

*He was forced to
wed a stranger,
and determined it
would be nothing more
than a duty he owed...*

White Knight

"This knight is mad, bad, and irresistible." – Catherine Coulter

JACLYN
REDING

white knight

JACLYN REDING



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*Yet where so many suffered one more wail
Of anguish scarce was heeded! Rang the dale
With lamentation and low muttering wrath,
As homestead after homestead in the strath,
As hut on hut perched tip-toe on the hills,
Or crouched by burn-sides big with storm-bred rills,
Blazed up in unison, till all the glen
Stood in red flames with homes of ousted Highland men.
- From *The Heather on Fire: a Tale of Highland Clearances**

by Mathilde Blind (1841-1896)

*This novel is dedicated to
thousands of Scottish Highlanders
who lost their homes, their heritage,
and oftentimes their lives
during the period of time known as
“The Clearances”*

part one

*No bird soars too high,
if he soars with his own wings.*

-William Blake

one

LONDON, 1820

*It is a truth universally acknowledged,
that a single man in possession of good fortune,
must be in want of a wife.*

*-Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice**

Lady Grace Ledys stood in the midst of her uncle's study, a room so scarcely used that the newspaper sitting on the desk was dated six months prior. The servants, underpaid as they were, rarely bothered dusting the place and had even taken to using the room for storage, knowing it would never be noticed. For this occasion, however, the draperies that were usually closed had been freshly shaken out and drawn back, and a fire burned happily in the hearth that had previously been home to a family of dormice.

Appearances, after all, were everything to the Marquess of Cholmeley.

He sat before her now, her uncle, looking quite at ease in this place he never frequented. His hair had been styled *à la Brutus*, brushed carelessly forward and curled over his shallow forehead. His boots wore a fresh polish and his waistcoat was one Grace had never before seen. He'd summoned her there a quarter hour before, but his attention wasn't centered on her. Not at all. Instead, his entire focus was wholly taken up with the man sitting beside him.

The renowned Duke of Westover was a man who must surely have already known his sixty-fifth year. His thinning hair, pulled back in a waspish queue, showed snow-white

against the darkness of his coat. A gnarled hand held loosely to the golden knob atop his polished Malacca cane, the fourth finger of which was adorned by a ruby the size of a small walnut. Two gold fob watches draped over the top of his breeches and he was grinning at her—more precisely, he was grinning at her breasts, as if the black mourning silk that covered them had suddenly grown transparent.

An unwholesome light kindled in the duke's bleary eye as he sat appraising her figure. "Tell me, girl, is your bosom genuine?"

He was trying to unsettle her, she knew, and if he had directed such a question at her but six months earlier, he would indeed have left Grace wide-eyed and gasping with astonishment. Adverse circumstances, however, had a way of dulling one's more delicate sensibilities.

Before coming to live at the London home of her uncle and guardian, Grace had known a blissful and refined existence at Ledysthorpe, her family's ancestral estate in Durham. She had been raised there under the gentle tutelage of her grandmother, the Dowager Marchioness of Cholmeley. Her life had been touched only by softness and light. She hadn't yet seen the smoke-clouded spires of London's churches, had never known the noise and stench and filth of living amongst the other million souls in England's capital city. The farthest she had ventured had been the short, tree-shaded buggy ride to the village of Ledysthorpe where everyone knew her and greeted her with waves and smiles and inquiries after her health.

On her first day in London, Grace had nearly been run down by a passing carriage and just missed having the hem of her skirts spat upon by a strange little man selling brick dust. Since then, she had witnessed children as young as four or five years being chased as pickpockets in Vauxhall Gardens, she had dismayed over the whipping of a horse so bony and so weary, it could barely pull the cart of barrels it had been tethered to, and once, she had even seen a man defecating on the front steps of a St. Martin's Lane townhouse at midday.

The duke's voice came again then, snapping her from her morose thoughts and back to the far more morose and

unavoidable here and now.

“Did you not hear me, girl? I asked if that is your true bosom.” He glanced at her uncle then. “Is the chit deaf? Mute?”

Grace stared at the duke, determined not to allow him the satisfaction of her upset. Instead, she said calmly, her voice as pricked as a winter wind, “Would you have me open my bodice to prove it, Your Grace?”

The duke looked momentarily taken aback. Her uncle’s voice, however, came sharp as a rap across her knuckles.

“Grace!”

Grace turned to where the Marquess of Cholmeley sat in his carved chair just the other side of the Axminster carpet. The Irlandaise knot on his cravat looked to have slipped a degree off center, his mouth fixed most unpleasantly amidst his bushy side whiskers. But instead of directing his hostility at the man who had just insulted her, his only niece, he was staring with displeasure at *her*.

Surely even Uncle Tedric must recognize the impropriety of this interview. But he wasn’t moving. He wasn’t even speaking. In fact, he was smiling, damn him, smiling at her in the same way that wily clerk at the glovemaker’s shop had when he’d tried to fool her into buying that pair of gloves with the overlong pinky fingers. *They’ll shrink with age*, the clerk had assured her, as if he had actually expected she’d believe him. Grace frowned again, looking from her uncle back to the aging duke who sat opposite him. The words of the glovemaker’s clerk couldn’t have rung any truer. *Shrunken with age, indeed*.

“I assure you, Your Grace,” her uncle said then, giving Grace a smile that held so little warmth, it made her shiver, “there is no artifice. Everything you see of my niece is indeed what the good Lord endowed her with.”

“Indeed,” the duke repeated as he shifted from one buttock to the other in his seat. “Although she certainly wouldn’t be

the first chit to have puffed out her bodice with a wad of stuffing in effort to wheedle a man into marrying her.”

With a sniff, he returned his attentions back to her. “Walk here to me, girl.”

Grace shot one last look at her uncle, silently begging him to stop this unprincipled humiliation. But instead of speaking out, protecting her as he should in his role as her guardian, he simply nodded his head once, his eyes telling her his thoughts more clearly than any words.

He was determined that the duke should offer for Grace’s hand and bless them all with his gold guineas in the process.

How had she never before realized the truth of her uncle? Grace could remember as a child how her grandmother had *tsk’d* and shaken her head time and time again over her youngest son. *Self-indulgent*, she’d called him. *An epicure*. But to Grace, from the time she’d been old enough to walk, her “Uncle Teddy” had been nothing short of the most handsome, most distinguished man she’d ever known, the closest thing on earth to his elder brother, her father.

Until now.

In the time since she had come to live under his guardianship, Grace had come to see Tedric Ledys, Marquess of Cholmeley, undistorted by any childhood adoration. In reality, her uncle was everything anyone else had ever deemed him. For it was he, and no other, who had brought her to standing as she was before the Duke of Westover now, feeling very much like a mare on the auction block at Tattersall’s.

“Take a turn now, my girl.”

Grace lifted her chin, fixing on the stare she’d seen her grandmother employ so many times during her childhood, most often whenever Grace had misbehaved. It seemed to succeed, too, this particular look, for the duke actually knit his brow in a moment of confusion. Bolstered by his reaction, Grace took a short turn, then stood stiff as a lamppost before his chair.

At this nearness, she could see that the duke was even older than she'd first thought him. He stood then, not without some effort, and came to nearly half a head shorter than she, cloaked in the heavy clove scent of his cologne, and the even heavier scent of age. Grace closed her eyes. *Good God, in the name of all that is holy, please do not allow Uncle Tedric to marry me off to this wretched man.*

"You've spirit," the duke said on a half-smile that revealed decaying teeth. "I like that."

Grace swallowed, calling on every ounce of fortitude she possessed to remain still and hide her revulsion at the mere thought of sharing any form of marital intimacy with him. She schooled herself to hold her tongue until after the duke had gone, when she would firmly inform Uncle Tedric that no amount of wealth was worth her wedding the Duke of Westover.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she said, fighting to keep her voice cold and detached.

The duke reached and took her chin between his thumb and finger, turning it to stare at her profile in the lamplight.

"Your teeth."

"What of them?"

"I should like to see them."

Grace frowned, peering at him from the corner of her eye. "And shall I whinny for you as well, Your Grace?"

Tedric cleared his throat behind her. "You may take your seat, Grace."

Her uncle frowned with displeasure as she headed for her assigned place. He would take her to task later, she thought—or perhaps he'd just sign the marriage contracts now in front of her, consigning the rest of her life to this horrible man.

Damn Uncle Tedric, Grace thought as she sat stiffly on a bench between the two men, to the right her past, to the left—God forbid—her future. Why, oh why had her uncle charged her with the sole responsibility of restoring the family coffers?

His part, of course, had been to empty them through whatever foolish means he might find, be it gaming, drinking, or philandering—talents which he had come to perfect—leaving them presently to live under the very real threat of debtor's prison.

It had taken him six months to reach the present crises—that the time since her grandmother had passed away, leaving the government of the Cholmeley finances solely to him. While Nonny had lived, Uncle Tedric had been afforded an allowance, which he'd always managed to spend long before he should receive the next, thereby prompting his quarterly visits to Ledysthorpe seeking more. Grace could remember these appearances throughout her childhood, listening as he had catalogued his expenses for her grandmother over their supper, bemoaning the state of wretched thrift under which he was forced to live. London, he would tell her, was far more expensive a place to live, and he had no choice but to hold his existence to a certain standard worthy of the Cholmeley name.

Occasionally, Nonny would relent and release additional monies to him. But on those occasions when she refused, Grace had recognized an unpleasant light that would spark in Tedric's eyes, had noticed the muscle on the side of his jaw stiffen against the words he so obviously would have liked to say. But he had been left to bide his time until the dowager would no longer hold the authority over the family finances.

And it hadn't taken long.

After Nonny's passing that terrible December morning, while Grace had dressed herself in mourning black and avoided any diversion save her books and drawing, Tedric had gone like a fox henhouse-wild, squandering his way through his substantial inheritance before running up debt on the Cholmeley estate that he had no hope of ever repaying. He had soon turned his sights upon Grace—or more accurately upon her portion of the inheritance, held in trust until she wed, or reached her twenty-fifth year. A portion of it was to become his as her guardian, and standing before the duke as she now was, it was clear Uncle Tedric had decided the eight months before she reached five-and-twenty was too long of a time to

ask his creditors to wait. Surely, though, there must be some other way for them to raise the funds he needed. Grace quickly decided she would do everything to convince her uncle to it as soon as the duke was gone.

Tedric spoke up then. “There is no history of illness, either physical or mental, in our family, Your Grace. As you know, my niece’s parents, my dear brother and his wife, were tragically lost while at sea when she was just a child, leaving my mother responsible for her upbringing. The dowager marchioness saw to it that Grace received her education from the best ladies’ tutors. And Grace hasn’t yet entered society. She was raised solely at our family’s country estate in the North, thus her character is sterling. And, as I think you will agree, she is quite lovely to look at.”

“Her age,” said the duke, studying her again. “Four-and-twenty, you say? A bit long in the tooth to have not yet been introduced to society.”

“I shall turn five-and-twenty in the new year,” Grace added quickly.

Tedric shot her a quelling stare before saying to the duke, “My niece gave up a coming-out before now so that she might pass the last years of my mother’s life at her side, seeing to her care. You may have heard Lady Cholmeley left us this past winter, just after she reached her seventy-second year.”

The duke’s expression seemed oddly to soften at this. “Yes, I had heard tell of Lady Cholmeley’s passing.” He paused a moment as if offering a prayer to her memory and then said, “I would suspect, however, the reason for your niece’s delay in coming to society is due more to your habit of gambling beyond your means.” He leveled her uncle a flinty stare. “Yes, Cholmeley, I have done a bit of digging into your affairs as well. It would appear you are nearly twenty thousand pounds in arrears.”

Twenty thousand! Grace almost gasped out loud.

Across from her, Tedric’s face blanched nearly as white as his cravat.

The duke watched him, brow aloft as if he awaited a denial. There came none. Only a lengthy and telling silence.

Grace could but stare. How? How had Tedric amassed such an enormous debt? She had thought perhaps a thousand pounds at most, but this? Her chances for convincing Tedric to abandon his ideas of her marriage were futile in the face of such a figure. Still, the fact that the duke knew their circumstances offered one consolation. Surely he would never marry her now. In fact, Grace made to rise from the bench, thinking his departure surely imminent now.

“Lady Cholmeley...,” the duke murmured then to no one in particular, “...we were acquainted once. Many years ago. She was a lady in every sense of the word.”

The fondness in his voice, the obvious affection he’d held for Nonny was unmistakable, and it brought Grace to dropping back onto her seat. It seemed he wasn’t totally discounting her as a prospect after all. Tedric wasted no time in using whatever affinity the duke held for her grandmother to his advantage.

“Grace was named for my mother, you know? And I believe you can see that my niece resembles her closely.” He motioned across the room to where the famed Gainsborough portrait of her grandmother hung above the hearth. “Did I mention they were quite close?”

Grace, Lady Cholmeley, had been the truest reflection of an age when elegance had reigned, when women had been cherished, and when honor had meant something more than who wore the stiffest, most neatly-knotted cravat. Her regal stance, her hair perfectly coiffed and powdered, she stood surrounded by her spaniels in the portrait on the riverfront lawn at Ledysthorpe. Even with her present situation, Grace found herself softening at the portrait, longing for the days when it had been just the two of them, she and Nonny—before Uncle Tedric had become her guardian, before she had moved to London, and before the Duke of Westover had come to assess her as a prospective bride.

The duke turned, regarding Grace once again, comparing her, she knew, to her grandmother’s image before he returned

his attention to her uncle. After a moment more of silent contemplation, he made to rise, thumping his cane once on the floor before him.

“I shall take the matter of a marriage under consideration, Cholmeley.” He turned for the door. “My man will write to you should the need arise.”

As she watched the duke depart, her heart filled with despair, Grace quickly began a mental catalogue of the Cholmeley silver, wondering how much she might fetch for it in sale.

*'He is coming! He is coming!'
Like a bridegroom from his room,
Came the hero from his prison
To the scaffold and the doom.*

-W. E. Aytoun

Christian Wycliffe, Marquess Knighton, alighted from the steps of his gleaming barouche even before his driver could reach the door to open it properly for him.

The coachman's name was Parrott, one that suited him well for both his peculiar habit of always repeating the last words of what was said to him and for his nose which did indeed resemble a hooked beak.

"I've got it, Parrott," said the marquess, nodding to the man as he swept toward the front door of the Georgian townhouse shaded by elms before him.

"Got it," repeated Parrott, bowing to the marquess's backside. "Got it indeed, my lord."

Parrott had been in Lord Knighton's employ ever since his cousin, Willem, had vacated the post upon leaving England for America five years earlier. Willem had recommended Parrott as his replacement before he'd gone, a day the coachman would never forget no matter if he lived to see one hundred years.

How nervous he'd been as he had toiled his lordship about the busy streets of London, demonstrating his skill with the horses; how struck he'd been by the young marquess's affable and unruffled demeanor. In his distraction to impress his prospective employer, Parrott had haphazardly near run down a wealthy-looking matron who was crossing busy New Bond Street. He'd managed to turn the horses before striking her, knocking her instead on her portly bottom upon a pile of straw. Crestfallen, Parrott had thought his chances for the post immediately lost, but Lord Knighton hadn't so much as batted an eye as he'd tipped his tall hat to the affronted madam, while congratulating Parrott on his success at finding her such a soft place on which to land.

From that moment, Parrott had thought the marquess was the most pleasant, most generous man he'd ever met, able to conquer any obstacle put in his path. A gentleman. A hero. A veritable god.

It hadn't taken long after he'd been assigned the coachman's position, spending part of most every day with Lord Knighton, for Parrott to discover that the marquess was really a man who wore two different, two very contrary faces.

To most, Christian, Lord Knighton was the handsome and courteous lord, wealthy, self-assured, a man who had the very world bowing at his feet. Most anything he desired was his for the taking. It seemed even the clouds seemed incapable of lowering when the marquess was about.

It was only when he was away from the scrutinizing eyes of society that Parrott came to know the other side to the marquess, the one most everyone else never saw—the one who seemed to bear the full weight of the world upon his shoulders.

It was that face which Lord Knighton had begun to wear far more frequently of late.

To the rest of the world, the marquess was heir to the wealthiest man in the land, his grandfather, the great Duke of Westover. Wherever Lord Knighton went, people knew it. You could see it in their eyes when they begged his acquaintance,

or sought his opinion out of false flattery, or even more often pushed their unmarried daughters in his path—as often happened whenever the marquess was about. A room immediately hushed at his entrance. Traffic slowed at the sight of him. The pleasure of a solitary walk in the park was something denied him for inevitably some romantic miss would devise a scheme to gain his attention—such as the last one who’d trained her lap dog to bring the marquess her shoe so that he’d be made to return it to her just like that story about Cinderella and her fateful glass slipper.

In the past year or so, the marriage-minded misses and their mamas had become doubly bold, as if they had somehow decided his lordship’s bachelorhood had gone on quite long enough, thank you. *He was past his thirtieth year*, Parrott had once heard one of them say, *long past the time when he should be presenting the old duke with an heir.*

As young men went, Lord Knighton was what most ladies would call ‘handsomely-cut.’ His features were strong, his dark hair cut neat and short and worn naturally. He wore his face clean-shaven and his suit of clothes seemingly without effort. Coupled with the vast fortune he was set to inherit, it was no wonder the man never had a moment’s peace.

“Would you be wantin’ me to await you here in front with the coach then, my lord?” Parrott asked, bowing his head as the marquess lifted his walking stick and rapped at the door.

Christian nodded, adjusting the cuff of his coat. “I would expect this to prove a visit much like any other I have made to my grandfather’s house, Parrott. The sooner cut short the better.”

“The sooner, the better. Indeed, my lord,” Parrott parroted before ambling away.

Of the countless places Parrott had driven the marquess, Westover House here on Grosvenor Square was certainly the one at which he chose to spend the least amount of time. It looked a fine enough establishment from the outside—all weathered red brick and gleaming windows behind an iron fence topped by finials that shone golden even on an overcast

day such as this. Parrot could only guess at the finery on the inside; he'd never once been admitted, nor had he so much as glimpsed the stables on the mews at the rear, although he'd heard from some of his acquaintances that they were equally fine.

The young marquess, however, seemed oblivious to it all. He came to this place only when summoned, and emerged just as quickly as he could, always in a far worse humor than he'd been upon arriving. Parrot had heard tell there was bad blood between the marquess and the duke, his grandfather—bad blood, indeed.

“Just pull the coach around the square and park it there under that large sycamore on the corner, Parrott. I've a notion a visit to my club will be in order once I leave here.”

“In order. Aye, milord.”

Christian remained at the door as Parrott made off, watching as the coachman climbed into his seat and clucked his tongue to the horses to urge them forward. He knew a sudden desire to walk back down the steps and disregard the summons that had brought him to this place even as he realized it would do little good. Eventually, he would find himself back at this same spot, waiting before this same door, for this same purpose. It was patently unavoidable.

Christian turned when he heard the sound of the latch opening behind him. The door then swung open. He nodded to the butler, Spears, a man who'd been at his station in the Westover household for as long as Christian could remember.

“Good day, Lord Knighton,” said Spears, bowing his head dutifully as he immediately secured Christian's fawn gloves and beaver hat, tucking the walking stick under his arm as he then took the many-caped garrick, brushing a hand over the fine wool to dislodge an offending bit of lint.

Christian mumbled his response and headed directly for the study, the usual setting for these nonsensical meetings. What would it be today? A lecture on his responsibilities to the northern properties? A justification of the invoices for Eleanor's new wardrobe? No doubt the old man had somehow

forgotten that his granddaughter, Christian's sister, was to have her long-awaited coming-out this year. Or perhaps the duke sought to delay it another year and render Nell's chances for a safe and happy future all the more difficult. If that were his aim, Christian was fully prepared for the confrontation.

Instead, he was brought up short by the butler's call.

"I beg your pardon, my lord. His grace is not in his study this morning. He wished me to inform you he awaits you in the garden instead."

The garden? Christian wondered that his grandfather even knew the house had such a thing for he ate, slept, and even relieved himself within the paneled walls of his ducal study, a place just as gloomy and severe as its most frequent occupant. Even as a child, Christian could recall sneaking into the place at night to see if the marble busts of the various historical personages that were set about the room actually did come to life as his father had once told him.

"The garden?" Christian queried, unaware of his Parrott-like response.

Spears nodded once, offering no further explanation.

Christian took a turn and headed off for the rear of the house.

As he made his way through the lower chambers, past furnishings and ornaments that were meant to impress more than enhance, Christian tried to shake away the foreboding that had greeted him with his morning coffee. No matter how he tried, he could not shake off the feeling that something was terribly wrong. He'd felt it in his gut the moment he'd found his grandfather's summons sitting atop his newssheet on the breakfast tray, instructing him to make this urgent and unscheduled appearance. While this wasn't the first, second, or even twentieth time his grandfather had sent such a request, somehow this time just *seemed* out of the ordinary.

Whatever it was that had brought the old man to calling for him, Christian knew it could not be for any good. Through most of his two and thirty years, it never had been. The duke

seemed to spend his every waking hour devising new and inventive ways to plague his unfortunate heir, as if he felt it his sole duty to assume the tradition of enmity that had previously existed between the king and his heir, the then Regent, before the old king had died earlier that same year. It shouldn't have come as any surprise. After all, the duke had certainly modeled his life after old mad George in more ways than one, periodic insanity seeming sometimes among them.

But the nearer Christian drew to the garden, the more that feeling in his gut began to curdle. He hated the fact that he should feel this way, that his grandfather should be able to have this effect over him. By the time he reached the double doors leading outside, Christian had convinced himself the reason for the summons had to be Eleanor's coming-out. The duke was going to refuse it again, and Christian quickly began to plan his battle plan.

He found the duke sitting in a cane-backed chair beneath the feathery boughs of a large willow. The drooping branches of the tree nearly shrouded the elder man from view. His snow white hair was curiously undressed, falling about his shoulders in thinning strands, and he wore a brocaded dressing robe over his shirt and breeches, slippers of red morocco on his feet.

He had not yet noticed his grandson's arrival.

