orders from ye. Now, out of my way.”

“I have my orders,” the boy protested.

She was about to push him out of the way but didn’t need to. The boy’s eyes opened wide and he ran screaming from the barn. When she turned to look at what had frightened him, she saw the same man she’d seen atop the stairs yesterday. Now, she realized he was transparent.

“Loooorna,” wailed the ghost.

Lorna’s heart raced. “G-Grandda?” she asked, only having known her grandfather for a short time when she was a very young girl.

The ghost floated closer to her, making her feel very uncomfortable. The sight of him was frightening. Lorna was all alone without anyone to protect her. She mounted her horse without a saddle, sitting astride like a man, and rode from the barn. The horse ran right through the ghost, taking her breath away when it happened.

She rode like the wind, looking back over her shoulder, but thankfully her dead grandfather didn’t seem to be following. Taking the road she’d seen Keithen travel, she soon came upon an old, broken-down barn deep in the woods. There was a horse tied up outside, and she recognized it as the one she’d seen Keithen riding.

Dismounting, she tied the reins of her horse to a tree and hurried into the barn. She took two steps inside and stopped in her tracks, seeing the still and the casks stacked up around the barn. This, she realized, must be where old Callum MacKeefe made his whisky.

A hand clasped around her mouth, and she struggled as a man pulled her into an empty stall.

“Keep quiet and ye willna get hurt,” she heard the low voice whisper in her ear, making her think that by running from the ghost she had inadvertently ran into even more trouble.



## Chapter Four

FROM A CROUCHED position in the barn near Callum's still, Keithen held his hand over Lorna's mouth, watching Callum at work. The girl had almost announced her presence, which would have caused the old man to know that he was being spied on.

Lorna looked back at Keithen, and her tense body slowly relaxed.

"Shhh," he said, removing his hand from her mouth. This close to the girl, Keithen could not only feel her body pressed up against him, but was well aware of her tantalizing scent of wildflowers and fresh air. "Dinna let him ken we are here," he said, his mouth up against her ear. He swore she held her breath and her eyes closed. Then, he felt her body go limp against his chest.

If he hadn't been looking at her, he would have noticed the MacKeefe guards run into the barn, followed by the damned ghost.

"Callum, it's the ghost! Do somethin'," shouted one of the men.

Callum put down the funnel and his hands went to his waist.

"Lennox MacNeil, ye are no' welcome here," shouted Callum.

"It's my grandda," whispered Lorna.

"Ye ken he's the ghost?" asked Keithen.

"I do. What does he want?"

"He wants the secret of how to make Mountain Magic."

“But he’s dead. He’s a ghost,” she said. “What does it matter now?”

“Leave before I have my guards run ye through with their swords,” Callum threatened the ghost.

A deep laughter filled the air. “Yer men canna harm me, and ye ken it.” Lennox flew right through one man, and the other went sailing through the air as if the ghost had pushed him.

Lorna gasped and held a hand over her mouth. The guards ran from the building in fright.

“Ye dinna scare me, ye mischant spirit. Now leave!” shouted Callum once again.

“Ye ken what I want, Callum. Now give it to me.”

“Never!”

Right before Keithen’s eyes, he saw a large cask of whisky rise from the stack and then come crashing down, letting loose the others with a loud bang. The barrels rolled right toward Callum.

“Nay!” shouted Keithen, darting out from his hiding place, running to Callum and pushing him aside to get hit by the barrels instead.

“NAY! KEITHEN!” LORNA ran out to help her betrothed while the ghost of her grandfather flew back and forth wailing, causing a shiver to run up her spine.

Keithen pushed up from the ground, facing the ghost head-on. Callum lay silent on the ground.

“Ye will leave here now and never return!” Keithen shouted to the ghost. “Ye willna ever hurt any of the MacKeefes again, and neither will ye stop my weddin’ to Lorna.”

“Ye ken what I want,” said the ghost, the apparition getting dimmer and his voice fading as if it were losing energy. Then, in a wisp of fog or air, the ghost disappeared.