Christian delayed for a moment in the doorway. He realized that he hadn't been to these gardens since he'd been a boy, since shortly before his father had died, taking him immediately from the innocence and freedom he had known in childhood to the penitentiary role he now held as ducal heir. From then, Christian's imaginative games of pirate and adventurer, even his interest in the wars taking place overseas were forbidden, these being pursuits deemed unnecessary to the needs of a future duke. After all, as heir to the Westover fortune, he would never be granted the officer's position he had so often dreamed of as a boy. His grandfather had made certain of it, filling Christian's days instead with studies of Latin and philosophy.

Stepping further into the garden, Christian noticed a glass of lemonade and a book—*a novel?*—sitting on the table beside

his grandfather. It appeared that the duke's attention was wholly taken up with watching a magpie picking at the ground a space away. Christian wondered if his eyes were deceiving him. Novel reading? Bird watching? His grandfather, the distinguished Duke of Westover? That weighted feeling in his stomach began to harden further still. There was no longer any doubt about it; something was definitely wrong.

Christian came to a halt several feet away from the duke's chair, stood tall and straight, and bowed his head respectfully as he'd been taught as a boy.

"Good day, Your Grace," he said.

Elias Wycliffe, the fourth Duke of Westover, turned slowly in his chair to regard his grandson and only living heir.

"Christian," he said in his usual dispassionate tone. When Christian made no attempt to converse further, he added, "you received my message, I see."

Again Christian remained silent, which prompted the duke to say, after an awkward moment, "Thank you for taking the time to come."

Christian abandoned his stance for another, one slightly more defensive. "Haven't I always come when you've summoned me, sir? I wasn't aware I had any choice in the matter."

Christian watched his grandfather's expression darken as it always did whenever they were together, and he wondered how they had come to be such adversaries. It had been this way so long now, he no longer could recall it being any differently between them.

"I will make this brief and come straight to the point. Christian, I have summoned you here to tell you that it is time for you to fulfill your part in our agreement—the first part of it, that is. Thus I have made the necessary arrangements for you to marry."

It was a statement Christian had always known he'd one day hear from the duke, but despite this, he still couldn't quite temper the breath-stealing impact that came immediately after

the words had been spoken. For nineteen years he had known this day would come. At twenty, even at twenty-five, he had anticipated it. But as time had passed on without the mention of it, Christian had begun to think that perhaps the old man had forgotten the bargain he'd made with his grandson so long ago. But Christian should have known better; the duke had simply been biding his time, waiting until he knew Christian would be absorbed with the arrangements for Eleanor's coming-out before delivering the blow he had been waiting so long to give.

Christian didn't move for several long moments as he stood waiting for the feelings of anger and impotence that he so often felt before this man to subside. He refused to allow his grandfather to detect even the slightest hint of emotion in him. He wouldn't allow him the satisfaction.

"Indeed?" he said blandly. "A marriage, you say?" Christian managed to hide his response behind a mask of nonchalance. It was a method he had come to master well during the past two decades.

"Yes. She is of fine stock, a nobleman's daughter, good character, unsullied. I would allow no less for you."

Christian's jaw tightened at the duke's cutting comment, one that implied he should be grateful. The notion of Christian choosing his own wife had never once been a consideration. From birth he had known this, but it was a fact that had become all the more apparent since his father's death. While he could do nothing to change this part of his life, this role he'd been born to, Christian would at least make certain the duke met his own obligation in their agreement.

"And Eleanor's coming-out?"

"What of it?"

"If you think to refuse—"

"It will be taken care of, just as we agreed, this season. Your sister will be given every opportunity to wed a man of her choosing and under the protection of the Westover name—without any fear of the truth coming out." He added, "Of

course, that is *if* you are agreeable to the match I have made for you.”

Bastard, Christian thought, hating the duke for speaking as if he actually had a choice, as if he might actually refuse. Perhaps he would have, had Christian not decided long ago to sacrifice his own future for that of his sister’s happiness. In order to protect Eleanor, Christian would have made a deal with the devil himself if he’d had to; indeed, for all intents and purposes, he already had.

Christian pulled in a steady breath. As he stared at the pendulous blooms of the snowdrops shifting in the morning breeze at his feet, he recalled Eleanor as a child—how she would bring him flowers, how she had followed him wherever he went. *For you, Eleanor. I do this for you, even though you can never know of it.* His feelings of anger slowly began to subside, as they always did when he thought of his sister. Only then did he return his attention to the duke.

“I assume some sort of public announcement is forthcoming.”

“*No!* There will not be an announcement made until after you are already wed. I want no possibility of any trouble.”

The duke’s expression had grown more perturbed than was his usual, causing Christian to wonder if some sort of threat had perhaps already been made. *Dear God, Eleanor*

The duke went on. “I have made arrangements for a special license and have already settled the terms of the marriage with your intended bride’s family. You have only to sign the contracts before you are to wed on the twenty-ninth.”

April the twenty-ninth. Less than a fortnight away, Christian thought, and on so significant a day.

It was the very anniversary of his father’s death.

How his grandfather must have planned this, every detail seen to, every precaution taken. No doubt even the suit of clothes Christian would wear had already been chosen for him. The duke had spent the past twenty years waiting for this day, for the glory of his final domination over his grandson’s life,

so embittered had he been since the death of his only son, Christian's father. Even now, Christian could hear the duke's words that fateful morning so long ago.

Now your life is mine.

Christian made to turn, readying to leave before he revealed to the old man just how very right he'd been in that prophecy.

He added in parting, "I assume you will send some sort of missive to me instructing the pertinent time and place."

The duke nodded.

"Then I shall take my leave, sir. Have one of your footmen bring the necessary paperwork to Knighton House and I will see to the signatures. I bid you good day."

Christian didn't wait for an acknowledgement as he started for the door. Truth be told, if he didn't leave at that very moment, he might possibly end up slamming his fist through a pane one of the French door windows.

"Christian."

He halted at the threshold, lingering a moment before he turned to face his grandfather's profile once again. The duke continued to stare outward at the garden, declining to look at him, to acknowledge him, as he spoke.

"Do you not even wish to know her name, this woman who is to be your wife?"

Christian hesitated, but for only a moment, in his response. "What does it matter, sir, when you have spent nearly my entire life assuring me that one wife is as good as any other?"

And with that, Christian departed, his mood definitely blacker for the visit.

three

Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.

-Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

“Westover.”

Grace felt her legs immediately go weak beneath her, her consciousness blurring as if she might actually faint. She quickly grabbed onto the back of the chair she stood behind. It was the only thing she could think of to keep herself from crumbling to the floor.

Dear God, no, she thought as she struggled to gather her wits, *of all the names her uncle could have given, why, oh why had he spoken that one?*

Simply the memory of that man sitting in this same room, in this very chair, questioning her about the authenticity of her anatomy made her shudder. It had taken all her will to make it through that day without getting physically ill. And now Uncle Tedric was telling her she was to be the man’s wife? To live

under the same roof? Share his home? Even—she closed her eyes against the thought—*his bed?*

Grace shook her head in denial, knowing no matter the consequences, she could never, *ever* agree to it. She said as much to Uncle Tedric a moment later, her voice oddly lucid for thoughts so much in chaos.

“I won’t wed him, Uncle.”

Tedric’s face went rigid over the cheek-high points of his collar, the fingers he’d been drumming on the rosewood tabletop falling suddenly still. “I beg your pardon, my dear Grace? I fail to recall having asked for your consent in this.”

Grace frowned, standing her ground, thankful for the chair in front of her lest her uncle notice the trembling of her knees beneath her skirts. “No, Uncle, you did not ask me, but I repeat: *I will not wed that man.* He is old enough to be my grandfather. I don’t care what he has offered you. I won’t do it. Threaten all you like. Forbid me from leaving the house. Take away all my things, if you must. But if you think to force me to wed him, I promise you now, I shall refuse to speak the vows. I will scream hysterically even as you have to carry me bodily down the aisle to him. I would rather live in the streets of...of...”

“Westminster,” Tedric said, knowing perfectly well Grace knew as little of London as would a foreigner landing on her streets for the first time.

“Westminster!” she repeated. “I would live in the streets of Westminster before I will ever become wife to that disgusting lecher.”

“You might consider that the streets there are named such things as Cut Throat Lane, Rogue’s Acres, and Pickpocket Alley. Believe me, Grace, marriage to Westover is far preferable.”

Grace wasn’t to be deterred. “I don’t care if he is the wealthiest man in England—or the entire world for that matter. I will not marry him!”

Tedric, Lord Cholmeley simply stared at his niece, no doubt taken aback by her unexpected and dogged determination, she, who had meekly accepted whatever Fate had doled out for her through the first four-and-twenty years of her life. Well, let him stare till his eyes turned to dust. She would not sit idly by and accept *this*.

But instead of arguing with her as she had expected, Uncle Tedric did the most peculiar thing. He began to laugh, a chuckle first that quickly progressed to a shoulder-shaking guffaw. Tears sprang to his eyes even as he looked at Grace, hands poised at her hips, chin thrust forward. He only laughed all the more as she stared at him in growing disbelief.

What the devil was he about? Grace had expected a quarrel, even threats—but this mirth? Not when the rest of her life depended upon this very moment. Regardless of his current financial predicament, did he feel nothing for her, his only niece, his only brother’s daughter, his sole remaining blood relation?

Helpless tears came to her eyes unbidden, causing him only to laugh the more. Unable to bear his hilarity any longer, Grace turned to flee the room.

“Grace! Wait a moment. You don’t understand.”

But she was already at the stairs, wondering if the Cholmeley coachman knew the swiftest route to Pickpocket Alley.

“Grace, no, you are mistaken. It isn’t the present duke who is to be your husband. It is his grandson, Christian, Marquess Knighton.”

Grace froze halfway up the stairs. It was not so much at the news that it wasn’t the old duke who was to be her proposed husband, but at the name her uncle had given her in his stead.

Christian, Marquess Knighton.

Knighton.

Knight.

She suddenly thought back to a day, months earlier, not long before her grandmother had died. The two of them had been sitting together on the terrace outside the dowager marchioness's bedchamber at Ledysthorpe, a quiet and peaceful spot that faced onto the banks of the River Tees several miles inland from the restless North Sea. It had been a lazy summer afternoon, albeit chilly, Grace remembered for her grandmother had urged her to wear a shawl. Grace had been reading Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* aloud while the dowager had been sitting in her chair, eyes closed, listening. The memory of that day was suddenly so vivid, Grace could almost hear the words now...

*A Knight there was, and that a worthy man,
That from the time that he first began
To ride out, he loved chivalry,
Truth and honour, freedom and courtesy—
And though that he was worthy, he was wise,
And of his port as meek as is a maid.
He never yet no villany had said
In all his life unto no manner wight.
He was a very parfit gentle knight.*

GRACE REMEMBERED that she'd looked up while reading to see that Nonny had nodded off, as she so often did when Grace had read to her. She had set the red ribbon marker between the book's pages to mark her place, thinking to work a bit on her drawing while Nonny dozed. But just as Grace had moved to set the book aside, with an abruptness that had unsettled the spaniel nestled in her lap, the dowager had sat up, suddenly alert and awake.

"You know you will have to marry."

Grace remembered wondering if perhaps her grandmother had been dreaming. "Yes, Nonny, I know that. Someday I will marry just like you did, but I do not wish to think on it just

now. I do not wish to think of ever leaving Ledysthorpe. This is my home. I love it here.”

Her grandmother had sighed. “I came here as a young bride from what had always been my home, dear. A lady makes her husband’s home her own when she is married. It isn’t so very far off for you either, my dear, this marriage I speak of. Once I am gone, I am afraid, you will be unable to avoid it any longer.”

“And where are you off to then?” Grace had asked, coming to her side to secure the blanket that had slipped from her lap. “A jaunt across the Continent perhaps?”

Her grandmother had smiled, reaching to rest her aged hand against the side of her granddaughter’s cheek. “My dearest, I am not long for this life. I feel it in my heart. And once I am gone, I will be unable to do much in the way of protecting you. Tedric will have charge over your future, at least until you reach five-and-twenty. I had hoped to remain long enough to see you to that anniversary of your birth, and past that restriction in your inheritance, however, I fear now I will not. But know this... should I die before you have reached that majority, even though I shall be gone, I will do whatever is within my power to bring you a good husband.”

“But however will I know who is the right husband if you are not here to advise me, Nonny?”

The dowager had smiled again, saying only, “You will, child because you are of my blood. I had only to dance once with my true love, your grandfather, and I knew I would happily spend the rest of my life loving him. It will be the same when you have found your own, your one true *very parfit gentle knight*.”

Her last words whispered like the soft summer wind through Grace’s thoughts. *Gentle knight. Knight...*

Was it possible? Could this Marquess *Knighton* be the one her grandmother had spoken of? Had Nonny somehow sent him to protect her, just as she had promised, or was she just being a silly fanciful girl, and the significance of his title was merely a coincidence?

“Grace?”

At her uncle’s summons, Grace came back into the doorway of the parlor where he yet sat. She thought again of her grandmother whose own marriage had been arranged, and which had still brought her great happiness. Her own mother and father had met only days before their wedding, and according to Nonny, they could not have been more perfectly matched. All her life, Nonny had read her the tales of the great lovers—Tristan and Isolde, Heloise and Abelard—whose loves had survived against great, almost insurmountable odds. Nonny had promised her granddaughter that one day she would have the same, that she would be saved by her own knight in shining armor.

Grace thought then of what would happen if she didn’t agree to this marriage. Where would she go, what would become of her should her uncle end up in debtor’s prison? She had no acceptable means of supporting herself; few ladies of her social standing did. Hadn’t she seen the fallen women who frequented the Dark Walk in Vauxhall Gardens, knowing what they offered to passing gentlemen in hopes of the sovereigns they carried in their pockets? She had never been to Westminster before, but from the sounds of it, it likely wouldn’t be a pleasant place. The way things presently stood, it seemed she really had no choice in the matter. She would have to marry eventually. It was the role she had been raised to fill, all she had been taught to expect. Why not, then, marry the duke’s grandson? At the very least, he was nearer her own age.

“I would see him first before I could ever agree to wed him.”

Tedric looked as if he might refuse. His mouth flattened into a thin line and his brow drew close over his eyes. After a moment, though, he nodded. “I will see what can be arranged, Grace. But I cannot promise anything.”



SEVERAL EVENINGS LATER, when Uncle Tedric was on his way out—probably for his club, Brooks’s, where he went most nights—he stopped a moment at the parlor door where Grace sat playing at the pianoforte. Head bent in concentration, she was working her way through the *presto agitato* of Beethoven’s 14th Sonata, the quick succession of frantic notes reverberating off the parlor walls. She had often heard it said music had a way of uplifting one’s spirits—especially, Grace had found, when one vented one’s spleen upon the keys.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted her uncle lingering in the doorway, but she continued to play her piece, striking the keys with renewed vigor. When she had finished, he came into the room, applauding softly.

“That was lovely. Grace. You are growing more and more accomplished each time I hear you.”

It was quite a compliment, considering that on the last occasion he had deigned to listen, she had been all of twelve. Grace looked at him over her music sheet. He was smiling at her, his eyes filled with a contrived warmth.

“You shall make a fine duchess one day, Grace. After all, your name portends it.”

Grace took little solace from his comment. Instead, she turned the music sheet over for the next piece. Ah, perfect—*fortissimo*. She glanced at him. “I’ll take that as indication that you have arranged for me to meet the marquess?”

Tedric nodded, obviously pleased with himself as he adjusted his kid glove. “In a manner of speaking, yes.”

Grace lifted her fingers from the keys before striking the first note, and folded her hands in her lap, waiting.

“*Meet* is perhaps the wrong choice in words. You see there can be no introduction, no conversation between you two. His Grace, the duke expressly forbids it.”

“He forbids me to meet the man I am to spend the rest of my life with?” She narrowed her eyes. “What does he seek to conceal?”

“There is nothing to conceal, my dear. Lord Knighton is considered to be *the* bachelor among the *ton*, quite the buck about town, sought after for his wealth and title as well as his looks by every suitable young lady with a mind toward marriage. It is precisely because he is in such demand that the duke doesn’t want the marriage between you made public until after the ceremony has taken place. It is really for your benefit as well as the marquess’s, Grace. An announcement beforehand would create quite a public stir. Any hope of peace in your life would be gone. Your every move would be watched, your every gesture criticized. Some desperate miss might even attempt to prevent the wedding from taking place altogether. Thus, it will be a private ceremony, between our two families, in an obscure church in the country somewhere, arranged by special license, on the twenty-ninth of April.”

“I am not even to be allowed a formal wedding ceremony?”

As a girl, like most others, Grace had always dreamed of a grand wedding. In fact, when Princess Charlotte had wed Leopold of Coburg, she and Nonny had read every news report and had pored over every engraving they could lay their hands upon. Grace had always known that she would wear the dress both Nonny and her mother had worn before her, in a church that would be simply bursting with flowers. It would be a day she would never forget, the day on which she joined her life with her husband’s, that nameless, faceless *knight* that Nonny had always assured her would be hers.

She now had a name, yes, but the face was yet unknown. And if she could not meet him, speak to him, get a sense of him, how would she ever know for certain he was *the one*?

“I’m sorry, Uncle, but I have already told you I cannot wed a man I have never met.”

Tedric shook his head. “On the contrary, my dear, you said you would ‘see’ him before you would agree to wed him—and see him you shall.”

“You know that is not at all what I meant when I—”

He held up a hand to silence her. “There is to be a ball, Grace, at the Knighton townhouse. It is intended to introduce Lord Knighton’s sister to society and is certain to be a crush. You will attend this ball; I will escort you. Since you haven’t yet been introduced to society, no one will know who you are. We will go, you will see the marquess, you can even watch him for a while if you’d like, and then we will leave. I’m afraid, this is the best I can offer you.”

Grace looked at her uncle, hearing again the words of her grandmother. *I had only to dance once with my own true love and I knew I would spend the rest of my life loving him...*

“But for one last thing, Uncle,” she said then.

“And that is?”

“I would share a dance with him.”

Tedric shook his head. “Impossible!”

“Why, sir? It is but a single dance. You have already said no one will know who I am, including Lord Knighton.”

Tedric fell silent in contemplation of her request. At first he looked annoyed, but then, after a moment, he appeared almost to smile. He shook his head. “I think perhaps the marquess is in for a bit of a surprise from his wife.”

“*Potential* wife.” Grace drew a breath, wondering why her pulse had suddenly quickened, but decided that a clandestine dance with one’s potential future husband without his knowing did have a measure of excitement to it.

“Then you will do it?” she asked. “You will arrange for me to share a dance with Lord Knighton?”

Tedric turned and headed for the door. “I don’t quite know how I’ll accomplish it, but yes, Grace, I will find a way for you to have your dance with the marquess.”

four

*A very merry, dancing, drinking,
Laughing, quaffing, and unthinking time.*

-John Dryden

Grace passed the next three days trying everything not to think about the Knighton ball. She forced herself to concentrate on thoughts of the weekly menu, or the furniture that needed polishing, even as she foraged through her wardrobe for something suitable to wear. By the time the morning of the ball dawned, she had thrice convinced herself to abandon the venture altogether, then again even as she was walking down the front stairs with her uncle to the coach to leave.

When all was said and done, she did go to the ball, and their coach arrived at the Knighton townhouse shortly after ten. For the first moment or two after they'd entered through the door, giving their cloaks to the waiting footman, Grace thought surely she had to be dreaming. As they came into the brightly-lit ballroom, she could only think that it was like stepping through a magical door into the legendary land of Cockaigne, where rivers flowed wine, the houses were made of cake, and the pavements were lined in honey-iced pastry.

Music and laughter filled the air amid this most enchanted setting; indeed every bit a fairytale. The ballroom was bathed in brilliant candlelight from chandeliers whose crystals winked like diamonds above their heads. Hothouse flowers the likes of which she had never seen spilled from ornate china and ormolu vases that were set about the room, filling the air with

an exotic mixture of their various perfumes. Liveried footmen stood off to one side, awaiting any request, while numerous other servants wove their way among the throng of guests bearing silver trays filled with every sort of delicacy imaginable. Brightly colored chiffon festooned each window opening and doorway, and one could have sworn that the tables set in the supper parlor were groaning beneath the weight of their delights. Jewels glittered about necks and ears, wrists and fingers. Elegant satins glowed against the candlelight. Everywhere she looked gaiety and opulence was evident. Everywhere except—

Grace glanced down, took one look at herself, and blanched.

The pale blue-gray silk she had chosen was one of her best gowns, still its modest design indelibly marked her a rustic from the country. The styling of her hair, a simple topknot of curls that bounced clumsily about her ears when she moved, made her lack of sophisticated polish all the more apparent. Uncle Tedric had arranged it so that they would arrive at the ball deliberately late in order to make their entrance as inconspicuous as possible. For that, Grace was certainly thankful now.

All these noble people had been born to the life of privilege, had never known a day of choosing their own clothing or dressing their own hair. Grace had been born the daughter of a marquess, yes, but it was a distinction made strictly in name for she had been raised in the country, more like a milkmaid than a noblewoman. Nonny herself had been of the belief that simple living gave one character. How the ladies present this night would gasp were they to learn Grace didn't have her own ladies' maid, but instead had relied upon her uncle's housekeeper, Mrs. Bennett, to fasten the hooks at the back of her gown when she couldn't reach them. How could she even presume to assume the role of Marchioness Knighton, much less that of the future Duchess of Westover?

Just as Grace convinced herself to have her uncle to take her back home and forget the entire event, a young lady, perhaps twenty, separated herself from the milling masses, and

came forward. She smiled politely at Grace before presenting her gloved hand to Uncle Tedric.

“I’m so happy you could come, Lord Cholmeley. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

To Grace, she was everything a lady should be—slender, perhaps an inch or two shorter than she was, her rich cocoa hair caught up in a graceful sweep. It was decorated by an ornamented ostrich plume that drifted softly as an angel’s wing when she moved. Her gown was made of white embroidered net that draped over pale rose-colored silk, and was set with sparkling brilliants that winked in the candlelight. It was quite the most elegant creation Grace had ever seen.

Tedric took the lady’s hand and bowed over it. “The pleasure is all mine, I assure you, my lady.” He turned toward Grace. “Lady Eleanor Wycliffe, allow me to introduce to you my niece, Lady Grace Ledys.”

Grace bowed her head, wishing she had something more ornate than the simple ribbon fillet laced through her curls. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lady,” she said quietly.

“Grace,” Uncle Tedric said, “Lady Eleanor is Lord Knighton’s sister. This evening’s ball is being given in her honor.”

The lovely brunette chuckled. “Yes, it is to be my coming-out. Such a peculiar term, don’t you think? Makes one think of a pillow that’s been overstuffed!”

Lady Eleanor linked her arm through Grace’s, whispering, “Your uncle has informed me of your wish to share a dance with Christian. I’m sure Lord Cholmeley wouldn’t mind letting me have you to myself for a bit first in order to get better acquainted.” She squeezed Grace’s gloved hand. “Especially if we are soon to be sisters.”

When Grace had been a girl, she’d often dreamed of having a sister, someone she could talk to and share secrets with or discuss books over tea, as she and Nonny had always done. And now, suddenly, here was this lovely young woman

offering herself for the role, and she hadn't even noticed that the shoes Grace had worn were too dark for her gown.

Grace smiled at Lady Eleanor, immediately and utterly charmed. Her anxiety about the evening ahead began to ease.

Tedric wisely took his cue to leave.

"I shall be in the gaming parlor should you have need of me, Grace." He bowed his head in parting. "Lady Eleanor."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Lord Cholmeley," Lady Eleanor said then, stopping him short, "but there is to be no gaming at the ball tonight."

"No gaming?" Tedric looked horrified, as if she had just told him that his beloved tailors, Schweitzer and Davidson, had closed up shop that very morning.

"I am afraid it was at *my* request, my lord. I didn't want anything tempting the gentlemen away from dancing with all the ladies present tonight." Lady Eleanor smiled sweetly, and a dimple appeared on her cheek, leaving Tedric little choice but to quietly agree.

"Might a gentleman find a glass of port somewhere then without fear of having it knocked against his shirtfront?"

"Of course, my lord." Lady Eleanor motioned through the door. "Down the hall, there is a parlor where you will find both port and brandy being served."

When he'd gone, Lady Eleanor directed Grace away from the doorway, taking her slowly about the periphery of the vast ballroom. As they walked, she questioned Grace about her childhood at Ledysthorpe, how she liked living in London, how she had come to be under her uncle's guardianship.

"My parents were lost in a boating accident when I was a young child," offered Grace. "I was raised by my grandmother and it was with her that I lived at Ledysthorpe until she passed away late last year."

"I am so sorry." Eleanor nodded in understanding. "Our father also died unexpectedly, although I am told his death was

due to an illness. I was not yet born, but Christian was very attached to our father and took the loss quite hard.”

Lady Eleanor spoke her brother’s name with such obvious affection, it was evident to see that they were quite close. Before Grace could question her more about him, his taste in reading or perhaps odd bits about their childhood, anything to help her get a sense of him, a trio of young ladies nearby caught her attention. They were staring at Grace from the corner of the room, whispering obvious disapproval behind their fans.

“You pay them no mind, Lady Grace,” Eleanor said when she noticed them. “They do not yet know it, but once you have become my brother’s wife, they will be falling over themselves for the favor of your attention. I promise they will mimic your every detail, no matter if you were to wear a flour sack, and they will pray you won’t remember their behavior toward you here tonight.”

“I hardly think I shall ever fit in,” Grace said. “I have spent all my life in the country where we very much lived a simple life. I’m afraid I am quite as a fish out of water here in London.”

“Do not be too distressed, my dear. Any one of them would sell their grandmother’s jewels for a chance at catching my brother’s eye. You should count yourself fortunate that you are yet unschooled in the ways of the *ton*. I, on the other hand, have been surrounded by this hypocrisy since birth. They lay claim to refinement even as they shamelessly throw themselves at Christian in hopes of inducing him to marry. As if he would even consider wedding someone who would do such a thing.”

She glanced around the room. “Look there, near to the door. Do you see that group of ladies crowding together? Do you know why they are all huddled there and are not out among the other gentlemen present? They are watching the stairs for my brother’s arrival.”

Grace spotted the flock of young ladies congregating near the foot of the stairs. Some appeared to be elbowing others for

a forward position while others stole furtive glances up the stairs.

“Oh, dear,” she said.

“It is truly embarrassing. Once at a musicale, a girl even blacked the eye of another fighting over an empty seat beside him. It is quite troublesome. In fact, it’s become the farce of the past several seasons. Hostesses at any ball he is rumored to attend must be on constant guard for these ridiculous annoyances. It has gotten so that he doesn’t go out much socially at all any more. I cannot tell you the number of ladies who have claimed to be my ‘dearest friend’ in effort to get close to him. I vow that once everyone learns he has wed you, I shan’t have any acquaintance left in town.”

Lady Eleanor chuckled, but Grace found herself wondering why the marquess would consider wedding someone he had never before seen, especially someone as unpolished as she was, when he obviously had the very crème of London society to choose from. She was also beginning to understand why the old duke had insisted upon such secrecy about their betrothal. If women were blacking one another’s eyes for a chair beside him, what would they do to her if they knew she might actually marry the man?

“Now, since my brother has apparently vanished, I shall have to go and search him out so that you may have your dance. I must admit I think I shall enjoy watching him dance with the lady he doesn’t yet know he’s about to marry, especially in front of all the ‘Helpless Hopefuls.’” She inclined her head toward the cluster of ladies still waiting at the foot of the stairs. “That is what I call them, you know. Appropriate name, do you not think? Now, may I beg your leave for only a moment or two while I go and ferret him out?”

Grace nodded, watching as Lady Eleanor departed through the crowd, noticing how poised and assured she moved. When she had requested the dance with the marquess, Grace’s only thought had been the memory of her grandmother’s words to her. It was meant to be a romantic waltz that would tell her the moment her eyes met his whether this man was indeed her “very parfit gentle knight,” the one she was meant to share her

life with. Grace hadn't considered what else this dance might entail, such as how everyone's attention in that room would be focused upon them.

What if Lord Knighton were dreadful? But if he were, why then would all these ladies be clamoring over one another for his attention? No, he must be perfect, and if that were the case, then she certainly was not the lady he should be wedding. He should have a wife of refinement and polish, someone more like his sister, and not some countrified mouse who had never before set foot in a ballroom, and who had only just recently learned to waltz. What if she did something absurd like step on his foot? Or worse, what if she completely forgot the steps of a dance she'd never actually performed with anyone save the Cholmeley footman, Henry, as her partner?

Grace only felt all the more inadequate when she looked down and noticed that the seam on her glove had begun to unravel even as she felt her hair beginning to slip from its knot. In that moment, Grace knew she could not possibly go through with it. She would find Uncle Tedric and beg him to delay the marriage. Better yet, he could simply thank the old duke for his consideration, but decline and beg his pardon a thousand times over. She, Grace from Ledysthorpe? A future duchess? It was too ridiculous to consider.

Grace turned, remembering that her uncle had gone to the parlor, and started to skirt her way from the room. It was no easy task. The ballroom, it seemed, had grown doubly crowded since their arrival. The musicians were seated and were preparing to play, heralding that the dancing would shortly begin. The crowd thickened in anticipation.

No matter how Grace tried to work her way through, an unyielding wall of humanity prevented it. She found herself swept along with the tide of the others, and soon ended up on the absolute opposite side of the ballroom. She looked around, chewing her lip. There must be another way through the house, and so she stood on her toes a bit to survey the various doorways surrounding her. No doubt the best choice would be the one closest to her, and so she sidestepped two gentlemen

involved in deep debate, smiling politely as she headed for the door.

But it didn't lead to the parlor. Instead there was a narrow corridor that appeared to be of use for getting servants from one side of the house to the other without notice. It would indeed serve her purposes very well. Grace started walking along it, hoping to find a doorway that might lead her to the parlor. Halfway down the length of the hall, however, the door she had come through suddenly closed behind her, throwing her in darkness. What followed was the rather disquieting sound of the latch being turned on it.

Oh, dear, she thought, this wasn't at all a good thing.

Grace stood a moment in the shadowed hall, contemplating her next move. She had but two options. She could go back and knock upon the door in hopes of summoning someone from the other side, but then she'd be no closer to finding her uncle than she had been when she'd started. Even worse, she would look very foolish for having gotten herself locked into a servants' corridor. Her other option, of course, was to proceed a bit further down the passageway to see where she might end up.

Grace prudently chose the latter.

With one gloved hand resting against the wall to guide her, she made her way slowly into the darkness. But there didn't seem to be any openings at all, just smooth wall along a corridor that seemed only to grow more shadowed with each step she took. She stumbled on some steps and slowly she made her way up. At the top, she flattened both hands against the wall, feeling her way along until blessedly, her fingers finally found an opening in the wall. It seemed to be some sort of moveable panel. A small doorway, perhaps? Grace felt around the edge of it, but could find no mechanism, no way to release it. She listened but didn't hear any sound coming from the other side. She tried to fit her fingers around the outside edge, but the seal was too tight.

So Grace placed her palm flat against the panel and gave it a push. The upper corner seemed to give a bit, so she slid her

hands upward and gave it another try, and then another, this time putting the weight of herself against it and—

The panel gave way and Grace then tumbled through headfirst, landing with a thud on her hands and knees. The fall set the weight of her coiffure falling forward. She looked through the mass of curls now over her eyes to see the polished toes of a pair of boots standing directly in front of her—boots that were most assuredly attached to a body.

five

A man perfect to the last detail.

-Horace

Grace drew in her breath and held it as she looked up through her lopsided hair past long legs, a trim waist, to a chest that was both broad and—

—bare.

Surely this couldn't be real. *He* couldn't be real. Grace blinked, but he did not vanish.

Good God, this *was* real.

“Well, this is certainly a first.”

His voice was deep, rich, and he had the most startling pair of eyes she'd ever before seen. They were silvery blue and the way they were looking at her so candidly made her feel as if it was she who was unclothed, not he. Grace had never before seen a man in any state of undress and was appalled to find herself staring at the muscles that lined his abdomen as he took up his shirt and slipped his arms inside.

“Oh my goodness!” was all she could manage to say. Her next mistake was in wondering how the situation could possibly get any worse.

She soon had her answer.

“I suppose, given the circumstances, I should introduce myself,” he said as he fastened the buttons on his shirtfront. “I am Lord Knighton, your host for this evening. And this is not

the receiving line, where we should be meeting, and would be—had I not run afoul of a certain lady’s ratafia. No, this,” —he smiled, a half-grin that was anything but warm— “is my dressing room. But then you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Of all the dressing rooms she could have fallen into in this vast house, how had she managed to choose his? With anyone else, she could quickly beg their pardon and leave, knowing she would likely never see them again. But this was the man she was supposed to marry, the man who didn’t yet realize that the woman who had just come tumbling through his dressing room wall was his intended future bride. Could she dare to hope he would forget this night and this meeting within the next fortnight?

The marquess turned and folded his neckcloth with an ease Uncle Tedric would have applauded, all the while staring at her in the reflection of his looking glass as if it were perfectly reasonable for a woman to have come popping out of the woodwork. And, perhaps, to him, it was.

Grace, on the other hand, felt utterly humiliated. It wasn’t until Lord Knighton lowered down before her, resting his forearm on his thigh while he held out his other hand to her, that she even realized she was still sprawled ignominiously across his Axminster carpet.

“Unless you have acquired a sudden fondness for my flooring, might I suggest we find more equal footing?”

Cheeks burning, Grace could only place her gloved hand into his, coming as quickly and decorously as she could to her feet. She opened her mouth to speak but no words would come out. She couldn’t quite decide if it would be considered proper in such situations to thank a half-naked man for having assisted a lady to her feet. So Grace merely stood, her curls askew, silent as a candlestick, while Lord Knighton finished dressing. She was suddenly reminded of Eleanor’s words earlier that evening, telling how the other ladies had been so bold and relentless in their pursuit of her brother’s attentions. She had just fallen through the wall into Lord Knighton’s dressing room—where Lord Knighton was presently dressing. Somehow, she didn’t think there could be a more undignified

manner for one to “throw oneself” at a man than that which she had just undertaken.

There was one thing that was certain: seeing him now only brought Grace to understanding exactly why ladies were blacking one another’s eyes to get near to him. Christian Wycliffe, Marquess Knighton, was, quite simply, the most beautiful man she’d ever beheld. Hair that was a deep chestnut brown like his sister’s swept back from his forehead to fall about the stark white of his impeccably high collar. He had the sort of face that sculptors committed to marble, clean, strong, inherently powerful. Tall and lean, he carried himself with an air of noble distinction. One need not be told he was the heir to the wealthiest dukedom in England. Everything about him, from his clothes to his expression, all but declared it.

“I...uh...,” Grace faltered, somehow suddenly unable to speak. How in heaven’s name was she going to explain her appearance there? “I was looking for my uncle...”

He quirked a brow. “Your uncle, is it? Well, I suppose that’s as good a tale as any. It happens all the time, although I would say you are certainly more inventive than the others. This is the first time I’ve ever had anyone come through my dressing room wall.”

Grace watched then as he took up his coat—elegant black—and put it on, taking his time in adjusting his cuffs. *He is angry. He thinks I have come here in hopes of catching him as a husband, like one of Eleanor’s “helpless hopefuls,”* she thought to herself. *If only he knew the truth.* But it was too ridiculous a notion to even laugh about.

He was watching her, quite obviously awaiting her name, a thing she had no intention of providing. Instead, she intended to get out of there as quickly as she could manage.

Grace started for the door. “Truly, I assure you I was looking for my uncle and I got lost...” The thought of sharing a dance with him now was beyond comprehension. “I’m sorry for the intrusion. I shouldn’t have come here.”

As she made for the door, the marquess stepped directly in her path, effectively preventing her from leaving. Grace’s heart

pounded as she stared up at him. His eyes, she noticed, had changed from silver blue to smoky, dangerous slate.

“Surely you don’t expect to leave so soon after you went through all that effort to get here.”

His smile had changed, too, into something infinitely more predatory. Grace swallowed against the nervous tightening in her throat. “I’m afraid I do not understand, my lord.”

“That, Miss Whoever-You-Are, is precisely my point. Didn’t your mother ever warn you against the dangers of entering a man’s bedchamber?”

Grace frowned at his sarcasm, a small part of her pulling deep inside. “My mother died when I was a child.”

For a moment, she thought she saw the slightest softening in his expression, but it didn’t remain that way long. “Allow me to instruct you on the finer points of propriety.” He took another step toward her. He was standing so near, Grace had to cock her head back to look up at him, for he was at least six inches taller than she.

“There is a reason ladies of good breeding do not sneak their way into the bedchambers of men. A very good reason.” He took her by the arms.

She found it suddenly difficult to breathe. She wondered fleetingly if her feet still met the floor. She certainly couldn’t feel them. “A lady can never know for certain if the man in question is a gentleman or a blackguard who would seize the opportunity to ravish her.”

“But, you are a gentleman, sir. Your grandfather is the Duke of Westover.”

She felt his hands tighten slightly over her arms, any light to his expression instantly gone. “A fact, my lady, that should have been warning enough.”

Before Grace realized what was happening, the marquess lowered his head and took her mouth completely with his as he drew her hard against the length of his body.

Christian felt the girl stiffen against him and tilted her head back to deepen the kiss, tasting her with his tongue, running a finger along the slender column of her throat until he felt her begin to tremble. He'd had enough of female wiles and machinations to last a lifetime. These antics had been amusing at first, but this latest invasion of his privacy had gone far beyond the bounds. Had she arrived but five minutes earlier, she would have discovered him at his bath and he would now be embroiled in a mess he would have no hope of extricating himself from. He intended to teach the lady a lesson she would not soon forget. Only there was a problem. She didn't seem to realize he was punishing her. She wasn't resisting him. Instead, she melted against him and took his kiss, even releasing a soft pleasing moan into his mouth.

Punishment be damned.

Christian kissed her thoroughly, forgetting for the moment who he was, where they were, how she'd come to be there. He indulged in the moment and in her—the softness of her skin, the faint herbal scent of her pale blonde hair, the total innocence of a gesture she so obviously knew nothing about. A heat began to kindle within him—more precisely within his groin. Even as he tightened his arms around her, Christian wondered that he should feel this way, with this woman, when no other had been able to stir him to any response in quite some time. Perhaps it was the fact that in less than a fortnight, he was going to be marrying a woman he'd never even set eyes upon. He shouldn't be doing this, he knew, but in the very next moment, she shifted slightly, her hips brushing his. Christian nearly lost his mind.

The thought to drag her to the carpet and take what she was so obviously offering nearly overcame him. Every inch of him begged to know her. Instead, he abruptly pulled away from her, even taking a step back. He watched her, her eyes half-closed, her breathing coming in quick rushes, her mouth so damned desirable. One errant blonde curl twisted over her forehead just above her brow, a twirl of amber honey. Slowly her eyes drifted more fully open and he suddenly knew the color of blue fire. She said nothing, just stood there, lips

glossed from his kiss, and the way she was looking at him could only be termed one thing—

Dangerous.

Was she truly as innocent as her kiss hinted? Or was she simply playing the part of the unschooled maiden? She had to be a practiced seductress, he decided. What virgin would sneak her way into a man's bedchamber?

Christian stared at her hard. Who was this mystifying creature? She was lovely, yes, her nose small and straight, her lips a very becoming shade of pink—darker now that he'd kissed them. Honey-gold hair curled about her eyes, eyes that were the brightest blue he'd ever seen. Still, any number of the other young women who had attempted to tempt him before her could lay claim to similar loveliness. What he wanted to know was how had she been able to rouse him so thoroughly when no other had?

He realized then there was something to her—a uniqueness he could not quite identify. How else could he explain how he had gone from seeking to teach her a lesson in one moment to being the one who was overcome in the next? How had she managed to defeat the untouchable self-control he had spent his life perfecting?

He wondered who she was, but then told himself it was better to keep her a stranger to him. Once he were wed, any assignation between them would be impossible. He would not tolerate adultery in his marriage. He would demand fidelity from his wife and would practice the same. It could be no other way. So better to get her out of his dressing room as quickly as possible before anything complicated this matter more.

Christian crossed the room in two strides and opened the door. He stuck his head out and shouted "Jackson!" to the empty corridor. He stood, watching her askance as if he didn't quite trust she would stay on the other side of the room. In truth, it was himself he couldn't trust; he didn't think he would be able to restrain himself if he got close to her a second time.

When no response came to his summons, Christian went out into the hall. He was readying to call out again when a liveried footman appeared at the top of the stairs—a very large liveried footman who had become quite adept at handling occasions such as these. Lord knows he'd had plenty of experience.

“My apologies for not having come sooner, my lord. There was a *situation* belowstairs that required my attention.”

Christian frowned. “Well, there is a *situation* here that requires your attention, as well.”

The footman exhaled loudly. “Another one?”

Christian motioned with his head toward his dressing room door. “Please escort the young lady back to the fête. And then make certain that all the doors on all the servants’ passageways are securely bolted.”

“Aye, my lord.” Jackson headed for the door. “Miss, if you’ll come with—”

But the footman turned back toward Christian with a look of confusion. “My lord?”

Christian made for the door, knowing even before he got there what he would find.

She had indeed gone, vanishing just as quickly as she had come, leaving Christian to stare at the vacant wall panel she'd fallen through moments before, far more befuddled than he cared to admit.



LORD CHOLMELEY DOZED in the coach after they had left the ball, leaving Grace to stare at the rain-slick London streets and hazy glow of the lamp lights through the swirling fog outside the window. She was thankful for the solitude, for it allowed her to better come to terms with the events that had taken place that evening.

She still wondered how she had made it out of that house after what had taken place in Lord Knighton's dressing room. She had slipped through the wall panel when Lord Knighton had gone into the hall to summon his man, only this time, she had found the way straight to the parlor as if her feet had always known the path. Once there, she easily found her uncle and quickly beseeched him to take her home, telling him she was unwell— "a female ailment," she'd added. A well-worn excuse, she knew, but it was the only thing she could think of that wouldn't have had him instantly interrogating her. Instead, he'd flushed pink as a pomegranate, and quickly set off to summon the coach and retrieve their cloaks.

As they had come through the entrance hall on their way to leave, Grace had spotted Lady Eleanor standing on the opposite side of the ballroom. At the sight of her, Grace had been filled with a feeling of regret. Eleanor had been so kind, so encouraging, and Grace felt she owed her some sort of explanation. But at that particular moment, she hadn't known if she would be able to frame a coherent sentence. Her heart had still been pounding from the thorough kissing Lord Knighton had given her.

All her life, Grace had dreamed of her first kiss as something tender, soft, infinitely romantic. It would take place on a flowery river bank, or even on a ballroom terrace with the moonlight filtering down through the trees. The man who would deliver her this awe-inspiring tribute would be kind and handsome and filled with adoration for her. He would be the man of her dreams.

Lord Knighton was unquestionably handsome, but any further comparison to her dream after that was completely lost. When he had kissed her, it had only been turbulent and she'd been left feeling giddy, breathless, and utterly chaotic inside. Nothing about their meeting had been as Nonny had said it would be. There had been no enchantment, no gaiety, no blissful realization of having come face-to-face with her life's intended mate. There had only been fire and suddenness and a total collision of beings—and something else she didn't quite understand, something that had shaken her to her core.

The worst part of it was that she had utterly humiliated herself in front of the man she was to have called husband. She would never forget the darkness of his expression, the thinly veiled anger that had sparked in his eyes when he'd spoken to her, so very contrary to the light and softness she had always envisioned. This man didn't adore her. He didn't even like her. And that was a far from propitious preamble to a marriage.

Grace waited until they had arrived back at the Cholmeley townhouse, retiring to the study for a claret, before she informed her uncle she could not possibly wed Lord Knighton.

Tedric responded with something a little less than familial understanding.