“Keithen, are ye all right?” Lorna ran to him and threw her arms around him. “That was so brave, what ye just did.”

Without being able to stop herself, she pressed her lips against his in a deep kiss. Keithen’s arms closed around her waist, and he pulled her closer, returning the kiss.

“Mmmph,” came the groan of Callum from the floor. Keithen quickly released Lorna and they both ran to his aid.

“Callum, are ye hurt?” asked Keithen.

“Can ye stand?” Lorna wanted to know.

“Och, hell. She saw the ghost.” Callum picked straw out of his long hair and sat up.

“It’s all right. I already kent about him,” Lorna admitted.

“Ye told her, Keithen? How could ye?” growled Callum as Keithen helped him to stand.

“Nay, it wasna him. It was the child, Avianca, who told me, but please dinna punish her or her mathair.” Lorna didn’t want the woman and girl to get in trouble, but neither did she want Keithen being blamed for something he had not done.

“Is nothin’ sacred anymore?” growled Callum. “I like my privacy. Why are the two of ye even here? No one is allowed at my still, and only the guards are allowed outside the barn.”

Lorna looked at Keithen, realizing he must have hidden here trying to get the information of how to make Mountain Magic to give to the ghost. This wouldn’t sit well with Callum at all, so she had to act fast.

“We’re sorry. We wanted to get away together. Alone. To get to ken each other before the weddin’.” She purposely reached out and caressed Keithen’s cheek for show. Keithen caught on to what she was doing and bent over and kissed her on the mouth once more.

“I am just glad to have been here to be able to help ye, Callum,” said Keithen.

“Aye. If he hadna been here, ye might be dead under all those barrels of whisky right now,” Lorna added, not sure if it was true, but saying it for emphasis.

“Callum, what are we goin’ to do?” asked Keithen. “Lennox wants yer secret recipe, and we’re never goin’ to get him to leave until ye tell him.”

“He’s a ghost. Why does he even care?” asked Lorna. “I mean, can ghosts drink whisky?”

“It’s his longin’ to ken my secret that has kept him trapped here in the land of the livin’ so long,” said Callum.

“So long?” asked Lorna. “The ghost has been here before now?”

Callum nodded. “Lennox has been plaguin’ me ever since the day he died.”

“What do ye mean?” asked Lorna.

“Most people think I’m mad,” said Callum. “But the reason I am this way is because I’ve had to take the blame for lots of mishaps that the damned ghost caused. The only way to keep him a secret, and to keep my customers from leavin’, was to take the blame and allow people to think I’m mad.”

“Ye should have told the MacKeefes before now, and mayhap they could have helped ye,” suggested Keithen.

“Aye, I suppose so,” Callum answered with a sigh. “But the damned thing usually stays here in the barn. That is another reason why no one but me is allowed near my still. I set up the betrothal between ye and Lorna because I thought peace between the MacKeefes and the MacNeils would satisfy Lennox, and he’d finally leave.”

“But instead, it only made things worse,” said Keithen, getting a nod from Callum.

“Why dinna ye just tell the ghost yer secret to makin’ the Mountain Magic?” asked Lorna. “After all, he’s a ghost, so he’s never goin’ to really use it.”

“Haud yer wheesht, child!” snarled Callum. “I’ve never given in to the fool’s demands when he was alive, and I am certainly no’ goin’ to do so now that he’s dead. It is out of the question.”

“Then how are we ever goin’ to get rid of the ghost?” asked Lorna.

“I have an idea,” said Keithen. “However, it’s risky.”

“I’ll do anythin’ to get Lennox out of my life once and for all,” said Callum. “What is it?”

“All right, if ye say so,” said Keithen with a nod. “However, I am more than sure that ye are goin’ to hate what I am about to propose.”





## Chapter Five

“**Y**E ARE INSANE, Keithen. Ye canna trick a ghost!” Later that day, Cam sat scowling at Keithen from the stool pushed up to the drink board in the Horn and Hoof. Gavin was with him. Keithen stood behind the drink board.

“Shhhh.” Keithen’s eyes scanned the room. “Lennox might hear ye.”