"The devil you won't wed him," he said as he poured himself a brandy. "I don't care if you do scream all the way down the aisle. You are going to wed Lord Knighton."

"Uncle, please, surely there must be some other way to—"

"It is too late, Grace. He has already assumed the debt."

She stared at him. "What did you say?"

"The duke, he has paid my creditors. In full. It was part of the agreement of the marriage. Westover wanted any outstanding annoyances seen to before news of the wedding came about. I don't think I need to tell you that twenty thousand pounds is a great deal of money, Grace. An absolute fortune. There will be ramifications if you refuse to marry Lord Knighton now. Legal ramifications. The Duke of Westover is not a man to be trifled with. He has already promised to bring a breach of promise suit against us both if you do not go through with the wedding."

"But I did not take his money!"

"True...but you did sign the marriage contract. It will look as if you agreed to wed Lord Knighton strictly to get rid of my debts, then broke off the agreement. You would have a very difficult time explaining to a jury that you had a change of heart about wedding Lord Knighton without ever having seen the man."

Oh, but she had seen him, Grace thought to herself—quite a lot of him, in fact. An image of him, standing over her in all his half-naked glory, flashed through her mind before Tedric went on. “The duke will paint you an extortionist in a very public court proceeding. And he will win his judgement. In the end, the Cholmeley family will be ruined. Honor and respect hundreds of years in the making will be lost—the same honor and respect my mother dedicated her life to preserving.”

And which you have spent your lifetime trying to destroy.

And then he said, “Do you want to be known to history as the one who brought down the House of Cholmeley, Grace?”

Grace looked to Nonny’s portrait hanging above the hearth, and she knew that her uncle was right, even though he said these things for his own personal advantage. Nonny would have fulfilled her duty no matter the cost, no matter the circumstances—she would wed Mephisto himself if she’d had to.

And because she had raised her granddaughter to follow that same ethic, Grace knew she would have no choice but to do exactly the same.

*Seven years would be insufficient to
make some people acquainted with each other,
and seven days are more than enough for others.*

-Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility

Little Biddlington, England

The vicar was grinning, grinning like a contented fiend, and well he should be. This was likely the most momentous event to have swept through his tiny village since back in 1669. On that occasion, one of King Charles II's many mistresses had gotten waylaid by an unprecedented blizzard, causing her and her considerable entourage of servants to "bed down" with the locals for three days and three nights. But now, the covert wedding of the heir to the Duke of Westover might just top that.

Little Biddlington was about as sleepy a hamlet as could be found, nestled in the rolling hills of Bedfordshire, its single road dotted by Tudor-style timbered houses with overhanging upper storeys. The village itself lay hidden from the main London road by a steeply sloping vale and a veritable fortress wall of sycamore trees. The Duke of Westover couldn't have chosen the location with more care. Its inconspicuous locale had saved the village nearly two centuries earlier when invading Roundhead troops had been unable to find it. A decade later, even the plague had missed it, striking, however, every other village around them. Thus, it would serve as the

perfect setting for the wedding nobody knew was about to take place.

The church itself was quite ancient, mottled stone and that moss-covered, with various parts of it dating back to before the Norman Conquest. Crosses cut into the lintel of the doorway on the inner porch were said to have been made by crusaders blunting their sword points as a dedication to peace upon their return from the Holy Land. This, and the gravesite of Miss Mary Pottinger, a spinster who had died aged one hundred and seven back in 1722, had been pointed out by the vicar, a Mr. Weston, upon their arrival; they were, it would seem, the two most distinctive features of the village.

Within the space of the next few hours, however, Little Biddlington's anonymity would be left behind, and Mr. Weston's tiny place in history thereafter secured. He would no longer fall to obscurity—living, preaching, and then dying in this obscure place—unknown to the rest of the world. Instead, Tobias Weston, vicar of St. Anthony's parish, would be known to history as the man who had secretly wed the heir to the wealthiest peer in England without anyone else being the wiser. Perhaps they would even erect a monument to record the occasion for posterity's sake, within sight of the headstone of one-hundred-and-seven-year-old Mary Pottinger. At the very least it would give Mr. Weston and his flock something to gossip about over tea for decades to come.

And so the vicar grinned.

Christian, his grandfather, the duke, his mother, and his sister, Eleanor, had left London before dawn, traveling in an unmarked coach hired just for the occasion. If not for Eleanor's lively chatter about the various landmarks they passed along the route, there would not have been a word spoken at all the way there.

Immediately upon their arrival in the village, the Westover footman had roused the vicar from sleep, presenting him the special license granted and signed by the archbishop himself.

"It would be an honor to perform this service, Your Grace," he proclaimed to the old duke from beneath his

slouching night cap. He then quickly performed his ablutions, donning his vestments with an alacrity that had surprised them all, and now stood at the chancel, still grinning at his good fortune. The young lady—Christian's intended wife—was to arrive with her uncle by a separate route. She had yet to make an appearance.

Christian stood at the end of the church's center aisle, impatiently awaiting his bride's arrival. He glanced at the old duke who sat alone on the first pew, his hand fisted tightly around the ball of his cane. How triumphant he must feel, Christian thought, having lived long enough to see this day, the day he'd waited so patiently for through most of Christian's two-and-thirty years, to fruition. If he had ever wondered before why his grandfather hadn't sought to claim his due part of their bargain earlier, it was patently apparent to Christian now. He need only look to the emptiness of the seat beside the duke, and consider the significance of the day.

Christian's father, Christopher Wycliffe, had been two-and-thirty years of age when he had died, and on that same day, but twenty years earlier. It was only fitting that at the same age, and on the same date, that the duke had lost his only son, he should exact his terms of the unholy bargain he'd made with his surviving heir.

Eye for an eyetooth for a toothlife for a life

Long-hidden memories of that horrible day began to rise, swell, blister unbidden, despite Christian's resistance to it. Even now, he could picture the throngs of mourners who had come all the way from London that day, huddling together beneath the dripping branches of the great Westover elms to pay their last respects. He would never forget the cold that had numbed him to his bones that day, the wet dripping down his face from the brim of the beaver hat he'd worn, the cloying mist of fog that had shrouded the Wycliffe family cemetery. He'd stood there, a shell of a boy on the cusp of becoming a man, all while the haunting toll of the church bell had rung out the traditional nine times, and then another two and thirty for each year of Christopher Wycliffe's abruptly ended life.

An ague had taken him, the family had said, and everyone had believed them. No one could have suspected the truth as they looked at the newly-titled, twelve-year-old marquess standing stiffly beside his grandfather, the duke, shivering in the rain.

Banishing the image, Christian glanced away from his grandfather to where his mother and his sister sat on the pew across the aisle. Frances, Lady Knighton, had been the celebrated beauty of her time, inspiring volumes of poetry, and setting a style that had been emulated throughout many a social season. Once a brilliant sable brown, her hair had since grayed, and the pale skin of her cheek was not as smooth as it had once been. Still, she continued to attract notice whenever she went out as a timeless figure of elegance, grace, and beauty.

Since the death of her husband, though, most of her time now was spent hidden away from society, reading her Bible, or passing her days in silent, reflective thought. The past twenty years had done little to remove the broken taint of sadness from her eyes, and Christian often thought that that day had not only seen his father killed, but his mother's spirit destroyed as well. For months afterward, they'd worried she might do herself a harm. The only thing that had kept her from it, Christian knew, had been the child she'd carried within her—her daughter, his baby sister, Eleanor.

From the moment she had been born, Eleanor was everything that is gentle and light in the world. Christian had watched her grow, blossoming from a silly tomboy with ragged-hemmed skirts and dirt beneath her fingernails to the sweet, accomplished young woman she now was. He had seen her through scraped shins, a terrible bout of quinsy when she'd been six, and a rivalry with the neighboring earl's daughter, Lady Amanda Barrington, that had ended with one unruly tangle in the midst of a trout pond. And he would see her safely wed, he said to himself, not in an arranged match like this, but with a man she both loved and respected, and one who would love and respect her in kind.

She deserved no less.

It was for those two women and none other Christian would see this day through; he would do anything—even marry a stranger—to protect them.

Eleanor, ever the optimist, had tried to ease what she perceived to be Christian's premarital apprehensions at their arrival in Little Biddlington earlier that morning.

"She will be lovely," she'd said, straightening his neckcloth and brushing a hand over his superfine coat. "You will see."

Christian had simply nodded, but inwardly, he had wondered what it would matter whether his bride was or wasn't lovely. She could have a hunched back and six fingers on her hand, and he would still have to wed her. After all, he'd signed his name to the contracts. Even now, he couldn't believe he'd done it, agreeing to wed a woman he had yet to set eyes upon.

But he had seen her name indelibly written on the contracts. *Lady Grace Ledys*. A relation of some sort to the Marquess of Cholmeley, for he'd also seen that name listed as the girl's guardian. A lovely name, yes—but who was she? And what sort of girl would agree to wed a man she, too, had never set eyes upon?

There came a stirring at the rear of the church then, drawing his attention back to the present. The time had come, it seemed, for him to face his unknown bride.

Christian drew a steady breath, turning from the vicar. Now to just be done with it.

A slight figure gowned in pale blue materialized at the far end of the aisle, standing on the arm of an older man, no doubt Lord Cholmeley. With the morning light that shone in through the windows behind her, Christian wasn't able to clearly see her. She was just a figure cloaked in the sun, an apparition. As she started walking slowly toward him, though, he thought for a moment he recognized something...familiar about her. But that was impossible, he told himself. They had never even met.

He watched her approach. She drew nearer. Golden hair took on a shimmer beneath a charming bonneted halo of flowers, glowing in the light that broke through the ancient church's stained glass windows. Christian didn't even realize he was holding his breath until she walked out of the light to join him and he finally saw her. His breath left him in a rush as he at once took in her delicate features, elegant, refined, and then her eyes—startling blue—the very eyes that had peered up at him from the floor of his dressing room the night of his sister's coming-out ball.

What...?

Before Christian could wonder what to think, she was there standing beside him and the vicar began the service. While Mr. Weston spoke, enunciating as if an entire congregation filled the church and not just their sparse half dozen, Christian peered again to study his unexpected bride. Her gaze was fixed upon the vicar, and she listened attentively to his words. Christian noticed her hands shaking slightly beneath the posy of flowers she held. She must have sensed Christian watching her, for she chanced a look at him, blinking warily before returning her attention to the vicar.

What the devil had she been doing that night, creeping about through the servant's passages? His initial confusion at the sight of her began quickly to twist into distrust. Had she been spying on him? What else could have been her purpose? Christian rather doubted she had been seeking to acquaint herself with the layout of the house.

When the vicar then asked if the couple had come both willingly and without reservation to this union, Christian hesitated only a moment before giving his assent. On through the liturgy he barely heard the vicar's words, but managed to respond when prompted. He slid the ring—a Westover heirloom sapphire surrounded by diamonds that had been both his mother's and his grandmother's before her—onto the lady's slender finger. It fit too loosely, he noticed fleetingly, and she closed her fingers into a fist around it. But in the space of a moment, barely a breath, they were suddenly and

indelibly joined. It didn't seem possible that it could be over with so quickly.

He didn't kiss her, despite tradition. After all, they'd already done that in his dressing room the night of Eleanor's ball.

With the ceremony closed, the duke stood from his seat, thanked the vicar, and rewarded him with a pouch full of coin before turning to leave. His duty was done, his utmost wish fulfilled.

Christian and Grace each quickly signed their names to the parish register, exchanging thanks and farewells with the vicar. Christian then looked to his bride, this stranger—his wife—and offered her his arm. “Madam?”

Outside, beside the gravestone of one-hundred-and-seventy-year-old Mary Pottinger, Eleanor and his mother were smiling. When Christian and Grace emerged from the church, Eleanor came forward, embracing her brother with a warm kiss to his cheek.

“Congratulations, Christian. I am so happy for you. You see, I told you she would be lovely.”

He scarcely managed a nod before she then turned to Lady Grace, welcoming her to the Wycliffe family with a kiss and an embrace. “You make a most beautiful bride, Grace. And it is just as I said to you. We are now sisters.”

Christian stared at Eleanor. She already was acquainted with his wife? Why the devil hadn't she told him? Was everyone in on this wretched deception?

Lady Frances came forward then and took her son's hands with hers. When she spoke, her voice was thick with emotion. “Thank you, Christian. I know how difficult this day must be for you. I want you to know you are more than any mother could ever hope for in her son.”

For a moment, he swore he caught a glimpse of the woman she had once been before the emptiness came to darken her eyes once again. “If there is any good to what I am, Mother, it is only due to you.”

Lady Frances looked quickly away from him to where Eleanor and Grace stood chatting. “She seems a lovely girl, Christian. I know it seems impossible, given the circumstances, but I do hope you will find happiness together.” And then she added, “Be kind to her.”

Christian could only nod before the duke stepped toward him, shattering the moment between mother and son with a thunk of his damnable Malacca cane.

“Did you think I’d have you wed to a gorgon?” When Christian didn’t respond, he said, “I’ve arranged for a coach to take you to Westover for the night. The staff has been alerted and is prepared for your arrival. One night, Christian. That was our agreement. By the time you return to London on the morrow, the announcements will have been made in the papers.”

Christian simply nodded at the reminder that he had one more task to perform in order to fulfill his part of their bargain. And the sooner he saw to it the better. He turned to Grace, who stood waiting beside him and offered her his arm once again. “Shall we depart, my lady?”

He handed her inside the coach then climbed in to sit opposite her. They waited while the coachman made his way to his seat. Christian watched as Grace waved out the window, calling farewells to her uncle and Eleanor just before they began to pull away. A riot of questions were galloping through his thoughts. Who was she? Where had his grandfather found her? Just how much money did she and her family stand to receive from this carefully constructed alliance?

It wasn’t until the church had disappeared behind them that Grace turned from the window to face him. She looked immediately uncomfortable, alone now with a man who was both stranger and husband. She said in an effort to break the awkward silence between them, “I know what you must be thinking, my lord.”

“Do you?”

“The other night at the ball. It isn’t at all what it seems—”

“Oh, no? And what pray tell was your purpose in coming to my dressing room, madam? Did you wish to view the goods before exchanging the vows?”

Her face grew shadowed. “As I told you that night, I was trying to find my uncle.”

Christian smirked. “And naturally one would think to look first in another man’s dressing room. I promise you, my lady, I’m not in the habit of entertaining gentlemen in my private chambers.”

Grace shook her head. “It wasn’t supposed to happen as it did. We were just supposed to share a dance.” He saw that her eyes were filling with emotion. She blinked it away. “That’s all. My uncle had arranged it with your sister. You wouldn’t even have known who I was. But then, when I saw that ballroom, all those people, I had second thoughts. When Eleanor went to look for you, I tried to find my uncle so we could leave before you came back with her. Only I got confused in the crowd and somehow ended up in the servants’ passage, which wouldn’t have been any trouble, except that someone locked the door behind me.”

Christian didn’t want to believe her, even though her explanation sounded perfectly plausible. Either that, or she had worked very hard at making it up. “You said you had wanted a dance. With me. Pray, why?”

Grace didn’t immediately answer. Instead, she glanced out the window for a moment, her brow drawn close in thought beneath the rim of her straw bonnet. She chewed her lower lip.

“I had been forbidden to meet you,” she said, her voice falling softly now. “I thought that perhaps by at least dancing with you, even if you didn’t know who I was, I would somehow be able to reassure myself that I was doing the right thing in becoming your wife. It sounds foolish now in the face of it all, but at the time, it was all I had.”

Her eyes shone only with a vulnerable sincerity. She was telling the truth.

Christian had anticipated so many things in the woman his grandfather would choose for his wife. He had expected she would be inspired to wed him for his title and the Westover wealth, those two qualifications that made him such a coveted prize on the marriage market. He had even prepared for someone as ruthless and devious as the duke. But, somehow, Grace seemed to have none of these qualities. Her honesty and absolute candor startled him. They were things to which he was wholly unaccustomed. They were things the Dukes of Westover had been taught since time immemorial to suspect.

He looked at her, shielding his thoughts. “You said you changed your mind. About having a dance with me.”

She nodded.

“Why?”

Her reluctance kept her from answering a moment. She took a breath, released it. When she finally did speak, her voice was barely above a whisper. “It was the way they all kept looking at me, like I didn’t belong there.”

Surely this vulnerability, this innocence could not be real, especially in one hand-picked by his grandfather. How long ago had the duke decided upon her as the chosen bride for the Westover heir? Long enough for her to rehearse every word she would say, every gesture she would make? Perhaps, somehow, the duke had realized Christian’s own secret plan, one that would foil the duke’s final triumph in their lifelong battle of wills. It was a battle Christian could never allow himself to lose; the risk was too great. Even as he found himself intrigued by her, he knew he must never lower his guard, no matter how lovely, how exceptional his new wife might prove to be.

seven

*Happiness in marriage is
entirely a matter of chance
it is better to know as little
as possible of the defects of the person
with whom you are to pass your life.
-Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice**

“We are arrived at Westover, madam.”

Grace slowly opened her eyes onto the darkened coach interior and the shadowed silhouette of Lord Knighton sitting across from her. She blinked, glanced out the side window, noting the dark and starless sky, the hazy gleam of moonlight from behind a thickening fog. Goodness, it was already night. How long had she been sleeping?

“Two hours,” the marquess said as if clearly reading her thoughts. “Ever since Wexburgh.” He then opened the coach door and alighted, offering his hand to assist Grace down from inside.

She was confronted outside by an immense structure that was part castle, part manor house, even part dungeon, issuing from the twilight shadows like the eerie backdrop put to use by gothic tales she enjoyed reading. It was surely the most imposing domicile she’d ever seen—twice the size, if not more, of Ledysthorpe. However, its vastness did not in any way signify comfort. At Ledysthorpe, from the moment one

arrived, visitors were embraced by a feeling of unmistakable welcome from the servants who came at once to wave in greeting, or the numerous dogs yapping excitedly at their heels. Cast as it was in the gray and mist of dusk, this dour place only gave an impression of foreboding, seeming almost to warn the visitor away rather than draw them in.

They stood in a courtyard surrounded on four sides by somber stone walls that frowned sternly down upon them. Two of the walls were cornered by ivy-covered towers and, except for the gated archway their coach had entered through, there appeared no other way out. After speaking briefly to the coachman, Lord Knighton started across the graveled drive toward wide front steps set beneath an imposing door that rose surely three times the height of him. Grace had little choice but to follow behind. As they reached the top stair, the door crept open to reveal a grim-faced, elder butler.

“Good evening, my lord.”

Lord Knighton barely acknowledged his greeting except to mutter a curt, “Ambrose,” as he walked past the man into the main entrance hall.

He noticed that Grace hadn’t followed. He turned. “My lady?”

“You aren’t going to carry me across the threshold?”

He stared at her a moment. “I beg your pardon?”

“I thought it was a rule that all grooms carried their brides across the threshold on their wedding day.”

“A rule?”

Grace nodded. “To neglect to do so could bring dire consequences to the marriage.” Well, that is, consequences more dire than the fact that the bride and groom were utter strangers to one another.

“I suppose that would be an issue for one who believes in that sort of nonsense.”

Grace merely looked at him. She didn’t move from the other side of the threshold. “Still, I would hate to be

responsible for tempting ill fortune.”

Christian stared at her. Ambrose, she noticed, stood watching the entire exchange in silent confusion.

“My lady, unless you think to sleep upon the front stoop, I would suggest you walk yourself through the door.”

“But I—”

“Oh, good God, woman. All right!”

Grace sucked in a startled breath as Christian swept her up and into his arms. It was the closest she had gotten to him all day and she immediately noted the scent of him, sandalwood and something else, something spicier. The sudden sense of being held by him, the warmth of her body against his, was new and oddly comforting. When he brought her inside and set her abruptly on her feet again, she instantly missed it.

He, however, seemed wholly unaffected by it.

“I hope that will set fortune at ease,” Christian said, and then turned to walk further inside.

While the outside of the building had initially intimidated her, the inside proved almost overwhelming. Marble Roman statuary were set around the circular entrance chamber in alcoves carved into the granite walls. Rather than where they might be better viewed and appreciated, they had been placed at such a height as to give anyone entering the sense of being stared down upon by a crowd of overlords. Thick alabaster columns measured off the perimeter of the room, and the Westover ducal coat of arms, carved in stone, was emblazoned above the arched central corridor. As they walked, their footsteps echoed on the marble floor and carried upward to the lofty heights of the ceiling, a ceiling that was buttressed with oaken beams the size of ship’s masts.

A figure emerged from the shadows at the far end of the hall holding a flickering branch of candles, a housekeeper in dark skirts and a white linen mobcap who surprisingly attempted a small smile as she curtsied. She came to a standstill beside Ambrose’s rigid posture.

“Good evening, Mrs. Stone,” Lord Knighton said.

The housekeeper bobbed. “Lord Knighton, ‘tis good to see you again.”

“Allow me to introduce my wife, Lady Knighton, to you both.”

The butler bowed his head dutifully, murmuring “Madam,” while the housekeeper dipped quickly into another curtsy. “Welcome to Westover, my lady.”

“You will show Lady Knighton to our chambers and assist her with her things. We’ve had a long journey and we will be leaving first thing on the morrow. Anything her ladyship requires, please see to it.”

The two answered in unison, “Yes, my lord.”

Grace looked at Christian. “You aren’t coming?”

“I have some business to attend to. Ambrose and Mrs. Stone are quite capable of directing you, unless there is some other nonsensical rule that requires bridegrooms to carry their wives over every threshold in the house.”

Grace felt her face redden, shook her head, uncertain whether he mocked her, or had attempted a jest. Instead she wondered at his sudden neglect. Did he mean to leave her alone in this vast cavern of a house for the night—on her wedding night? “I just thought that—”

But Christian wasn’t listening to her. Instead, he turned and began issuing orders to the butler. “Please instruct the cook to have our dinner served in the dining hall. A footman can show Lady Knighton there when she has finished settling in upstairs.”

Grace stared at Christian, wondering if he would ever shed the mantle of cold indifference he had worn throughout the day. He had been polite during their journey, not overly interested in any conversation she attempted, but she had figured him tired and had thought they would get further acquainted once they reached their destination.