“What does Callum have to say about this?” asked Gavin.

“He says he’ll never give the ghost his real recipe for makin’ Mountain Magic, but he’s willin’ to write down a fake one.”

From across the room, Lorna headed over. “This is dangerous, and I’m no’ sure it’s a good idea, Keithen.”

“Lorna, it’s fine.” Keithen took his betrothed’s hands in his, looking deeply into her eyes. He decided he was going to like being married to the beautiful lass after all. “Just have faith in me. I’ll fix this, I swear I will.”

“Well, all right,” she said, looking up at him shyly. A blush colored her face. “After all, it’s for the best.”

“Ye’re damned right it is.” Keithen boldly leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. If there had actually been patrons in the tavern, he wasn’t sure he would have done this. And certainly not if her father was present.

“Oooh, I think I saw him up at the top of the stairs,” Lorna said in a low voice.

“Get Callum, quickly.” Keithen pretended to be wiping off the drink board.

“I’ll get him.” Lorna ran off to the kitchen, and returned with old Callum limping along behind her. “We’re ready,” she

whispered.

“Callum, where are ye off to?” Keithen spoke the rehearsed words loudly.

Callum scowled at him. “Ye already forgot?”

“Just go with it,” said Keithen from the side of his mouth. “Do exactly as planned.”

“Och, aye. Of course.” Callum cleared his throat and almost shouted, “I’m off to work at my still. Now, where did I put that secret recipe I wrote down? I’m always forgettin’ it, so that is why I wrote it on a piece of parchment.” He dug into his pouch, really not able to find it.

“Try inside yer tunic,” said Keithen, his eyes flashing up to the top of the stairs where he saw the ghost of Lennox peeking around a corner.

“Ah, here it is.” Callum pulled a piece of parchment out from under his tunic and held it in the air. “I’ll just go use this now. But it’s a secret, so no one can see it.” He over-acted, and in Keithen’s opinion it wasn’t believable in the least. Hopefully, the ghost wouldn’t notice. Callum opened his mouth to say more, but Keithen stopped him.

“That’s enough,” he said in a low voice. “Ye’ve got his attention, now go!”

Callum hobbled to the front door, purposely dropping the parchment. Keithen watched as the ghost of Lennox slowly floated down the stairs toward it.

Just as Callum reached out to open the door, someone opened it from the other side. A breeze blew in, and the parchment fluttered across the floor.

“Chieftain! What the hell are ye doin’ here? Ye’re goin’ to ruin everythin’,” spat Callum.

“Oh, hell,” mumbled Gavin from his stool.

“This canna be good,” said Cam.

“My da is here?” Lorna spun around to see.

Keithen groaned. Sure enough, Chieftain MacNeil marched into the tavern with several of his men right behind him. Then, a woman walked into the tavern as well.

“Mathair is here too?” whined Lorna.

“Bloody hell.” Keithen could see that things were going from bad to worse.

“This is my wife, Anna,” announced Bhaltair. “Anna, this is Callum MacKeefe, who owns the tavern.”

“Hello,” said the woman, seeing the piece of parchment on the floor. “Oh, I think ye dropped somethin’.”

“Nay, I didna. Now go! Leave. Hurry!” Callum’s hands swished through the air as he tried to wave them away.

Keithen saw the ghost heading for the parchment just as Anna bent down to pick it up. He hurried across the room, but he was too late. Anna stood up and screamed as the ghost of Lennox MacNeil made a loud wailing noise and flew out the door, right through her.

“Mathair!” cried Lorna, running to her.

Bhaltair and his guards all drew their swords.

“What the hell was that?” shouted one of the guards.

“Not what, but who,” said Bhaltair. “I’m pretty sure that was the ghost of my faither, Lennox MacNeil.

“Ooooh.” Anna’s eyes rolled back in her head and she swooned, just as her husband reached out to catch her.

“MacKeefe, what is this all about?” shouted Bhaltair.

Since there were four MacKeefes in the room, they all answered at once, and nothing made sense.

“Haud yer wheesht, the rest of ye,” said the angered Bhaltair, still cradling his wife. “I want only one of ye to tell me.”

“Bhaltair? Was that a ghost?” Anna’s eyes flickered open. “We canna let our daughter stay here. It’s no’ safe.”

“Mathair, I’m safe with Keithen,” said Lorna. “Ye dinna need to worry.”

“Someone, tell me about the ghost,” Bhaltair commanded.

“He’ll be gone soon, I promise.” Keithen stepped forward. “He’s only a ghost, and canna harm anyone.” He swallowed forcefully and rubbed his throat, hoping to hell this was true.

“What is the ghost of my faither doin’ here? And why didna ye tell me, Callum? Why did he appear now after all this time?”

“Calm down, ye fool. The damned ghost has been here for decades,” said Callum. “He only wants to ken how to make my Mountain Magic, but I’ll never tell a soul.”

“Is that what is written on this parchment?” Anna, still grasping it, held it up.

“Nay. That’s just a fake recipe to trick the ghost into leavin’,” said Callum.

“Lennox is goin’ to be madder than ever now.” Cam walked up to join the rest of them.

“Bhaltair, we need to break the betrothal and take Lorna home right away.” Anna pulled her daughter to her.

“Nay, Mathair. I want to marry Keithen.”

“Mayhap she’s right,” said Gavin. “Callum, ye never should have involved Lorna and her family.”

“Nay!” came Bhaltair’s strong answer. “The weddin’ will continue as planned.”

“Chieftain?” Keithen questioned his decision. “Even with the ghost?”

“If I canna get rid of the haunting spirit, no one will ever enter the Horn and Hoof again, and I’ll be doomed,” said Callum. “The MacKeefes will be broke, and we’ll starve to death because of this wretched ghost.” He waved his fists in the air.

“Then let me deal with the ghost of my faither,” offered Bhaltair.

“Ye? What can ye do that we havena already tried?” asked Cam.

“I think I can get my dead faither to stop hauntin’ ye.” Bhaltair had a look of shame upon his face, if Keithen wasn’t mistaken.

“Ye canna kill him with a sword,” Gavin told him. “We’ve tried.”

“And neither do I plan to.” Bhaltair sheathed his sword.

“Then how will ye get Grandda to leave, Faither?” asked Lorna.

“I’m ashamed to say he’s only still here because of me.”

“Bhaltair, what are ye sayin’?” asked his wife.

“My faither always gave me anythin’ I asked for,” Bhaltair explained. “But he died before he could give me the thing I *really* wanted.”

“What was that?” asked Keithen.

Bhaltair looked over at Callum and shook his head. “I’m sorry to have to tell ye this, Callum, but it wasna my faither who wanted to steal and sell yer secret recipe to give it to the enemy. It was me.”



## Chapter Six

SHOCKED BY WHAT she'd heard, Lorna was sure this would be the end of the betrothal, and the start of a new feud between the clans.

She heard the sound of scraping steel as the MacKeefes drew their swords. Her father's guards did the same.

"I dinna want bloodshed in my tavern!" shouted Callum. "It's hard enough tryin' to get my customers to return, but if killin' is goin' on, they'll never come back."

"He's right. Put down the blades," Bhaltair said to his guards.

"But Chieftain," one protested, "they've still got their weapons drawn, and we will die to protect ye and yer wife."

"Put yer swords away, ye fools!" Callum growled at Cam and Gavin. "Canna ye see we are tryin' to solve a problem, no' create a new one?"

Everyone slowly lowered their blades.

"Callum, I'm surprised ye are no' angry with Bhaltair for admittin' he was the one who wanted to steal from ye," said Keithen.

"Everyone wants to steal my secret, so what's the difference?" said the old man. "Even though I should have yer head right now for deceivin' me." Callum glared at Lorna's father.

"It seems to me ye both deceived each other," Lorna spoke up before Keithen could say a thing.

"So ... what are we goin' to do?" asked Cam. "We seem to be at a standstill."

“There is only one thing we can do,” said Bhaltair. “Get the ghost to leave so we can get on with the weddin’.”