Apparently that was not to be.

But before Grace could voice any agreement or disagreement to these plans, Christian turned and strode toward a side door, the sober echoing of his footsteps the only sound in the hall. Grace merely stood and watched him go as he closed the door firmly behind him.

She stood alone in the center of the hall.

“My lady?” Mrs. Stone said finally.

Grace looked to her.

“If you would be so kind as to follow me, I will show you to your chambers.”

Grace gave one last look at the door where Christian had disappeared before she simply nodded and followed in the wake of the light from the woman’s candelabrum.

Mrs. Stone led Grace up a cheerless flight of stairs to an upper corridor, paneled in dark walnut and lined with portraits of Westover ancestors bearing expressions both as austere and menacing as the house they inhabited. They glowered down at her from their shadowed and gilded perches as she passed, and once she even imagined she had seen the eyes of one of them, a most severe-looking Tudor fellow in jerkin, hose, and cartwheel ruff, move to follow her progress down the hall.

She put it off as a play of the candlelight, but as they continued, Grace found herself glancing at the binding of the novel she’d carried in with her from the carriage to make certain its title still read *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and not suddenly *The Mysteries of Westover Hall*. This night certainly had all the trappings of a tale worthy of Mrs. Radcliffe, complete with the somber butler who looked as if he himself might be of the netherworld.

Once they were a fair distance away from the entrance hall, Mrs. Stone’s demeanor seemed to ease a bit. Soon she even began to chat. “We hope you will enjoy your stay here at Westover, my lady, even if ‘tis to be for the one night. ‘Twill be your home one day when Lord Knighton becomes the new duke. If there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to ask.”

The thought of making her home in this solemn place one day was most unsettling. And then Grace remembered something Nonny had once said to her. *A lady makes her husband's home her own.* Grace wondered if her grandmother could have foreseen the gloom of this place.

“Thank you.” Grace thought for a moment, then said, “I wonder if you might answer something for me, Mrs. Stone?”

The housekeeper stopped before a massive oaken door, took up the vast ring of keys that hung at her waist, and fitted one inside the lock. “Of course, my lady. Anything.”

“Have you been in service here at Westover very long?”

Mrs. Stone turned the handle and pushed the door wide, stepping back to face Grace on her answer. “Oh, quite some thirty years or more.” She entered the room and began lighting numerous sconces and candle stands that were set about the room, continuing as she did. “My mother was in service here before me and married my father, who worked as a groomsman in the stables. I grew up here at Westover. I started as a scullery maid, then became an upper chamber maid, a nursery maid, and worked my way through the ranks to housekeeper these past ten years or more. My own daughter and nieces are maids here now, too.”

Grace nodded. “Then you have known the Wycliffe family very long?”

“Oh, indeed, my lady, quite. I was a nursery maid to Lord Knighton when he was a child.”

Grace tried to imagine the man she now called husband as a boy, playing along these same halls, his laughter echoing up to the lofty ceilings, but an image just wouldn't present itself. She returned her attention to the housekeeper. “Since you have been here so long, perhaps then you can tell me if this house and this family have always been so filled with the misery they are now.”

Mrs. Stone stopped immediately. She turned to face Grace, her mouth fixed, her eyes suddenly clouded.

“I am sorry,” Grace said then. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have asked.”

The housekeeper shook her head. “It is all right, my lady. You’ve every right to know.” She glanced quickly toward the door. “It has not always been thus. Westover used to be a happy place filled with much joy.”

Her reply offered Grace a small morsel of hope. “What is it then that has brought such sadness to this family?”

Again, Mrs. Stone glanced to the door, her voice lowering as if fearful the portraits in the hall would overhear. “It is only since the death of the previous marquess—your husband’s father—some twenty years ago. Lord Christopher’s passing brought such a terrible sorrow to them all, one that has lingered even now. ‘Twas his lordship’s passing that brought along the rift between the old duke and his lordship, your husband. A terrible rift it is, too, one that has never been breached. And poor Lady Frances. Such a ray of happiness she once was. She has never gotten past the losing of her husband. It was as if when his lordship died, so did life for everyone else in the family.” She said then, her voice lightening, “But not every Wycliffe has been so touched by it. I’m sure you’ve met Lady Eleanor?”

Grace smiled. “Oh yes, and I like her very much.”

“Ah, such a sweet child she is, Lady Eleanor, so very different in temperament from the others. She is a true blessing and so dear to your husband, the marquess. Without her, I should think his lordship would have—”

“That will do, Mrs. Stone.”

The housekeeper silenced, and turned wide eyes across the room, staring with obvious dismay at the doorway where Ambrose had suddenly appeared. The butler’s face was fixed most unhappily.

“His lordship has asked me to inform Lady Knighton that dinner is ready to be served in the dining hall.” He looked to Grace. “Mrs. Stone can see to the further unpacking of your things, my lady.”

His manner was insolent, yet polite enough to avoid any suggestion of insubordination. From Mrs. Stone's expression, though, it was easy to see she was frightened of the man, a fear that was obviously rooted in years of experience.

"Thank you, Ambrose," Grace said. "You may tell his lordship I will be down shortly."

The butler remained at the door. "I am to show you to the dining hall *now*, my lady." His eyes settled on her. "His lordship requests it."

While she would have preferred having Mrs. Stone direct her belowstairs, Grace didn't wish to be the cause of any unneeded trouble for the housekeeper. Thus she decided to go with the stoic Ambrose, although she wasn't much pleased about it. She didn't care for his abrasive manner—and she sensed he didn't much care for her either.

"Very well," she said, "Mrs. Stone, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, I should like to have a bath before going to bed to wash away the dust from our journey."

"Indeed, my lady, I will have the bath ready for you when you finish your supper." Mrs. Stone dipped into a curtsy, smiling despite Ambrose's sullen frown.

Grace walked in silence behind the aloof butler along darkened corridors. The only light came from a single candlestick that Ambrose carried before him. In his company, the house had grown even gloomier than before, like a lowering storm cloud on an already overcast day. He said nothing to her except to give a warning to watch her step once as they turned. Even then he seemed to have spoken more out of custom than any concern for her. When they reached the stairs to descend to the lower floor, Grace finally spoke out.

"Ambrose, a moment if you will."

The butler stopped, turned to regard her.

"I hope you will not find fault with Mrs. Stone for my curiosity earlier. It was I who initiated the conversation you overheard, not she."

The butler's face took on an almost ghoulish quality in the light from his candle, the sharp angles of his face pronounced by the shadows. "I am aware of that, madam. I see no reason to discuss the matter further with Mrs. Stone. However, in the future, should you have any questions that concern either him or the members of his family, I feel certain that his lordship would prefer that you direct them to him rather than to the servants. We of the household are not privy to anything more than conjecture about the events of the past."

She nodded. "Indeed, Ambrose, however, may I remind you that his lordship's family is now also my family as well?"

The butler stared at her through a pregnant moment. Finally, he said, "Of course, my lady."

He then turned without another word and continued down the shadowed stairwell.

They walked for some time, past suits of armor and ancient objects of weaponry that glimmered in the light of Ambrose's candle. Surrounded as she was by the dour trappings of her new home, Grace found herself wondering wryly how many heads had been lopped off by the various instruments of torture they passed—and if any of them had been newly-wedded Westover brides.

They arrived at an arched double doorway and the butler stepped aside, allowing her to precede him. Grace found herself at the entrance to a large chamber set with a long table that stretched across its center. The table would easily seat thirty, and when filled would hold enough to feed the entire village of Ledysthorpe. At the far end, in the seat nearest the blazing hearth, sat Lord Knighton, looking rather like the king at his court. Only there weren't any courtiers present, no performing troubadours, just the empty chair to his right that had been set with a service, obviously meant for her.

"Good evening, my lord," she said at her approach, leaving Ambrose to stand at the door.

Christian rose from his seat. "Good evening, my lady. I trust you found your chambers to your liking?"

Grace took her seat. “What little I saw of them before Mr. Ambrose arrived to escort me to dinner was most agreeable.”

“My apologies. I had thought to give you more time to prepare for dinner, but the cook had been awaiting our arrival. The food was already prepared.”

Grace wondered that he had abandoned his pressing business to share the meal with her, but kept that thought to herself. She unfolded the linen napkin, placing it in her lap. Two footmen came forward from the nethershadows to serve them, ladling out a steaming helping of soup into each bowl.

“I was wondering, my lord,” Grace said after taking a sip of her claret, “why is it we are only staying here at Westover Hall one night? If you have business to attend to here, we should certainly stay longer.”

Christian didn’t look at her, but instead took up his soup spoon. “There are more pressing matters in London which require my being there. It will not take long for me to see to what needs attending here. We will leave for town on the morrow as planned.”

He began eating, as if to say the conversation was at an end. Grace, however, couldn’t help her curiosity. “But if we are to leave on the morrow, wouldn’t it have been a more prudent choice to simply pass the night someplace between Little Biddlington and London, or perhaps even return to the city tonight rather than travel nearly half a day’s ride west?”

Christian laid down his spoon. He looked at her squarely. “Yes, my lady, it would have been a more prudent idea. Had I any choice in the matter, that is precisely what we would have done. But there is a tradition among the dukes of Westovers, one of which you are unaware. Call it one of your ‘rules’ if you will, like carrying you over the threshold. You see, all new brides must spend their wedding nights in the Westover ducal bed—more precisely they must surrender their virginity in it. It is believed that doing so ensures the next male heir. You have your traditions. We also have ours.”

At that, Grace’s mouth fell open. A moment later, her soup spoon clattered heedlessly to the floor.

*Oh! how many torments lie
in the small circle of a wedding-ring!
-Colley Cibber, The Double Gallant*

When Grace returned abovestairs after supper, she found a copper bathtub awaiting her in the withdrawing room set off from the main ducal bedchamber. The water was strewn with soft-colored rose petals and steamed invitingly as a freshly-stoked fire crackled in the hearth nearby. Mrs. Stone had taken it upon herself to set out everything Grace might need—a cake of soap stamped with the Westover coat of arms, a cloth to wash with, towels, even a thick robe. She had placed Grace's nightshift and hairbrush on the dressing table with a note that she should call with the bell pull for assistance in dressing afterward.

Supper had been a strange affair. Through six courses served *à la russe*, the newly-wedded man and wife had spoken about such bland topics as the weather, the delicacy of the fish sauce, or if Princess Caroline, the new king's long-estranged wife, would return to England to claim her place as his queen, anything other than the fact that their lives were now indelibly joined as one. Finishing with a glass of *doce* Madeira for her, Armagnac for him, Lord Knighton had then excused himself from the table, leaving Grace little choice but to repair back to her assigned chambers, to...?

She really had no idea what to expect.

Standing now, alone in the withdrawing room with the waiting bath, Grace suddenly wanted nothing more than to sluice away the oddity of the day. She quickly began to undress herself, unfastening the buttons at the bodice of her gown, slipping it from her shoulders.

As she stepped away from it, she looked down at the pale blue silk pooled at her feet, the gown she had worn to become a wife. She hadn't truly thought of it as her marriage dress, for it was not the one she had always dreamed of wearing—the gown Nonny and her own mother had worn as brides.

If you wear this dress, Nonny had promised her, your marriage will certainly be blessed with the happiness and love that both I and your mother found in our own marriages.

But with the old duke's haste for the wedding to be held on that particular day, her grandmother's gown would not have arrived in time from Ledysthorpe to properly alter it. Grace had instead worn the most comely gown she owned, the same gown she had worn the night of Eleanor's ball, when she had tumbled through the wall into Lord Knighton's dressing room. There was, she thought fleetingly, a certain irony to that.

Grace retrieved the garment from the floor and draped it carefully across the foot of the bed. The ducal bed. The *Westover* ducal bed. It was a large, heavily carved thing set high off the ground and draped in dark rich velvet. The words Christian had spoken to her during their dinner together that night whispered through her thoughts at the sight of it.

All new brides must spend their wedding nights in the Westover ducal bed, more precisely they must surrender their virginity in it

Surrender...

Grace was not totally naïve about what took place between a man and a woman, and the eventual result of children. She had been raised in the country among horses and dogs and various other farm animals. While it all seemed quite surreal to her, somehow she had always thought that when *that* time in her life arrived, she would know something more of the person

with whom she would share the experience than simply his name.

Grace turned from the bed and pulled the pins from her hair, letting the weight of it fall about her shoulders. She stepped gingerly into the tub, slipping beneath the perfumed water, its warmth instantly enveloping her body and setting her skin atingle. As she bathed, she considered the idea that this night might bring about the conception of a child. It was, after all, the reason she had been chosen, she knew, the reason the duke had come looking for a bride for his grandson. It was the expectation of most every society bride—to produce an heir and a spare—and what a different mother she would be, not at all like the ladies who had come to visit her grandmother at Ledysthorpe during her childhood.

From the time when she had turned thirteen, Nonny had allowed Grace to sit in and take tea with her and her guests despite the disapproving looks of the other ladies present. Grace had always sat quietly, sipping at her cup, listening as they talked of seeing their own children for naught but a quarter hour out of every day as if it were a chore and not a privilege. How they would proudly boast of delivering their children from nearly the moment of their birth into the hands of a hired wet nurse, and then, later, when they were older, to a nursery maid. How they would then evince astonishment when their children grew up as strangers to them, often ill-mannered, and speaking in the vernacular of their caretakers.

Listening to them, day in and day out, had only shown Grace that when the time came for her to have her own children, fashionable or not, she would embrace her role as mother faithfully. She would sing them to sleep, she would feed them at her own breast, and she would teach them the same ideals Nonny had passed on to her. More than anything else, Grace was determined that she should never give her children any cause to believe they had not been wanted.

Grace took up the small ewer that stood beside the tub and leaned her head forward to rinse herself. As she dipped the pitcher into the tub a second time and poured the scented water over her head, she heard the faint sound of a door opening and

closing in the adjoining bedchamber. She went instantly still. Lord Knighton had come so soon? She waited. She listened. The only sound she heard was the nervous drumming of her heart and the water dripping down around her.

Grace rose quickly from the tub and was just stepping out of it when the door across the room suddenly swung open. She did the only thing she could think of. She quickly grabbed the robe that had been set out for her, shoving her arms into the sleeves as she said, "Please allow me my privacy, my lord. I'm at my bath now."

But it wasn't Lord Knighton who stood there at all. Instead, it was a young maid, no more than sixteen years, bearing a tray in both hands.

She bobbed a quick curtsy. "Beggin' pardon, milady. I was just bringing your tea. Lord Knighton thought you might like a bit before retiring this e'ening."

Feeling suddenly quite foolish, Grace took up a towel and began rubbing the wet ends of her hair. "Yes, thank you. Please just set it there."

"Aye, milady. Would you be wishing me to help you brush out your hair and dress you for bed?"

Grace looked at the maid, tempted to accept. In the end, she decided it would be better to occupy herself as much as possible while she awaited Lord Knighton's imminent arrival. "No, thank you. I think I can manage."

The maid bobbed again before leaving, closing the door behind her.

Grace draped the towel around her shoulders, walked to the tea tray, and dropped into the chair in her favorite way, with her feet tucked up beneath her, as she took up the teapot and poured herself a cup. It had been thoughtful of him, she mused, to send up the tea to her. Grace took a small sip and immediately coughed. Her eyes watered, her throat burned. The tea was laced with a spirit more potent than the occasional bit of claret she was accustomed to. She very nearly

abandoned the tea, except that, after a few seconds, it began to fill her with a most pleasant warmth.

Grace took up the cup and drew another sip, wishing that Lord Knighton had thought to have the maid include a biscuit along with the tea. She realized now she was quite hungry. Dinner, while fine, hadn't tempted her beyond a sparse few bites. In truth, she hadn't been able to eat much of anything after hearing Lord Knighton's comments about the traditions of the Westover ducal bed. Grace took another sip of tea, peering into the pot that was yet two-thirds full. Taking up the tray, she headed for the ducal bedchamber, thinking she would just have another cup while she changed into her nightclothes and brushed out her hair, to wait for Lord Knighton to arrive.

When next Grace noticed the time, it was nearing midnight. She had emptied both the cup and the teapot, and her hair was dry and curling down her back. She had even fashioned a ribbon through it, tying it in a pretty bow atop her head. She wore her favorite nightdress, the white linen one with the small pearl buttons along the front. She had read three chapters in her novel. Still there came no sign of Lord Knighton.

Grace yawned, sinking back against the thick, goose-down pillows on the ridiculously large ducal bed. She wiggled her toes, which did not even reach halfway to the other end of the mattress, and decided that the bed could easily sleep herself, Lord Knighton, and Ambrose and Mrs. Stone with them. Perhaps even the footman who had served them their supper. She giggled at the image that presented itself, that of sacrificing her innocence on the great Westover ducal bed while the unflappable Ambrose glared at her from the other side of the mattress.

She stared at the tree-trunk sized posters and wondered why the figures carved in the dark gleaming wood suddenly appeared to be dancing. She blinked. She thought of the other virginal Westover brides who must have lain on this same spot before her. Had the figures danced for them as well? Perhaps that was part of the tradition. She glanced over the side of the mattress, looking for the floor, but she couldn't see it. No

doubt the bed had been chosen for this particular tradition because it was so very high, leaving frightened young virgins less willing to flee for fear of a broken neck.

Grace giggled again.

The clock struck half past twelve and still Grace was alone. Perhaps Lord Knighton had perceived her dismay at dinner—surely the sound of her soup spoon dropping to the floor and the sight of her mouth hanging agape had given him some indication. Perhaps he had decided to forgo the tradition of this bed and this night. The candle on the table beside her was guttering low; the others had long since gone out. The fire in the hearth was burning more slowly with each turn of the clock.

Her eyes began to grow heavy.

Grace's vigilance in watching the door started to falter as she fought to keep her eyes open. She touched a hand to the side of her face. The tea, and whatever had accompanied it, had brought a lovely flush to her cheeks, warming her throughout. She kicked at the coverlet. It was growing very late. She closed her eyes thinking that Lord Knighton must surely have decided to retire for the evening after all, to another bedchamber, in another part of this gloomy, spooky house. Yes, that must be it

In what seemed the very next moment, there came a click from across the silent room. The sound echoed strangely to her ears. Grace opened her eyes with some effort—and even then only halfway—to see a figure hovering at the edge of the shadows given off by the ebbing fire. It was the maid again, she mused on a half-conscious thought, and if she was returning with more tea, Grace hoped perhaps this time it might be with something to eat.

“Scuse me,” she measured out, “but might I trouble you to bring me a biscuit, please?” Grace wondered why her own voice sounded so odd, almost woolly to her ears.

There came no reply. Grace blinked, watching as the figure drew closer to the bed. Funny, she thought, but the maid

appeared to have grown taller from the last time she had come, and broader, especially across the shoulders.

When the figure then emerged into the firelight, Grace saw that it was not the maid at all.

It was Lord Knighton suddenly standing in the bedchamber with her. He was wearing a dressing robe, and his feet were bare beneath. He was watching her intently. And he was coming toward the bed.

Grace's last thought before he reached her was that apparently he had decided to uphold the Westover tradition after all.

And so to bed.

-Samuel Pepys

Christian watched Grace as he started toward the bed. It was late, he knew, and a small part of him had thought, perhaps wished, she'd have fallen asleep by then. He hadn't expected to be so long in coming there.

He'd spent the better part of the past few hours with a bottle of brandy, telling himself he was allowing Grace time to prepare for the inevitable conclusion to the evening. In truth, it was he who had needed the time. Not since he'd been a boy of fifteen when he'd confronted his own virginity with Lord Wheatby's seventeen-year-old daughter in the hayloft of the Westover stables had he felt so awkward and uncertain—awkward and uncertain because he was about to consummate his marriage, while at the same time he would *not* consummate his marriage.

At twelve years of age, a boy is not yet fully able to fathom the repercussions of his actions. He does without thinking, never considering what the consequences might be five, ten, or even twenty years later. So when Christian had stood facing his grandfather the duke, hours after watching his father die, his only thought had been to protect the family he had remaining, his mother and his unborn sibling. He would have agreed to cut off his left arm for them if he'd had to, only the duke had had other thoughts in mind.

“You will live the life I choose for you, Christian. You will follow the course I have set for you. You will wed when I decide you will, and when the time comes, you will give over to me your firstborn son.”

How easy it had seemed all those years ago, how very far off in the future, how *fair*. Two lives for two lives; his mother and the babe she carried, for his own and a child that he couldn't even begin to contemplate. Back then, it had almost seemed as if he were getting the better part of the bargain. Even as his mother had begged him not to, Christian had entered into the duke's agreement, scribbling his twelve-year-old signature across a contract the duke had hastily drawn up. What choice had he? If he hadn't, the duke would have seen them all destroyed.

So Christian had passed the next two decades living the life that had been chosen for him. He had studied what he'd been told to study. He had allowed himself to be groomed in every way to be the next Duke of Westover. He had married the woman chosen by his grandfather. And now, he would do his duty in making her truly and completely his wife.

But he would be damned if he was going to play the role of Westover stud and beget the next unfortunate male heir while that diabolical old man yet lived.

So Christian had formed a plan. He would take his wife's virginity, honoring his agreement with the duke, but he would never bring the encounter to its usual conclusion by spilling his seed within her womb. In that, his grandfather would be denied the life of yet another innocent. It was the only way Christian could endure living with the bargain he'd made, the only way he could face himself in the mirror every day. And for that reason above all else, he was determined that he should feel nothing while seeing to the business of deflowering his wife.

Christian came across the room to stand at the side of the bed. Grace didn't move, didn't make a sound, simply blinked up at him from where she lay buried among the nest of pillows. Her honey-colored hair was loose and spilling about her shoulders, shimmering liquid gold. Christian checked an

impulse to reach out and touch its softness. He focused his attention on her wide eyes instead.

Grace blinked. “*Yer* not the maid,” she said, her words coming too quickly for her mouth to properly form them. “*Yer* Lord Knight’n.”