“How do I ken ye’ll no’ still try to steal my secret?” asked Callum, looking at Bhaltair from the sides of his eyes.

“I dinna need to ken how ye make Mountain Magic anymore,” said Bhaltair. “If my daughter is married into the MacKeefe clan, then I’ll have as much whisky as I want. Right?”

“That’s right,” Keithen spoke up. “The MacKeefes drink for free, and I’m sure Callum will extend that privilege to ye and yer clan as well, since ye’ll be part of the family.”

“Nay, I willna,” protested Callum. “I have no customers anymore, and I willna give away the main means of income for our clan by servin’ all the MacNeils free whisky.

“Then how about just my mathair and faither?” asked Lorna. “The rest of the MacNeils will pay if they drink.”

“Lorna!” snapped her father, wanting to shut her up.

“Bhaltair,” said her mother. “I think that is a fair trade.”

“Callum? What do ye say?” asked Keithen.

The old man thought for a while and finally nodded. “Aye, but only if Bhaltair gets rid of the ghost.”

“Shake on the deal,” said Keithen, not wanting either of them to back out.

Reluctantly, Bhaltair held out his hand. “I suppose that would be fair.”

“Ye’re damned right it is,” said Callum, grasping his hand and shaking it. “And ye should be thankful I’m no’ goin’ to lop off yer head for makin’ me live like this for so long.” The men shook and then pulled apart.

“Ye werena the only one to suffer. I had to live with the guilt of what happened,” said Bhaltair.

“So, it was really yer fault yer faither died and no’ the MacKeefes,” said Anna.

“It’s no one’s fault, since the horse reared up, so let’s forget about this and figure out how to rid ourselves of a ghost,” said Keithen, coming to the rescue and making Lorna want to kiss him for stepping in and stopping a brawl that was about to begin.

“I need to talk to the ghost of my faither,” said Bhaltair. “But we’ll have to get him here first.”

“Now that he’s probably realized he’s been tricked, he is goin’ to be angry,” Callum pointed out.

“I heard what ye said,” came a voice from the top of the stairs. When the ghost floated down, the MacNeil guards turned and ran out of the tavern. Lorna grabbed her mother’s hand when she saw the woman’s face turn pale.

“Da,” said Bhaltair, with a catch to his voice. “Ye dinna have to haunt the MacKeefes any longer. We dinna need the recipe for Mountain Magic. I was wrong in wantin’ to steal it.”

The ghost hovered over the chieftain as he spoke.

“I tried to make ye happy, Son.”

“It would make me happy if ye left and stopped hauntin’ this tavern, and the MacKeefes.”

“Nay!” shouted the ghost.

“Nay?” questioned Cam. “Oh, hell, this canna be good.”

“Grandda, what will it take to make ye leave?” asked Lorna.

“I want to be at yer weddin’,” said the ghost.

“Oh.” Lorna looked over to Keithen for help.

“Surely, that can be arranged,” said Keithen, surprising her.

“And I want a drink of Mountain Magic as well as this entire tavern filled with people, or I’ll never leave.”



“Of course,” said Keithen. “Ye will have it.”

“Good!” With that, the ghost disappeared into thin air.

“Keithen, why did ye agree to such a daft thing?” spat Callum. “Ye ken that no one will even come inside if the ghost is here.”

“He’s right,” said Bhaltair. “Ye saw my guards run from the room. And if we canna fill this tavern, my dead da will no’ be happy, and I’m ashamed to say he may never leave.”

“We’ll fill the tavern with people. He’ll have what he requests,” Keithen assured Lorna’s father.

“Keithen, are ye a simpleton?” hissed Gavin. “No one will step foot in here because of the ghost. And ye think they’re goin’ to want to attend yer weddin’ with the ghost present? I’m afraid we’re goin’ to be haunted by Lennox forever.”

“Nay, we’ll do it,” Keithen assured them. “Gavin and Cam, send word to the MacKeefes that they are all invited to the weddin’ in two days’ time.”

“That’s no’ enough time to get a message to Hermitage Castle and have everyone return,” Gavin pointed out.

“Then just send word to the Highland camp,” said Keithen.

“Keithen, they’ll run as soon as they see the ghost, and then we’re still doomed.” Cam shook his head.

“Only invite the bravest warriors then,” was Keithen’s suggestion.

“Faither, I think some of the MacNeils need to be here for the weddin’ as well,” Lorna spoke up. “After all, this is an alliance bein’ formed. And Grandda used to be the clan’s chieftain.”

“I canna ask that, and I refuse to demand it,” said Bhaltair with a scowl.

“This is important, Da,” said Lorna. “If the MacKeefes are bringin’ in some of their brave warriors, then I think we

should do the same. And I want my family present for my weddin’.”

“I dinna ken,” said Bhaltair. “Once they hear about the ghost, I dinna think they’ll come, and I refuse to trick them.”

“Then the ghost of Grandda will never leave,” said Lorna sadly.

“I’m sure I can get yer brathairs and even yer uncles to show up,” said Anna. “But we’ll have to make it worth their while.”

“How about free Mountain Magic for a month for anyone who attends our weddin’ and stays until the end?” asked Keithen, looking over at Callum.

“That sounds good,” said Cam. “What do ye say, Callum?”

“Fine,” mumbled Callum, followed by a few choice words. “But no more than a month. And everyone has to spread the word that the ghost is gone forever so my customers return.”

“See, Lorna? Everything will work out for us after all.” Keithen smiled and held Lorna’s hands, filling her heart with love.

“Yes. Yes, it will,” she said, eager now to be married to the handsome Keithen MacKeefe and become part of their clan—their family.



## Chapter Seven

KEITHEN LOOKED AROUND the tavern the day of the wedding, happy to see the room filled with both MacKeefes as well as MacNeils. The atmosphere seemed tense as everyone waited for the ghost of Lennox MacNeil to show. Still, Keithen decided he wouldn't let this ruin his important day. He was about to be married to Lorna, and the lass looked bonnier today than ever.

The piper started playing, and Keithen stood next to the priest with Cam and Gavin at his side. Lorna walked up to them, holding onto her father's arm. Dressed in the MacNeil green plaid, after today the clans would be aligned, and Lorna would wear the MacKeefe colors.

Keithen looked around the room, seeing his chieftain, Storm MacKeefe, there with his wife, Wren. Then there were the Madmen MacKeefe: Onyx, Aidan and Ian, who were some of the bravest and craziest men of the clan. Old Callum had positioned himself behind the drink board, probably guarding his precious Mountain Magic.

Yvaine and little Avianca were seated next to Lorna's mother. There were a handful of MacNeils there, but most of the crowd was made up of MacKeefes.

Keithen leaned over and whispered to Gavin, "Where are North and Nash? I dinna see them." North and Nash were twins and good friends of Cam and Gavin. At one time, they were considered outcasts, but had earned their way back into the clan.

"They'll be here," Gavin whispered back. "They're always late, and like to make a grand entrance."

Sure enough, just as Lorna took her place next to Keithen, the tavern door burst open, and North and Nash entered with

their swords drawn.

“We’re here,” said Nash.

“And ready to protect,” added North.

The music stopped, and everyone became silent, staring at the twins.

Callum ran over and grabbed them both by the front of their tunics. “Put away the blades, ye fools. Canna ye see this is a blasted weddin’?”

“Sorry, sorry,” said both men, sheathing their swords and slinking away into the crowd.

“Let’s proceed, shall we?” asked the priest, looking back and forth nervously.

“Yes. Please,” said Keithen, hoping the ghost wouldn’t show up until after their vows were taken. “And make it fast.”

“My pleasure,” said the priest, making this the shortest wedding ever.

“Do ye, Keithen MacKeefe, take Lorna MacNeil for yer wife? And do ye, Lorna, take Keithen for yer husband?”

Keithen and Lorna looked at each other and almost laughed since it was so rushed. Then they both said “aye” at the same time, and just like that, the wedding was over.