Apparently, she’d drunk quite a lot of the tea he’d sent up to her. He’d only added a healthy splash of brandy to it in hopes of helping to ease what he expected would be very anxious maidenly feelings. From appearances, the tea had done just that.

“Yes, my lady,” he said, “but I think it would be better if you would call me ‘Christian.’”

“*Chrish-dinn*,” she repeated, nodding slowly. She closed her eyes a moment then looked at him again and smiled. “I am *Gra-ce*.”

He resisted the urge to smile in return, said instead, “Grace, would it be an accurate assumption to say that you drank *all* of the tea I sent up to you?”

“Uhhh,” she nodded. “You took a very long time in coming.”

“I am sorry. Matters took longer than I had expected.”

In fact, Christian had never realized before then just how much thought went into the taking of a wife’s virginity. All the while he’d been downstairs, he’d tried to consider the best means for approaching the task, weighing one against the other until in the end, it had come down to a sort of pre-conjugal checklist, a practical plan for hapless bridegrooms. First, he had offered her a bit of brandy to ease her maidenly fears. From the looks of her now, that bit had succeeded. Next, he would need darkness to protect her modesty...

Christian leaned over and blew out the one remaining candle at the bedside table, casting them in the muted glow of the remaining firelight. “You didn’t eat very much of your supper this evening.”

Grace shook her head. She then furrowed her brow as if she were suddenly troubled.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“I was just wondering why the room keeps moving even though I am quite certain my head has gone still.”

Christian frowned. Perhaps the brandy hadn’t been such a good idea after all. She was half-tipped.

“You didn’t care for what the cook had prepared for our wedding supper?”

“No, I mean yes. I did. It was very good, what I had of it, but I just... I just... I...”

Grace lost her words as she watched Christian walk around to the other side of the vast bed. He sat at the edge of the mattress, right beside her her leg was stretched out from under the bedcovers, and moved on to the next item on his checklist—to discern just how much Grace knew about sexual relations.

“Grace...”

She watched him quizzically as he positioned himself closer to her. “I know what you’re going to do. You’re going to take my *‘ginity* now, aren’t you?”

Christian leaned on one elbow beside her. “Yes, Grace, I am. If you agree, that is.”

She nodded. “I do...”

He put his hand on the knot that held the sash of her dressing robe and slowly loosened the tie. Grace barely gave him notice. She was far too busy staring into his eyes with an expression that wasn’t at all fearful, not even nervous, but was curious. It disconcerted him, the openness of her gaze. It was not what he had expected from his virginal young wife.

Christian had told himself to approach this night simply as a task that had to be done, no matter how disagreeable, like so many of the interminable philosophical lectures he’d had to sit through while he’d been at Eton. Just put your mind to it and be done with it. But, how the devil, he wondered, did one liken lovemaking to Descartes?

“Grace, what do you know of the relationship between a man and a woman?”

Grace smiled, blinking slowly. “Oh, I know more than you think I know, Lord Knighton.”

“Indeed?” He raised a brow. “And, please, again, my name is Christian.”

She nodded confidently. “You think I’m *mishish... misssh... mi—*” She gave it up, saying instead, “You think I don’t know what you are going to do to me... to take my *‘ginity.*” She smiled assuredly. “But, I do.”

“You do?”

“Uhhh.” She looked baldly down at the sash of his own robe and said quite matter-of-factly, “Needle and thread.”

Christian stared at her, startled. “Did you just say ‘needle and thread’?”

She peered at him, seeming almost startled by his response. “You mean you don’t know? Grandmother told me men were born knowing these things.” She scoffed. “How funny to think that *I* will have to teach *you.*” She looked at him then and said with utter seriousness, “You see the way it works is I am the needle and you are the thread...”

Christian stared at her, dumbfounded.

“...without one, the other cannot create a true stitch.”

Good God, he thought, the situation was more hopeless than he’d feared. She hadn’t the faintest clue what the sexual act entailed. Needle and thread, indeed...

“Grace, how many times have you been kissed by a man—I mean other than an affectionate peck from a family member?”

Grace stared at him, carefully contemplating his question. “Including you?”

The memory of her visit to his dressing room the night of Eleanor’s ball flashed through his thoughts. “Yes. Including me.”

“Then...once.”

He had thought as much. Christian stood from the bed. Perhaps a bit of philosophical inquiry would serve after all. If he educated her on the facts of it all, prepared her for what would happen, it might prevent a fit of hysterics when the moment of consummation was at hand. He reached for her. “Grace, come here to stand before me.”

Grace scooted from the bed, lowering at the side of the mattress until she stood looking up at him in the firelight. Her hair was mussed from the pillows and her nightgown was buttoned all the way to her chin. Her bare toes curled against the carpet as she waited for him to do whatever it was he planned to do. Christian tried to ignore the soft floral scent of her as he leaned toward her and gently touched his lips to hers. She stood completely still, her mouth warm and giving, but her kiss chaste and unversed. After a moment, he pulled away.

Determined to keep things on a purely philosophical level, he then said, “Grace, I am going to assume you have never seen a man’s body before.”

She nodded silently.

“A man’s body is very different from that of a woman. It is made that way for a reason, so that they may join together—physically.” Still, she stared at him, silently listening. “I don’t want you to be frightened. So I would like you to look at me, at my body, before we consummate our marriage. Would that be acceptable to you?”

She nodded again.

Christian loosened the belt of his dressing robe. Watching her closely, he parted the fabric in front and let the weight of it drop to the floor.

He wore nothing underneath, and kissing her just then had aroused him more than he cared to admit. He watched her eyes as they moved down over his chest, further still to where his sex stood erect from his groin. She furrowed her brow as if confused by him, by how things might work between them. He saw the moment of realization in her eyes when she figured

out what would happen. But she didn't move to back away or look at him in fear. Instead, slowly, tentatively she reached out and touched two fingers to him. The unexpected sensation had Christian's body jerking in response. She pulled her hand quickly away.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Christian looked at her, swallowing in effort to take control of his quickening pulse. Now he was the one thankful for the darkness. "You didn't hurt me, Grace. A man's body reacts sometimes without his meaning it to."

She didn't understand, of course, and he didn't have the ability at that moment to explain, so instead he urged her back toward the bed and lay her against the nest of pillows.

Christian fought to take control of the emotions that were fast stirring within him. He positioned himself alongside her and kissed her again, this time covering her mouth with his and drawing her gently against the length of his body. As he did, he took a journey back in time to Eton, to hour upon hour of dictum and lecture. He deepened the kiss, stroking his tongue slowly over hers. She tasted of tea and the brandy he'd laced it with, and her hair fell softly against his cheek. He already knew that Grace had never known such a kiss but still she didn't shy away as he had expected her to do. Instead, his virginal little wife kissed him back.

He felt Grace open her mouth against his, pressing her body yet closer to him. He felt a jolt overtake him.

Christian pulled away from their kiss and looked down at her. "We will take this slowly," he said more to himself than to her. He'd come to her this evening set on doing his duty as a husband, but only so far as he would need to in order to leave the proof he knew the servants would be looking for on the sheets, her virgin's blood. He had told himself he could separate his body from his mind. He could do this thing without getting caught up in any feelings.

It appeared, however, that this wouldn't prove so easy for already his pulse was pounding through his veins—this after he'd only just kissed her.

Christian began reciting philosophic precepts in his head, anything to occupy his attention, as he began to loosen the buttons that held the front of her nightdress, his fingers slipping the tiny pearl buttons one by one through their closures all the way down to her middle. He pushed the fabric aside and drew in a breath at the untouched whiteness of her skin, the perfection of her breasts.

He reached and tugged the hem of the gown upward over her legs to bunch it at her waist. Inwardly, he contemplated Socratic dialogues in effort to manage his increasing desire.

He told himself it would go easier if she were at least somewhat aroused, so he kissed her again and as he did, he brought his mouth lower along the column of her neck, the swell of her breast. Grace arched her back in response, sucking in a breath. She brought her hands upward, lacing her fingers through his hair as he drew on her.

When he lifted his head to look at her, she opened her eyes, blinking, staring in silent bewilderment at him. The wavering glow of the firelight played across the tawny gold of her hair, her rapid pulsebeat showing at the hollow of her neck. Christian felt his thoughts begin to blur. His hands queried her body, his mouth touched her with kisses, introducing her to the delight of her collarbone, the thrill of a whispering touch against her shoulder.

With every gesture, every stroke, Grace sought to return in kind, trailing her fingers over his back, against his neck. It was not what he had expected from her. He'd thought this would be a chore, but with each motion, each responding touch from her, Christian's need for her grew. He ran his hand over her, smoothing a palm over her belly along her thigh. Slowly, tentatively he parted her legs, touching her, seducing her to readiness for him.

Grace gasped aloud. His own pulse was pounding now like cannon fire in his ears. His eagerness to know her brought him to moving over her, positioning himself between her legs, joining his mouth with hers once again. With first one hand, then the other, he gently lifted her legs, bending them at the knee. He stared down at her, hesitating only a second until she

looked at him, telling him with her eyes that she had no fear of him. That she wanted him. And then she touched the side of his face with her hand and that gesture took away the last of his restraint. He swiftly buried himself within her, his mouth taking her startled cry against the sudden sharp pain of him as her woman's body naturally stretched to accept him.

From the moment he entered her, Christian was beyond anything but the feeling of her around him. He found he could not control the movement of his body as he groaned her name, his hips moving, his eyes tightly closed. The scent of her, the warmth and softness of her, her giving and unexpected passion, overtook him. With each movement he made, his desperation grew, so that only with another, and another, could he hope to find the release from the torment she held him in. He dropped his forehead against her neck, groaning against her hair. He breathed her in until, when it was almost more than he could bear, he came into her one last time.

He vaguely heard her cry out through the pounding in his ears and his own release as he climaxed. And with it the need, the fury, the utter torment released him, giving him back to himself as his body shuddered, spilling his seed within her.

It took Christian several moments to regain full command of his faculties. His breathing slowly returned to normal. Only then did he realize just what he had done. Despite all his plans to prevent it, he'd just fully consummated their marriage.

In frustration, he pulled away from Grace, as if by doing so, he could reverse what he had done. But it was too late. Despite all his intentions to the opposite, he had done just what his grandfather had demanded of him.

Christian moved to sit at the edge of the bed with his back to Grace. All the passion, all the wonderful desire he had felt moments before had gone in a wash of cold reality, leaving him numb with disbelief that he had done the one thing he had vowed he would not do. He did not know what had happened, how he had lost such total control over a situation in which he had intended to be master. It was his wedding night and he'd bungled it beyond bungling. He had not withdrawn before

spilling his seed inside Grace's womb. In the end, his grandfather had bested him once again.

Christian stood in defeat from the bed. The fire had died to where a solitary flame now flickered sluggishly among the glowing embers in the grate. Grace lay still upon the bed, naked in the firelight, watching him. She lifted her hand and beckoned him to return to her, but he did not move toward her. He could not. He simply stared at her in silent, solemn despair. After another moment, she slowly lowered her hand back to the bed.

Christian reached forward without a word and pulled the edges of Grace's nightgown closed over her breasts. He covered her further with the blanket. He frowned, staring at her a moment more before he slipped on his dressing robe, started to walk away from her, saying as he went, "Good night, Grace."

And as he closed the door behind himself, somehow, wherever he was this horrible night, Christian knew his grandfather was gloating.

ten

So, I awoke,

And behold it was a dream.

-John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

The morning dawned to the gleeful *hweet* of the chiffchaff outside in the trees, accompanied by the movement of the servants at various stations throughout the house, the echoing of footsteps, muffled voices, the opening and closing of doors. It was to this, lost amid a tumble of the bedsheets and pillows on the ducal bed, that Grace slowly opened her eyes to face her first day as a wife.

Soft sunlight poured in through the tall windows across the room, creeping across the carpet and lighting the chamber's interior to her gaze. Seeing the room now, in the daylight, she thought it not nearly so harsh and gloomy as she had remembered it from the night before. In fact, the furnishings themselves were really quite nice—Tudor in style with plush hangings in burgundy and gold. Shadows no longer crept about the walls. The carvings on the bedposts no longer appeared as frolicking demons but were, in fact, cherubs poised amid an enchanted setting of clouds. What a difference the light of day could make.

Grace lifted her head from the pillow just as the door across the room creaked softly, inching open. A maid peeked an eye through to the inside, and then, seeing her awake now, quietly pushed the door further inward to enter.

“Good morning to you, my lady,” she said, bobbing a curtsy. She was the same maid who had brought her the tea the night before.

“Good morning,” Grace replied.

Grace’s head felt oddly heavier than usual, as if it were weighted from the inside somehow. As she sat up on the mattress, she realized a soreness between her legs. She immediately recalled the night before. Why, oh why had she drunk all that tea? Even now, she could but vaguely remember what had happened except for flashes—Christian had kissed her, and she had spouted some nonsense to him about needles and threads. She remembered having touched his body, and the shock of pain she’d felt at him entering her body. She remembered how she’d wanted to soothe him, but not much beyond that until he’d risen from the bed to leave her.

The only thing she did know was that whatever it was she was supposed to have done, she had obviously done it badly. Why else would a bridegroom be so quick to leave his marriage bed?

“What is your name?” she asked the maid as she watched her move about the chamber, seeing to her duties.

The maid looked startled at the question. “Eliza Stone, my lady. But everyone calls me Liza.”

“Stone. You are related to Mrs. Stone, the housekeeper?”

“Aye. My aunt she is, my lady. ‘Twas because of her I was able to find a position in this household.”

Grace nodded. She heard the sound of horses then, walking on the drive outside and stood, moving to the window. The coach that had brought them there the day before stood waiting below her window on the drive, the coachman making a great show of checking the harnesses and fastenings. Grace remembered then that they were to leave for London that morning. “Do you know the time, Liza?”

“Aye, ‘my lady, tis a quarter hour past nine.” Liza removed the topmost gown from Grace’s trunk and gave it a shake to smooth out its wrinkles. “His lordship is a’ready awake. He

said to see you up and ready to leave for London by ten. You've a long day's journey ahead of you."

She draped the gown at the foot of the bed, a plain beige bombazine, along with the other necessities she'd taken from the trunk—chemise, stockings, half boots. "Breakfast awaits you in the parlor downstairs. I'll have the boys come to fetch your trunks down after you've dressed."

Grace was pulling on her robe when she noticed the maid staring at the bed behind her, the expression on her face quite peculiar. She turned to see what had caught the maid's notice.

Spotches of brownish red marked the white of the sheet beneath where Grace had lain. It was blood.

Her blood.

She drew in a startled breath, covering her mouth with her hand. She knew quite well it wasn't time for her monthly—that had come and gone but a fortnight ago. And then she remembered the pain from the night before. She lifted the hem of her nightrail, looking down at her legs. There were similar blotches staining her thighs.

"Oh, dear... what has happened?" She looked at the maid, eyes wide. "Am I... Am I injured?"

Liza came immediately to her side. "Oh, no, my lady. Not at all." She took Grace's hand, urged her to sit. "Do you not know? Didn't you realize? Were you never told?"

Grace was growing upset. "Was I never told what?"

Though her grandmother's friends had often spoken of the *unpleasantness* a woman was made to endure in the marriage bed, Grace had never expected it meant she would receive grave injury.

Liza shook her head. "'Tis all right, my lady. It is but your *virgin's* blood. 'Tis natural. When a lady beds with a man the first time, the man takes her virginity."

Grace let go a frustrated breath. "Yes, yes, I know that, and the girl is then suddenly considered a woman and can participate in adult conversations, and no longer is required to

have a chaperone wherever she goes. She can even wear her hair differently. But what has that to do with *this*?”

“It isn’t that I’m speaking of, my lady. I’m speaking of what happens when a man comes into a woman’s body.” Liza looked at Grace directly. “I can’t say for myself, since I’ve never been with a man as yet—other than when Jemmie the stable boy once stuck his hand down my bodice and got his nose bloodied for it. But Ma says the Lord has made it so a man knows if he’s the first to bed with you. There’s a part of you, ‘tis your maiden’s head. ‘Tis your honor. I don’t know exactly what it is, but the man must breach it that first time and there’s pain when he does, there is often a bit of blood like that, but it is only for that first time, my lady. After that, it never happens again. Ma says ‘tis what we must bear for the sins of Eve.”

Her voice dropped to a near-whisper as she added. “But my sister, Mary, she says that after that first time, the rest of the times after that are much nicer, like going to heaven without the dyin’, she says.”

Grace looked at the girl, who was so much younger than she was, but so knowing of things that had never been spoken of, much less thought about during her sheltered childhood. Suddenly, she felt very much a fool. She shook her head. “No one ever told me this.”

Liza smiled at her, smoothing an errant curl behind Grace’s ear. “And they call us of the serving class ‘uncivilized’. Leastways we don’t send our young girls off to the marriage bed thinking they’ve been murdered the next morn.”

Grace’s cheeks colored at her own ignorance. Liza squeezed her hand. “‘Tisn’t your fault, milady. Those sorts of things just aren’t talked about among the quality. But my ma had nine of us girls, and she takes us aside when we each of us reaches ten-and-three. Tells us everything there is to know about ladies and men and what goes on when they get alone between the bedcovers. And because she did, not a one of us has come home yet with a swelling belly before first getting a husband to look after us.”

Grace looked at Liza. It took her a moment to realize exactly what the maid was saying. *A child*. A child that could have been conceived because of what had happened between her and Christian the night before. While at first the notion of it frightened her, after a moment or two, it also gave her an inkling of warmth, a new feeling unlike any she had ever known. Her hand instinctively dropped to her belly. Even now, she might be carrying a child of her own. Someone she could love. Someone who would be with her always.

Grace heard the sound of the coachman then talking to someone on the drive outside and remembered the time. “Liza, thank you for telling me these things. I understand now. But the marquess awaits. Will you help me to dress, please?”

They left the ducal bedroom for the small antechamber where Grace had bathed the night before. At the corner washstand, hidden discreetly behind an embroidered screen, Grace performed her ablutions, washing herself thoroughly before asking Liza for her chemise and stockings.

She sat staring at her reflection in the glass while Liza quickly arranged her hair, twisting and pulling it up in a style that befitted a titled lady, but that left Grace resembling herself very little. She realized then she was no longer Lady Grace Ledys, the name she had carried for all of her four-and-twenty years. Her name, her own body—she looked at the ring on her hand—everything was now different. She had lost her innocence, was now wholly a woman, and thus the unfamiliar styling of her hair seemed somehow appropriate. But what of Christian? Would he present himself differently as well now that he wore the role of husband?

Grace stood as Liza slipped her gown carefully over her head, arranging the soft fabric around her before setting to work on the buttons along its back. Somehow the plain color didn’t quite complement the more refined styling of her hair, leaving her feeling at contradiction with her two selves—the Grace she had been, to the Grace, the marchioness, she now was.

When she had finished dressing, Grace left the ducal bedchamber and took the stairs quickly to the ground floor,

wondering what she might say to Christian when she greeted him at breakfast. What exactly did one say to a man after one lost their virginity to him? *Thank you, sir, for performing the task?*

What Grace really wanted, but would never dare, was to ask Christian what she had done to displease him—more what it was she should have done differently. She knew from her grandmother that a good number of husbands and wives shared marital relations without sleeping in the same bed. It was considered quite normal. She also knew from the gossip she had often overheard between her grandmother and her friends that those same husbands and wives often found others with whom to fill the time when their spouses were off elsewhere.

Grace wondered if that was what Christian intended. Did he plan to take a mistress, do those same things he'd done with her the night before with another woman, one who would do things correctly, one whom he'd not leave afterward, but with whom he'd stay until morning? And what if he already had a mistress? It was possible, she knew. He was, after all, a man of experience—and she, a foolish girl of the country. Despite what might be accepted in other marriages, Grace somehow couldn't bear to think of Christian doing those same things with another woman. Though her memory of it all was vague, what she did remember had been utterly intimate, a completion of the vows they had taken before God and the world, a culmination. And now that she knew what really happened between a man and wife, she would be better prepared. She hadn't known what to expect the first time. She told herself she would just try harder the next time to do—whatever it was she was supposed to do—right.

The trepidation she'd felt over how she would greet Christian that morning vanished when she reached the parlor door and found the room empty, but a single setting placed at the far chair of the dining table. Grace felt a twinge. Apparently, Christian did not intend to join her for breakfast.

A footman sprang to attention when he noticed her at the door, pulling the chair back for her to sit—alone. Grace

remained at the door, awash with humiliation, stung by Christian's absence. She was taking breakfast alone, on the morning after her wedding night. The footman stared at her and the expression on his face was almost too much to bear. He pitied her. Suddenly Grace found that the discomfort of an empty stomach was far preferable to the embarrassment of dining alone for everyone in the household to see.

“Thank you, but I do not wish to dine this morning,” she said to the footman.

Then she quickly turned from the room, hastening away so that he might not see the tears smarting in her eyes.

As you make your bed

You must lie in it.

-English Proverb

Grace had no idea where she headed after she left the dining parlor. Nor did she care. She simply turned away from the empty table and the staring footman, fleeing down the adjacent hall as she dashed away her frustrated tears.

She fought to quiet her bruised emotions. She had come to this marriage knowing full well it would be work, but she had told herself it was work she was willing to take on, especially if it meant that she and Christian might one day find the same love and respect that both her parents and her grandparents had found in their own arranged marriages. Was it foolish of her to have even tried? She had expected to make mistakes, yes, but she had also expected to learn from them as she had everything else in life—she had never been one to quit, even against great odds.

With Christian, she had known it would take time to get past the initial unfamiliarity between them. From the moment she had agreed to wed him, Grace had made it her foremost intention to be a wife her husband could be proud of having at his side. When the vicar had spoken the vows the day before, she had listened closely to every word—better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health—and she had taken each one of them to heart. Yet here she was, the morning after her

wedding, and already Christian had abandoned her. What in heaven's name had she done so wrong?

No matter how unpleasant the experience of their wedding night might have been for him, Grace just couldn't believe that she deserved to be forsaken like this for all of the household to see. Had he expected that she would wake to find him gone and simply sip her morning tea, nibble her toast, and then await him in the carriage, saying when they met, "Thank you for seeing to the distasteful task of ridding me of my virginity, sir, might I offer you the seat with the best view?"