Everyone rushed over to congratulate them, but then the sound of the bell mounted on the drink board rang out loudly.

“Callum, do ye really have to do that on our weddin’ day?” complained Keithen, covering his ears.

“It’s no’ me,” said Callum. “I didna touch the bell. It was Lennox.”

Keithen’s head snapped around, and his eyes settled on the ghost of Lennox MacNeil standing at the end of the drink board. No one said a word. Keithen was afraid people might start running if he didn’t do something fast.

“Come with me, Lorna,” he said, grabbing the hand of his new wife and hurrying over to the ghost.

“G-Grandda,” said Lorna, flashing a smile. She tried to act calm, but Keithen could feel her arm shaking.

“Callum, some Mountain Magic for Lennox please,” said Keithen. “After all, that was part of the deal.”

Callum grumbled, but made his way back to the drink board, poured a tankard of whisky, and slid it down the drink board to Keithen, who caught it.

“W-we have the tavern filled with people,” Lorna pointed out. “Just like ye wanted, Grandda.”

“Both MacKeefes and MacNeils,” Keithen added.

“Aye,” said the ghost in a booming voice. “That ye do. And now ye are married. Congratulations.”

Keithen noticed the women and little Avianca stirring. A few of them stood up. He looked back at Gavin and Cam and nodded. Gavin rushed over to guard the front door, and Cam did the same to the kitchen door as planned. They would stop anyone from leaving until the ghost was satisfied and gone forever.

“Thank ye,” Keithen told the ghost, holding out the tankard. “Well, there is just one thing left before ye go, I guess.”

“That’s right. I want my drink of Mountain Magic,” insisted Lennox. He reached out for the vessel, but of course his hand kept going through it.

“I want it!” shouted Lennox, causing the entire room to stir restlessly as his anger grew.

“I’m givin’ it to ye,” said Keithen. “I’m sorry, but I dinna ken how this will work.”

“My faither is never goin’ to leave if he canna get his drink,” said Bhaltair from behind Keithen.

“If he doesna leave, my business will be ruined,” said Callum, making his way over to Keithen. “Give me that.” He grabbed the tankard from Keithen.

“I want my Mountain Magic,” the ghost insisted.

“Then take it any way ye can!” To everyone’s surprise, old Callum took the tankard, throwing the whisky from the vessel right at the ghost. It went right through the spirit, hitting Cam, who was guarding the kitchen door.

“What the—” Cam’s tunic was soaked with whisky, but as soon as he realized Callum was the one to throw it, his face lit up in a smile. “Callum? Ye are no’ just spillin’ Mountain Magic, but throwin’ it around the room!”

“Ye’re breakin’ yer own rule,” Gavin called out from the front door.

Still, everyone remained quiet.

“Are ye satisfied now, ye wretched spirit?” Callum thunked the tankard down on the drink board and put his hands on his hips. “And if ye say no, I’ll wring yer neck and stomp on ye until ye are naught but a pile of dust.” Callum moved closer to the ghost. Keithen smiled when he realized the ghost was more afraid of the little old man than Callum was of him.

“Mmm,” said the ghost, licking his lips. “It’s just what I needed.”

“Then leave! And never return again. Do ye hear me?” Callum was going crazy. He picked up a bottle of whisky and threw it at the ghost next. Then he picked up a stool and threw that at the ghost as well.

“I’m out of here,” said Cam, ducking every time the items thrown went right through the ghost and smashed against the kitchen door, almost hitting him.

“I’m satisfied and will never return, because ye are a *madman*, Callum MacKeefe,” said the ghost. “Goodbye, Lorna. Bhaltair. I will never see ye again.”

The ghost disappeared, but Callum continued to smash things, spill things, and make a mess, breaking almost every one of his own rules.

“Whoa, that’s enough, Callum.” Keithen took the man by the shoulders. “The ghost is gone and will never return. Let’s clean up the mess and celebrate my weddin’.”

“He’s gone for good?” asked Callum with a raised brow.

“That is what the ghost of my grandda said,” Lorna told him.

“My da is a man of his word. Or he used to be,” said Bhaltair. “Callum, yer tavern will no longer be haunted.”

“What about my customers? Will they return?” asked Callum.

“We’ll all make sure everyone kens the ghost is gone,” said Cam. “However, I canna guarantee they’ll return if they think ye’re goin’ to throw somethin’ at them.” Cam stood up from his hiding place behind the drink board, brushing off the front of his tunic.

“We’re married, Lorna,” said Keithen, kissing his new bride and pulling her into his arms.

“Our clans are aligned,” shouted Bhaltair.

“I’ll drink to that!” The MacKeefe chieftain, Storm, walked over, holding a tankard high above his head. “Grandda, a round of Mountain Magic for everyone,” he called out as the music started back up. “Today is an important day, and we will all celebrate the marriage of Keithen and Lorna, and the alliance of the MacKeefes and the MacNeils.”

“I’ll get the Mountain Magic,” grumbled Callum, not at all sounding happy about giving away free whisky. “But first, this mess needs to be cleaned up.” He pushed a broom into Keithen’s hand.

“What?” asked Keithen. “It’s my weddin’ day. Ye expect me to work?”

“Now that ye’re an accepted member of the clan, ye’ll do yer part. Unless ye want to lose yer job here at the tavern.”

Keithen smiled from ear to ear, liking the fact that he was now accepted and had earned his way into the MacKeefe family.

“Lorna, I’m sorry, but I think I’d better clean up this mess. I dinna want to anger Callum.”

“Dinna be sorry. I’ll help ye,” she said, giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

“I really wanted this to be a special weddin’ that ye’d never forget,” he told her.

“Oh, it was, and still is,” said Lorna with a wink. “After this is over, mayhap the event will even be mentioned in the king’s Highland Chronicles.”

“Aye, we might be mentioned,” agreed Keithen. “But unfortunately, I’m afraid our weddin’ will be titled somethin’ crazy, like *Once Upon a Haunted Horn and Hoof!*”

The End



## From the Author

I hope you enjoyed Keithen and Lorna's story of how they had to go up against a ghost. I always love writing about old, crazy Callum MacKeefe and also the Horn and Hoof Tavern.

My series often continues with next generations of characters or characters making guest appearances in other books. Especially the MacKeefes!

Keithen was first introduced to my readers as the brother of Yvaine in [Highland Flame](#), Book 2 of my Highland Outcasts Series. If you want to read more about Gavin and Cam and their friends, North and Nash, each of them is featured in one of the books of the [Highland Outcasts](#).

The Horn and Hoof Tavern, Callum MacKeefe, as well as others from the clan, were first seen in my book, *Lady Renegade* from my *Legacy of the Blade Series*. If you enjoy Highlanders, my MacKeefe clan can also be found in my *Madman MacKeefe* and *Highland Chronicles Series*, among others.

You can follow me on social media, and learn more about the books I write by using the following links:

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Thank you,

*Elizabeth Rose*

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## **About Elizabeth Rose**

Elizabeth Rose is an Amazon All-Star, and bestselling, award-winning, author of nearly 100 books and counting! Her first book was published back in 2000, but she has been writing stories ever since high school.

She is the author of contemporary, western, paranormal, and her favorite – medieval romance. You'll find sexy, alpha heroes and strong, independent heroines in her books. Sometimes her heroines can even swing a sword. She loves adding humor to her work, because everyone needs to laugh more in life. Her ***Bad Boys of Sweetwater: Tarnished Saints Series***, was inspired by people, places, and things in her own life. The location is the lake and small town of Michigan where she grew up visiting her grandparents.

Living in the suburbs of Chicago with her husband, she has two grown sons and one granddog – so far. A lover of nature, Elizabeth can be found in the summer swinging in her “writing hammock” in her secret garden, creating her next novel. Her secret garden is what inspired her series, ***Secrets of the Heart***, which of course centers around a secret garden too!

Elizabeth's current and upcoming books will be published by *Dragonblade Publishing* and independently too under *RoseScribe Media Inc.*

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