Grace stopped walking, letting go a frustrated breath. She looked around at her surroundings. She didn't recognize anything. She stopped to listen, but didn't hear any of the servants moving about the house and decided she must have wandered into one of the hall's vacant wings. For a moment, she wondered what would happen if she were to come up missing, delaying their return to the city. Would Christian simply leave without her? Or would he just be angrier with her? Perhaps she didn't wish to know the answer to that question.

Not wanting to be the cause of further discord between them, she decided she should try to find her way back. She turned and wandered through unfamiliar hallways, past long forgotten chambers, each as stark and forbidding as the last. It seemed as if laughter couldn't possibly have ever touched these walls, nor could merriment have danced across the rich Turkish carpets. This place wasn't a home. It was a relic haunted by misery.

She came to a door at the end of a hallway and quietly opened it. Inside, she found a sitting room that was set off from the main house, the furnishings hidden beneath a shroud of dust covers. She would have turned to leave except that the place drew her somehow, standing out as different from the rest of the house. Grace crossed the room and gave the drapery on the tall window a tug to allow the morning sunlight in through the grubby mullioned windows underneath.

Decorative carpeting, light yellow and blue, was revealed against the invading sunlight, set beneath furnishings of

delicate fruitwood and mahogany. The walls, she saw, were covered in pastel Chinese silk. It was a room that spoke of feminine softness, and Grace wondered at the difference of it from the rest of Westover Hall. It was almost as if the chamber didn't belong there—quite like her in that respect. It, too, seemed to have been left to fend for itself.

Grace lifted the dustcover from one of the pieces and found an elegant Queen Anne secretary concealed underneath. It was crafted of fine cherry and engraved across a brass plate on its top were the words, “For Frances, my wife... My love.”

She decided the room must have once been a withdrawing chamber for the dowager marchioness, Christian's mother. Grace remembered her from the wedding the day before—how polite Lady Frances had been to her. She remembered something else, too—the dullness she had seen behind the woman's eyes, as if a part of her wasn't really present.

Grace ran a finger lightly along the desktop, drawing an invisible curve as she imagined the marchioness sitting in that room, reading or even watching the rabbits at play on the outside lawn. She wondered had she been happy there? Or had she felt trapped by the weight of this unhappy place? The desk had undoubtedly been a gift to her from Christian's father. But why was it here, Grace wondered, forgotten and locked away in this place, instead of with Lady Frances at her own residence in London? It was such a special piece, the inscription telling of the marquess's regard for his wife. Had their marriage been an arrangement like her own marriage to their son? Or had they married for love? Was such a concept even possible in the House of Westover?

A layer of dust had accumulated on the fireplace mantle, revealing it had been some time since the chamber had been put to use. As she turned from it, Grace noticed a painting high on the wall, concealed by a cloth. Curious, she stood on tiptoe, tugging at the lower corner until the cover slid away.

Underneath she found a portrait of a man, a woman, and a young child of no more than five years of age. Grace recognized the dowager marchioness, Christian's mother, immediately, but she was a younger, more vibrant reflection of

the woman she'd met the day before, with laughing eyes and a bright expression. The child, a boy, was kneeling at her feet, his head resting softly against his mother's full skirts while her fingers played lovingly at his dark hair. The man who stood beside them both resembled Christian closely, particularly in the way he held his head. He had the same captivating silver-blue eyes, only he wasn't staring at the artist as was most often depicted in such portraits. Instead, he was gazing down at his wife beside him and his expression was unmistakable.

He loved her.

Grace then studied the boy's image more closely. It must be Christian, but this was a carefree, innocent boy who bore little resemblance to the man she now called husband. Missing were the cold reserve, the unreachable eyes. This boy had once known happiness and laughter. He had known love. Grace could only wonder what could have happened to have changed him into the guarded, inscrutable man he was now.

Her study of the portrait was interrupted when she heard the sound of someone walking on the gravel path outside. She glanced out the window where the curtain was parted and caught sight of Christian approaching down a narrow pathway through the trees. There stood a door to her right that led to an outside terrace. Grace opened it quietly and slipped outside.

The wind rustled through the trees, lifting the hem of her skirts and tugging at the tendrils of hair that the maid had left loose as Grace fell in step behind him. She kept a good twenty paces away so that he wouldn't hear her following. She wanted to see him, watch him without his being aware of her. People often behaved differently in diverse situations and she wanted to see if his indifference was a thing directed only at her.

As she came around a turn in the pathway, Grace stopped, lingering behind the sizeable trunk and overhanging branches of an ancient willow. Christian had arrived at a small area that was shaded by other trees and enclosed by an iron fence. A number of tall headstones lined the interior space, flecked gray against a rich grassy carpet. Grace stepped off the footpath and onto the lawn so that Christian wouldn't hear her. Coming

under a curtain of new spring leaves, she looked on as he stood in silent contemplation over one of the headstones, watched him crouch down to pluck away an offending weed from beside it. He smoothed a hand over the lettering carved there, laying his palm flat against the stone as one might set a hand upon another's shoulder in reassurance.

As she drew a few steps closer, Grace saw that the gravestone he knelt before was that of Christopher Wycliffe.

It was his father.

Christian remained kneeling, his head bent for some time in silent reflection. As she watched him, Grace thought of the man she'd seen depicted in the portrait, Christian's father. He looked as if he'd been the sort of father a boy of five would have worshipped. She remembered her own grief at the loss of her parents, the disordered feeling even at her young age as if her place in the world was no longer secure despite the fact that she hadn't really even known them.

Grace's birth had been accidental, an imposition to the lives of two people bent on personally conquering the world. She had been left with Nonny as an infant while her parents had gone away traveling more than they'd ever stayed at home. They would return every so often to visit, never remaining long enough to unpack all their belongings, before setting off for some other new and exciting destination. They'd been to the Far East. They'd ridden elephants in India. They had slept in ice palaces in the North. They had come home most often on special occasions—a random birthday, the marriage of a cousin, the death of Grace's grandfather, the marquess. Still, Grace could remember the last time she'd seen her parents, could even remember the clothes they had worn, the smell of her mother's exotic perfume, the way the wind had ruffled the ends of her father's neckcloth as he'd patted her on the head in parting.

"*Arrivederci*," he had said to her, for they were off to Italy this time, more specifically the former republic of Venice. Grace had secretly wished they would take her with them to that magical watery city, had even voiced her thoughts hopefully, but they hadn't.

She remembered how her mother had bent to kiss her on the cheek, retying the ribbons on her straw bonnet with the promise that soon she would be old enough to join them on one of their jaunts around the world.

“Next time,” she had vowed to her daughter, “next time we will take you with us and we will see the lions and the giraffes in faraway Africa.”

But that promised journey had never come. Instead, a messenger had arrived from London a month later with the news that the ship they had sailed upon, the prophetically named “Tempest,” had gone down in the Alboran Sea in a storm. There had been no survivors. Ironically, in death, Grace’s parents had become tactile in a way they had never been while living, for from then on, she’d had the twin headstones that had been erected in the Ledysthorpe cemetery to visit. She remembered the last time she’d gone there—the morning she was to leave Ledysthorpe for London, how she had whispered her good-byes, cleaning away the weeds, just as Christian had now.

Grace remembered then how Eleanor had told her of her brother’s closeness to their father. No doubt such an attachment would make facing the memorial of his death difficult, even after all the time that had passed. She wondered that perhaps their shared loss could provide a way for them to lay the first stepping stone across the river of unfamiliarity that stood between them. Suddenly hopeful, Grace threw caution to the wind and started toward the cemetery.

The gate creaked as she pushed it inward to enter and the sound brought Christian to lifting his head. He stared at her and for a moment, his expression was open and unguarded, resembling more the boy in the portrait. A moment later, however, his eyes turned cold as the bitterest winter.

Grace froze, hovering just inside the gate as he stood. For a moment, she thought she saw the sunlight glisten on a tear at his eye. He continued to stare at her without speaking, his face set without expression. He needed no words to convey that he was heartily displeased to see her suddenly there.

“You must have loved him very much,” she said in an awkward effort to ease the tension that had seized that small, peaceful place.

Christian turned, tossing the weeds he’d pulled over the fencing. “What are you doing here?”

Grace blanched. “I... I saw you come here and I thought perhaps you might like someone to talk to. You had been kneeling so long, I—”

“First you sneak into my dressing room at Eleanor’s ball, and now this, the second time you have gone where you don’t belong. Do you make it a habit of intruding on the privacy of others like this often, or is it just mine?”

Grace ignored his bitter words. “I know what it is to lose a parent, Christian. I lost both of mine.”

For the barest second, her statement seemed to reach him. His expression softened and the tense lines around his mouth eased—but only for a moment. Then the ice returned to his stare, and his voice grew clipped and sharp as a blade. “You would do well in the future, madam, to avoid meddling a third time.”

Grace instantly brought her arms around herself, chilled despite the warmth of the spring sun. She had only hoped to offer Christian comfort, a wife’s tender touch to ease his obvious pain at the loss of his father. She had wanted to talk to him, share with him the memory of her own parents, commiserate in their mutual loss.

Instead, she had met with his anger and hostility.

Grace turned her face away so that Christian wouldn’t see the tears that so quickly came to her eyes at his harsh words. Was she doomed to displease him at every turn? She looked back when she heard his footsteps on the walkway and simply stood there, watching him leave her again, just as he had the night before, stripped raw of anything but humility and despair.

twelve

*Women are like tricks by sleight of hand,
Which, to admire, we should not understand.*

-William Congreve, *Love for Love*

Christian stared at Grace as she sat across from him within the closed carriage. They had left Westover Hall nearly an hour before, and were rumbling along the London road toward town. Since leaving, she hadn't spoken above two words, other than to ask how long their journey might take, and if he would prefer the front-facing seat instead of the back. After that, she had gone mute, but he would have known she was troubled even without her silence. She had one of those intelligible faces that showed the thoughts going on behind it as clearly as if they'd been written on paper. This, coupled with the book she had opened in her hands as if to read—and the fact that she was holding it upside down—gave a clear impression that she was still smarting from his harsh words to her in the cemetery.

She was wondering at his indifference, he knew, trying to understand why it seemed he was doing everything humanly possible to avoid being in her company when just the night before he had touched her more intimately than she'd ever been touched. Their meeting in the cemetery had taken him unawares. He hadn't expected to find her there, coming upon him so quietly as he knelt before his father's gravestone. His emotions had been raw at the reminder of his loss, and the moment he had seen her, the memory of his failure the night

before had come back to him like a dousing in Westover's ice-cold fish pond. He hadn't meant to snipe at her as he had; he was simply unaccustomed to having someone, anyone—most especially a wife—suddenly insinuating themselves into the most private and tender moments of his life. Even more so, he was unaccustomed to having anyone affect him like she had.

As Grace sat lost to her thoughts and her upside-down tale, Christian took the opportunity to look at her, to truly study her for the first time. When one considered it, the old duke hadn't done badly in his choice of a wife for him. Grace had the loveliness of generations of aristocratic blood, her hair the perfect shade of blonde, not too light, nor too dark, the color of honey warmed by the summer sunlight. Lashes framed eyes that were a brilliant blue, inquisitive, and something more, something that couldn't be named but that spoke of a strength and spirit yet unrealized. Her nose was straight and unobtrusive, her mouth full and pleasingly-shaped, her skin unblemished, untouched...

Christian had known his wife—whoever his grandfather decided upon—would be an innocent. The great Duke of Westover would never have consented to a secondhand maid as the mother of the future heir. Christian wondered though, had the duke perhaps assumed Grace's delicate features might betoken a meek and accepting manner, thus making her more malleable, more easily controlled? It was a mistake one might make when first faced with her, and it had been for that reason alone Christian had sent up the tea the previous night, knowing Grace wouldn't be accustomed to strong spirits, hoping it might ease her fears at giving over her innocence to a virtual stranger. He had prepared himself for her apprehension, even tears. What he hadn't been prepared for was her complete and utter trust.

Christian could see Grace now in his mind's eye as she had lain beneath him on the ducal bed, clad in that prim nightgown even as her virgin's body had awakened for him. Her soulful eyes had told him that while she might fear the unknowing, she would never question anything he might want. Despite that she knew next to nothing about him, she'd had faith in him, something few others in his life had ever shown him. Christian

hadn't been prepared for that, hadn't known how to deal with it. That simple gesture had taken away any thought he'd had of indifference toward her, and his plan to keep her at a safe distance had slipped like sand through his fingers.

But if his reaction to her emotionally had taken him unawares, the physical response of his body to hers had undone him completely. In his life, the position he'd been born to, marriage was as much a certainty, as inevitable, as death. It was his duty, his sole purpose in life, to sire the next Westover heir, and he wouldn't have been at all surprised had the old man insisted on standing present, thumping his damnable cane on the floor, to assure that Christian fulfilled his end of their bargain in bedding her.

And bedding his wife just once had been exactly what Christian had planned on doing, and without culminating the act, in effort to deny the duke the one thing he wanted more than anything else in life—another heir to control. But from the moment Christian had first touched Grace, realized the scent of her, tasted the softness of her skin, looked into the bottomless blue of her eyes, he'd been lost. Every thought he'd had of restraint and of keeping their intercourse controlled had vanished in a haze of need.

But what did it mean, this reaction to her, really? It signified nothing, Christian assured himself, nothing at all. So he'd had one night where he'd lost his command over his body. Plenty of men had done the same. Regardless of Westover tradition, chances were Grace wouldn't conceive a child from that one encounter. And one encounter was all it would be. Christian was determined of that. The mystery of her was now past, her virginity no longer an issue to be dealt with. He had done his part. He had fulfilled his side of the bargain he'd made. And now, he would not again visit his wife's bed, not until the time came that he was ready for a child—and that wouldn't be until his grandfather was dead and gone.

For a moment Christian wondered why he shouldn't just tell Grace the truth, explain that he could not be a husband to her in the physical sense because of the agreement he'd made

with the duke. But then she would want to know the reasons why he had made such an unholy promise—why he had agreed at the age of twelve to give over his firstborn son to the duke. And that was something she could never be told, not when the lives of his mother and sister hinged upon it.

Christian could, he knew, through his influence and that of his grandfather, arrange a marriage for Eleanor quite easily and be done with running from the past. As a Westover, she would be sought after by any of the best of society's families, but Christian had vowed he would never do that to his sister. He had promised himself that Eleanor would be given the luxury of choosing. She would meet a man, talk to him, share her thoughts, and know him as she should the man she would spend her life with. She would reveal her love of music, her fondness for lemon tarts and gillyflowers. She would admit to him her distaste for mushrooms. She would discuss her favorite books, would show her talent for poetry. She might meet with a boor or two, or maybe even three, but she would eventually find the one man who shared her likes and dislikes, or who at least cherished them in her. She would be allowed to imagine herself in the role of wife long before his permission as her brother and the future family patriarch was sought. And when that time came, when the honor of her hand was requested, she would be given the choice whether to accept or decline.

Put simply, Eleanor would be permitted the one thing Christian had known all his life he would be denied. Eleanor would be given the chance to fall in love—and then the truth, the very ugly truth that put at peril her every chance at happiness would pose a threat to her no longer. She would be secure.

Christian looked at Grace again. Her brow was furrowed now and her mouth was pressed in a tense frown. For a moment, he wondered that she had perhaps been as much a victim as he in this marriage. Then he wondered where that thought had come from. He wondered at her reasons for wedding him, a man she had only seen once when she had come tumbling through the wall of his dressing room. She was a nobleman's daughter, certainly lovely to look at. He had read

the marriage contracts and knew that while she didn't have a fortune behind her, she had brought a sizeable dowry of property with her to the marriage. Surely she could have had any number of other noblemen interested in wedding her. What had she gained by agreeing to be his wife? And why had his grandfather chosen her above all others?

Had she perhaps been bolstered by the myth of who society thought him to be? She could have no idea what she had agreed to when she had consented to be his wife. Grace thought him honorable, a gentleman worthy of her devotion. Her head was filled with fustian dreams of a white knight on a charger coming to rescue her. She could know nothing of the past. The Westover secrets were long buried, unknown to the rest of the world. She knew only what she had been told, smooth words meant to influence the romantic whims of a fanciful young lady.

Thus, Grace could have no clue she had just married herself to a murderer.

thirteen

*Oh, London is a fine town
A very famous city,
Where all the streets are paved with gold,
And all the maidens pretty.*
-George Colman, the Younger

Knighton House, London

Grace studied her reflection with care in the tall pier glass near her dressing table. The gown was fine, her hair perfectly coiffed, pulled away from her face and arranged into a crown of golden curls stop her head. Not a single flounce showed out of place. Everything appeared perfect, still the image that met her critical eye only brought her to frowning.

She turned a bit to view her left side. The frown grew to a scowl. To the right side, and the scowl hardened into a furrow at her brow. It would be a blessed miracle if she made it through this night.

She was to attend a ball, a ball being held at the home of some very important society figure, someone whom she had never heard of before but who, it seemed, everyone else in creation had. She would attend with Christian, and it would be their first appearance together as the Marquess and Marchioness Knighton. Everyone would be watching, of course, looking their fill at the unknown lady who had married the man everyone else had wanted to marry. They were

expecting a goddess and no less, a mortal endowed with immortal beauty. They would be looking for a woman of taste and elegance, refinement and—

Grace

—something which, despite her name, she was sorely lacking.

Funny how life had a way of mocking you, she thought, bestowing upon you a particular appellation and then taking away any possibility of ever living up to it. Even worse was knowing that her lack of social polish was a flaw her husband had evidently noticed. Grace had overheard as much two weeks earlier, the very morning after their arrival in London when Christian had been talking to Eleanor in his study, charging his sister with the task of transforming, as he'd put it, "their country mouse into a proper marchioness."

Mouse, Grace had thought as she'd stood outside the door, their voices having caught her attention. Her heart sank to the very depths of her soul. *What a disappointment I must be to him*. Later, as she'd sat staring out from her bedchamber window at the busy street below, her arms hugging her knees to her chin as tears trailed down her cheeks, she came to realize that hidden within her misery at Christian's words actually lay a challenge. It was a challenge she would put to herself, to prove Christian wrong and to become the marchioness he had expected to wed.

Perhaps even a marchioness he could love.

She'd been given a fortnight to prepare, sufficient time for the tumult that had erupted following the announcement of their marriage in the newspapers to settle. Once news of their secret ceremony had become known, the knocker had sounded daily, almost hourly even. It was just as Eleanor had said—everyone, it seemed, suddenly wanted to make her acquaintance. People she had never met before now sought her out. Invitations and calling cards arrived in bundles, but Grace put off accepting them. After all, the transformation from country mouseahem, *missto* marchioness would require careful preparation.

Foremost, she would need suitable clothing, and an entire wardrobe of it. Morning gowns, day gowns, dinner and ball gowns, carriage dresses, garden dresses, walking and riding costumes. There were gowns fashioned just for the theatre, others for the opera, some for evening, others for *full* evening. The differences between them all still somehow escaped her, however Grace knew she must never, *ever* wear one at any time other than for its intended purpose.

Along with each ensemble came the necessary trappings—parasols, wraps, gloves and hats, shoes, boots, and stockings for each. It amazed her how the acquisition of a mere husband could thus triple the size of a woman's baggage.

With the exception of the final fittings, Grace had yet to make use of any of her newly acquired wardrobe—no occasion had yet come about that would require anything more than her own familiar—if somewhat countrified—gowns, made up of lackluster colors that helped to keep her inconspicuous if she did dare to venture out. No one would imagine that the new Marchioness Knighton would ever go about in homespun. Bonneted and blandly dressed, she could still manage the occasional sojourn to Hookham's without drawing anyone's notice.

But Grace knew she wouldn't be able to hide herself away forever. The time would eventually come when she would have to emerge from her refuge of anonymity, face the curious eyes of society, and present herself as Marchioness Knighton.

Not just *any* gathering would do either, she'd been told. It must be neither too grand, nor too modest, neither distinctly Whig nor Tory. The choice of it would need to be made most carefully. After much consideration, the news, when it had come, had not given her even the slightest measure of excitement. Instead, it had filled her with an immediate and utter sense of dread.

Christian had informed her of the event in a manner that was fast becoming custom. He'd passed the word through his valet, Peter, who'd delivered it to Liza, the young maid whom Grace had befriended on her wedding night at Westover Hall. Not long after their return to London, Grace had been advised

that her lack of a personal servant would be unacceptable to her new role. It made no matter that she hadn't found the necessity for one through the first four-and-twenty years of her life. A marchioness—and more importantly a future duchess—required a ladies' maid.

When told she would need to begin making inquiries to an agency after one, Grace's efforts had extended only so far as to send off a letter to Liza at Westover Hall offering her the position. The lively maid had turned up at the doorstep of Knighton House within days, bags in hand. Since then, Liza had become Grace's helpmate, confidante, and collaborator in everything she undertook. She rode with Grace in the carriage along Pall Mall, and walked beside her on the Serpentine in Hyde Park early in the mornings when no one else was yet about. Liza suggested styles in which Grace could best wear her hair, and colors for gowns that would complement her complexion. But more so than just a ladies' maid, Liza had become Grace's friend, something which, other than Nonny, Grace had never truly had before.

True to her brother's request, Eleanor had come to Grace's rescue in all matters of society. It was she who had hired Thomas Wilson, the dancing master, who had spent hours teaching Grace the proper execution of a quadrille and the waltz until she could practically do them in her sleep. It was Eleanor who had educated Grace on the various notable personalities of the *ton*, riffing through every invitation and calling card to designate the ones Grace should or should not accept after their upcoming first appearance together. And it was Eleanor who had persuaded the most sought-after modiste in London, Madame Delphine, to come to Knighton House for a round of personal consultations and fittings and last minute alterations despite the fact that it was the busiest time of the season.

Grace would never have been able to bring it off without Eleanor's support; just the arrangements for the gown Grace would wear on this first occasion had taken nearly a week. They had spent days mulling over stacks of fashion publications and engravings. After considering dozens of fabric swatches and numerous bits of trimmings, the gown that

had been created was the most elegant creation Grace had ever seen.

Made from the palest sea-green silk damask, the gown fell in an elegant line to a hem that was corded underneath in order to make it swing gracefully—quite like a bell—when she moved. The skirts were decorated in a woven floral pattern with varying shades of blue and golden threads, and soft, petal-shaped sleeves came off a cross-over bodice that was stitched with gold edging. It was indeed exquisite, certainly not the ensemble for a country mouse.

Its deeply-cut bodice, however, was causing Grace's present state of dismay.

Grace had never before exposed this much of her bosom, not even when clad only in her underthings. She felt as if she were walking about with half a gown to cover her. When she had voiced these misgivings during the round of fittings, all three of them—Eleanor, Madame Delphine, and Liza—had collectively assured her that this was *the* fashion, and that every lady at the ball would be envious of how well she wore it. Grace couldn't bring herself to imagine it so—in fact the only thing she was certain of was that if she didn't tumble out of the thing, she'd surely catch a cold in her chest from exposure.

But perhaps, she'd thought hopefully, she just might manage to catch her husband's eye, as well.

Though Eleanor hadn't spoken those words precisely, Grace knew it had been in her thoughts at the final fitting for the gown that morning. She had proclaimed how her brother wouldn't be able to keep his eyes from her, no matter if he tried. And Grace then realized Eleanor wasn't the first in the household to have noticed the disregard Christian showed his new wife either. In fact, it was something that everyone in the household had taken notice of.

A good many times over the past two weeks, Grace had overheard the servants whispering to one another, remarking on how soon after their marriage the lord and lady had taken to separate beds, that the door adjoining their bedchambers had

yet to be found unlocked in the morning. Since the first night at Westover Hall, Christian hadn't come to Grace's bed. At first, she'd thought perhaps he was waiting to find out whether she was with child, and that perhaps it only required one such interlude to conceive. But with so many taking notice of his inattention, Grace could only conclude that there was something wrong between them.

The only problem she faced now was how to fix matters, especially when Christian was so rarely at home. He left in the mornings, and returned oftentimes late at night, after she'd retired. When even Lady Frances had broached the subject of his absence to him, Christian had merely replied that he had business to attend to. Hoping to combat her loneliness, Grace had thrown herself into the preparations for her society introduction, wanting everything to be just right.

And now, that time was upon them.

Tonight, she thought staring at her reflection. *Tonight*, I will show him that I can be the wife he had expected.

Liza came into the bedchamber then, humming a cheerful tune. "Well, I think I managed to get the last of the creases out of this shawl. Took quite a bit of steaming and pressing." She held it up for Grace to see. "'Tis a pretty thing to be sure."

Indeed, it was. Pale cream Kashmir-designed silk, tasseled and embroidered with small trailing floral cones along each border, it had been Nonny's when she'd been a young lady, a gift to her from Grace's grandfather on their marriage. Grace had always admired the shawl and it had been among the many things Nonny had bequeathed to her. Since it had always held such loving memories, Grace held a secret wish that it might bring her good fortune for the all-important evening ahead.

Grace took the length of fabric up, holding it out a moment to look at it before she wrapped the width of it snugly over her bodice. She closed her eyes and for the first moment or two, it felt almost as if her grandmother were softly hugging her, for the shawl still carried Nonny's unique lilac scent.

Grace turned with a smile toward Liza to display the shawl. “How’s this?”

But Liza was frowning, shaking her head in disapproval.

“My lady, I’d not be doing my position as your maid any justice if I were to let you leave this house looking like that.”

Grace peered at herself again in the glass. “I know. That was my thought exactly. The modiste must have measured the bodice of this gown too small. I don’t wish to fault her—anyone can make a mistake—so that is why I will be sure to wear the shawl over it.”

“My lady—no. If you do that, every lady at the ball tonight will laugh at you.”

Liza pried the shawl away, setting Grace’s arms each at an angle. “There is an artistry to the wearing of a shawl just as there is to wielding a fan. You should simply drape the shawl about your back, like this...” She set the soft fabric over each elbow and then arranged it so that it was wrapped just below the tiny capped sleeves of the gown. The position of Grace’s figure thus, with her back slightly arched, only made her bosom that much more conspicuous.

“And one more thing...” Liza went to the dressing table, returned with something in her hand. “Lady Frances asked me to give this to you to wear this evening. She took it specially from her own collection.”

Liza came behind Grace and fastened a necklace before her that rested just below her throat. Grace peered in the glass, drawing in a breath at the elegant emerald and pearl fringe necklace she’d put on, touching her fingertips to the sparkling stones in awe.

“Oh, it’s beautiful...”

The maid stepped back to survey the final result. She straightened a flounce and then took up the heated tongs from the fire to reset a loose curl from Grace’s coiffure. Then she stepped back to study her figure again. “There, that’s perfect. No, wait—” Liza reached forward, grabbed the high waistline of Grace’s gown and gave it a quick tug—*downward*. Flesh

Grace had never thought to expose to daylight—let alone to a crowded ballroom—swelled above the dangerously low edge of the fabric. Liza stood back on a grin. “There. Now that *is* perfect.”

“But, Liza, I am falling out of this gown!”

Liza grinned. “That, my lady, can only be a good thing. Now, let us put on your mantelet before you go down to meet Lord Knighton. Promise me you won’t give him a peek until after you’ve arrived at the ball.”

Grace stared at her, doubtful.

“Trust me in this, my lady. I would never tell you to do anything that I wasn’t truly certain of.”

Grace sighed. “All right, but we must hurry. Lord Knighton wanted us to leave at eight o’clock, and it is already nearly ten minutes past. I fear he may grow annoyed if I delay much longer.”

“Oh, but you are early, my lady. There is no reason to hurry. A lady always makes a gentleman wait for her. Makes ‘em appreciate more the trouble you go through to look as pretty as you do. Gentlemen know that, otherwise they think you didn’t make the effort to look your finest for them. Ma always said when a gentleman says eight o’clock, he really means half-past.”

Grace looked at the maid, feeling not for the first time wholly untutored in the ways of women and men. “Liza, how does your mother know so much about these things?”

“Before Ma married my Pa, she had served as ladies’ maid here in London to none other than Miss Harriette Wilson.”

It was a name that was unfamiliar to Grace. “Harriette Wilson—she was a popular lady?”

Liza smiled, quirking a brow. “You could say a good many of the gentlemen sought her company. Everyone from dukes to some say even princes.”

Princes? Well, then, this Harriette Wilson must certainly know the proper way to wear a shawl. In the face of such

expertise, Grace shrugged and left the gown's bodice where it was, even though she felt most indecently exposed. She focused instead on the challenge she had put to herself to become a proper marchioness. More importantly, *Christian's* marchioness. It was time she gave up girlhood modesty. It was time she stopped playing the role of *The Anonymouse*, and became Lady Grace, Marchioness Knighton. She squared her shoulders. If this was what it took to make her husband notice her, then by heavens she would do it.

Grace stood while Liza slipped her silk mantelet around her shoulders, fastening it under her chin. When she had finished, Grace looked to the clock on the table beside her. It was now twenty minutes past eight. She certainly didn't want Christian to think she had rushed in preparing for such a paramount event. She waited four minutes more before heading for the door.

Christian, Eleanor, and Lady Frances were all waiting for her at the foot of the stairs when she appeared on the landing above them. Christian looked handsome and quite refined in his evening suit of strict black with but the stark white of his shirt and neckcloth against it. Grace felt a small tug deep inside herself; she has missed seeing him except in scarce glimpses these past two weeks. But tonight, all that would change for the better. *Yes, indeed*, she thought, recalling Liza's words, *every lady will envy me for the man whose arm I will be on*.

She would not be nervous. She would act and speak as the marchioness she was—Christian's marchioness.

Grace smiled hopefully when she saw he had noticed her descent. But Christian didn't seem to register any response to her appearance. Instead, he glanced at the hall clock, barely giving her notice. He frowned. "I had hoped to avoid having to wait in the carriage line."

Grace's smile immediately flattened and she felt a tightening deep inside her chest. Liza had been wrong. She had displeased him by being late.

“Oh, but it is better that we arrive after most everyone else,” Eleanor said quickly. “There will be less of a crush to get in. Do remember the Easterley rout, Christian. We arrived promptly at eight and Mother’s hem was ripped when Lord Calder trod upon it trying to make an entrance before us. It was most clever of you, Grace, to consider that.”

Everyone knew perfectly well Grace’s lateness had nothing to do with any forethought, and there followed a silent moment before Christian turned for the door, the cape of his evening cloak sweeping outward as he went. Grace remained frozen on the stairs, all her hopes, her plans, stricken even before she’d begun. She wanted nothing more than to turn and retreat to her bedchamber, to never emerge again. But she knew she couldn’t. She had to see this night through. So she renewed her vow to meet the challenge of the evening and continued down the steps, following the others outside to the waiting coach.

Eleanor, blessedly, chattered endlessly during their ride to the ball in an obvious attempt to keep Grace’s thoughts from both her sullen husband, who sat beside her staring out the window, and the butterflies fluttering through her insides. Grace realized they had nearly arrived when the coach slowed to a lazy crawl, picking its way along the cobbled street that was lined on each side with other coaches.

Soon they stopped at a stately house set on a corner across from Hyde Park. Candlelight glimmered through every window as shadowed figures clad in shimmering silks walked along the footpath toward the front door. Their coach halted and one footman opened the door while another let down the two steps, taking Grace’s hand to assist her to the walkway where Christian awaited. He offered her his arm, and together they started up the stairs in silence.

Once inside the house, Grace waited while first Christian, then Lady Frances, and then Eleanor removed their cloaks. She remembered Liza’s words about how surprised Christian would be by her gown. The others had turned toward the ballroom, seeming to forget her. Grace quickly unfastened her mantelet, handing it to the waiting footman with a smile. She

joined the others atop the stairs just as the footman was announcing their arrival.

“My lord and ladies, the Marquess and Marchioness Knighton, Lady Knighton, and Lady Eleanor Wycliffe.”

It seemed as if a sea of faces immediately turned in their direction. Grace looked to where Christian stood beside her and noticed he wasn't staring out toward the crowded ballroom below them. Instead, he was staring at her as if he didn't quite recognize her. The sullen look he'd previously worn was gone, replaced by one of total astonishment.

Country mouse indeed! Grace thought with a surge of confidence. Liza had been right. He did like the gown. She gave him a smile and asked, “Is everything all right, my lord?”

But Christian didn't answer her. For the moment, it seemed, he was far too occupied with staring at her bosom.

fourteen

*Wasn't that a dainty dish
To set before a king?
-Sing a Song of Sixpence*

“Really, Christian, could you perhaps endeavor to be just a little less obvious?”

Eleanor’s comment broke Christian from his blind distraction long enough for him to realize that he was standing before a ballroom, crowded with London’s most elite society, openly ogling his wife’s breasts.

But *good God!* they were lovely. In the weeks since their wedding night, he’d forgotten just how lovely they were. Even now he found it difficult to tear his gaze away. He was mesmerized, totally taken aback, and even worse, he began to feel himself responding beneath his breeches.

Buffoon! What the bloody hell was wrong with him? What had happened to the cool, unflappable reserve he’d perfected over the past two decades, that he’d adhered so faithfully to in the past weeks since returning to London? And more importantly, how had his modest mouse of a wife suddenly transformed into this thoroughly unexpected, tantalizing temptress?

Christian knew a sudden urge to remove his coat, wrap Grace under it, and take her away from the leering eyes of every other man present. Either that, or take her to the nearest closet and explore just how much farther her bodice could be

lowered before it fully gave way. One thing of which he was now quite certain: this self-imposed celibacy was surely going to punish him.

He noticed that Grace was staring at him, the combined looks of uncertainty, hope, and anticipation shining in her brilliant blue eyes. He could read her thoughts as clearly as if she'd spoken them. She had done this for him, donning the gown, taking care with her hair, all to please him. Why the devil did she have to worship him so obviously? He had virtually deserted her since their arrival in the city, never once walking through the door to her bedchamber or engaging in conversation more meaningful than the state of the weather. He had tried being sullen, hoping to temper that romantic wistfulness, the wistfulness she fed by reading her novels and the comparing of sex to the threading of a needle.

But he saw now that his efforts hadn't worked a whit.

Christian didn't want to be worshipped. More so, he didn't *deserve* to be worshipped. And he certainly didn't want to be married to a woman who played on his last noble trait—an admiration he had for that which was innocent amid the baseness of the world. It was this same trait that gave Christian his total devotion to his sister, driving him to do anything he had to in order to preserve it in her. And now, incredibly, he found that his wife possessed this quality in kind, making it nigh impossible for him to dislike her.

He hadn't been fair or even kind to Grace he knew, avoiding her, *ignoring* her as he had the past fortnight. He simply hadn't had a choice in the matter. If he didn't do everything he could to avoid her, he knew he would only lose himself to her, to her goodness, her innocence, or God help him, her *love*. He might even begin to acquire the one thing he'd given up on—hope—even as he knew there could be no such thing for him, never again, that a fact made quite certain that cold spring morning twenty years before.

Still, Christian realized that Grace had gone to a lot of effort this evening to look her best when she was presented to society as his wife. She didn't wish to shame him before his

peers. The very least he could do would be to acknowledge her trouble.

“You look quite lovely this evening, Grace,” he said, a statement that seemed pale in comparison to the vision she truly was. Her gown was made of a particular shade of green that only enhanced the color of her eyes, the cut of it carrying an air of seduction in the way that the bodice hugged her, with skirts which swayed enticingly when she moved. Her hair had been swept away from her face into a wealth of honeyed ringlets that danced about her temple, her ears when she moved. He had never realized what a slender and alluring neck she had nor how fascinating the hollow of her throat could be before now, particularly with his mother’s emeralds nestled against her.

Grace immediately beamed under his approval. “Thank you, Christian. I am happy you are pleased.”

Christian forced his eyes away from her and set her arm upon his as the two of them proceeded together through the waiting crowd. As they went, he accepted greetings and well-wishes on their marriage from the various people they encountered. Christian introduced Grace to his acquaintances, less than delighted with the way so many of the men in the room were openly admiring the charms of his wife’s décolletage. How ironic, he thought to himself—they imagine touching her and cannot; he can more than anyone else, but won’t. He’d already made that mistake once—on his wedding night, and he was still waiting to discover if it would prove a fatal one in the conception of a child.

They had come across the length of the ballroom and were standing at the far end beside an overgrown potted palm when a voice suddenly broke through the muted murmur of the crowd.

“My eyes must be deceiving me. Can this be England’s Most *Ineligible* Marquess?”

Christian turned, and his face immediately broke into a grin.

“Noah!” he said, taking the outstretched hand of his closest friend. “I didn’t know you were going to be in attendance tonight. When did you arrive in town? Why didn’t you stop to call at Knighton House?”

It had been nearly two years since Lord Noah Edenhall had given up his own bachelorhood, as a result of his marriage to a mysterious lady with midnight hair and smoky eyes, too clever by half, and equally as lovely. Lady Augusta was an astronomer and the *ton’s* latest fascination. To look at her, one would never think that the petite bespectacled damsel would soon be written of in history books. She had made a stunning celestial discovery just the year before and was now awaiting her due recognition. She was also with child, a fact Christian remarked upon happily. At his enthusiasm, Grace allowed herself to wonder that he might welcome any children they might be blessed with.

“We arrived just yesterday,” Noah said. “Augusta had some work to complete with Lord Everton and I had some business to conduct with my brother. And of course, Catriona would never forgive us if we missed one of the rare balls she so scarcely hosts. Imagine my surprise when I arrived and heard that you had suddenly gotten married.”

Christian nodded. “We arrived a bit late tonight and missed seeing Robert or Catriona in the reception line.”

“Is that my name I hear coming from the newly-wedded Lord Knighton?”

Their host for the evening, Robert Edenhall, the Duke of Devonbrook, came forward as if on cue to join them. Tall and dark, he presented a formidable figure wherever he went. But then, a man with a formidable fortune usually did.

At his side stood his wife, the lovely duchess Catriona, a coppery-haired Scot who was another of the *ton’s* most recent celebrated figures. It was solely because of her that the ballroom was as crowded as it was; no one in London would ever miss a fête hosted by the infamous Duchess of Devonbrook.

Catriona kissed Christian affectionately on the cheek, embracing him openly, heedless of the risk she took in crushing her lovely tartan-trimmed gown. “We heard the news the minute we arrived in town. Congratulations, Christian. I’m so happy you could come this evening for your first appearance as a married man.” She turned her attention then to Grace, who stood quietly watching the exchange. “And I assume this lovely young lady on your arm is the new Lady Knighton?”

Christian nodded. “Grace, allow me to introduce the Duke and Duchess of Devonbrook, our hosts for this evening. And this is the duke’s brother, Lord Noah, and his wife, Lady Augusta Edenhall.”

Grace smiled timidly at the quartet of welcoming faces. “It is a pleasure to make all of your acquaintances.”

As Christian would have expected, Catriona and Augusta immediately enveloped Grace in their fold. Any danger of social disapproval toward her would now vanish under their protection; it had been his foremost thought in choosing this particular event for introducing his wife to society.

“My dear Lady Knighton,” said Catriona, “that is indeed a stunning gown. Is it one of Madame Delphine’s?”

“Yes, thank you, Your Grace, but please call me Grace.” She pulled an nervous expression. “That sounded a bit silly, now, didn’t it?”

“Indeed, and it will be doubly confusing when you one day become a duchess and everyone begins calling you ‘Grace, Your Grace.’” She chuckled. “Let us avoid any confusion and simply address one another by our given names.”

“Splendid idea,” said Augusta then, taking Grace on one side while Catriona commandeered the other. “Come, let us leave the gentlemen to their port and catching up in the parlor while we badger Grace into telling us if Christian snores half as loudly as Noah does.”

“Oh, then it must be a family trait,” added Catriona. “I thought none could be worse than Robert.”

Grace grinned, immediately at ease with the ladies' banter. "Well, if Christian does snore, it mustn't be very loud for I never hear him through the door adjoining our rooms."

Both ladies suddenly halted. Their respective husbands turned to stare at Grace, who hadn't yet realized the significance behind her words. Immediately, everyone shifted their attention to Christian. It seemed as if the ballroom had suddenly grown as silent as a church. Christian wondered that every other guest present had not overheard the telling exchange.

Catrina, blessedly, came to the rescue. "Well, then, consider yourself fortunate. Come, Grace, let us find a quiet corner somewhere where we might get better acquainted."

Christian stood and watched them go, silently cursing. He wasn't angry at Grace; how could he be? She could have no notion of just what she had revealed by her innocent statement. Without even realizing, she had revealed to his two closest friends in life, men who were openly passionate about their wives, that she and Christian, newly wedded, did not share a bedchamber. He turned to regard his friends again. The stares he received in response saw far more than he had hoped they would.

"So what business are the two of you transacting?" he said to Noah in hopes of diverting their attentions elsewhere.

Noah stared at him a moment before replying. "Robert has finally convinced Augusta to breed her mare, Atalanta, with his stallion, Bayard. Only problem is deciding who will take the foal should the breeding prove fruitful. I have suggested that they draw straws. Augusta is more inclined to a combined ownership where the beast shall live part of the year with Robert at Devonbrook Hall and part of the year with us at Eden Court." He finished on a grin, "With Augusta, of course, retaining possession in the summer months."

The conversation progressed from there with neither Robert nor Noah making further mention of Grace's comment. But then they were gentlemen, and gentlemen rarely pried into such personal matters.

Ladies, on the other hand...

Catriona had found them a bit of space in the back parlor, far from the noise and crowd of the ballroom. They dropped into a pair of matched brocaded settees that faced one another, Grace on one side, Catriona and Augusta on the other. Thus, when Grace looked up, it was to dual sets of keen, inquiring eyes.

“So, dear,” Catriona said on a smile, “do tell us everything about yourself.”

Grace found herself suddenly tongue-tied before these two refined and elegant ladies. With hair the color of glistening copper and diamonds sparkling from her ears, Catriona was exactly what one would think of in a duchess. Poised and confident, Grace couldn't imagine this woman having ever done anything improper in her life. In contrast, Augusta's hair was silky black and pulled atop her head in a coronet that gave her the look of the nobility she had obviously come from. She was quite intriguing. Grace had never met a woman who would dare to wear spectacles in public, let alone at a society ball.

Even as they had walked across the ballroom together, Grace had watched as Catriona and Augusta had drawn the notice of the crowd. She could only think that everyone else must have been wondering why she, the unknown country mouse, would be with these two most distinguished women.

Finally, she said, “I'm afraid my upbringing is not what you would consider fashionable,” she began. “I cannot make much of a claim to society. I was raised in the country and—”

“Nonsense!” said Catriona. “I was raised in the country as well—in Scotland.”

“And I was raised on board a ship among nothing but sailors,” broke in Augusta. “So much more interesting than strapped to a backboard, pouring tea at a finishing school, don't you think? So tell us, how did you come to know Christian?”

“I didn’t really know him.” Grace chewed her lower lip. “In fact, I didn’t know him at all. The truth is our marriage was arranged by our families.”

The two women looked at one another and then together they nodded.

“You don’t care for him?” asked Augusta.

“Oh, no—I mean yes, I do care for Christian very much.” Grace hesitated, chewing her lip some more. “I just don’t think he cares very much for me.”

“Impossible!” said Catriona. “Why on earth wouldn’t he? You are obviously sweet and charming and intelligent. He should be proud to have such a lovely wife.”

Grace felt so comfortable with the two women, she found her words suddenly spewing forth in a gush. “The truth is he rarely talks to me. Whenever he does, he just seems, I don’t know, it’s as if he is *angry* with me.” Grace immediately regretted her loose tongue. She had only just made the acquaintance of these ladies, and here she was telling them the most awful truth of her marriage.

But they didn’t seem offended by her candor. Instead, they seemed genuinely concerned.

Augusta said, tapping a finger to her chin, “Odd. That doesn’t sound at all like Christian.”

“Indeed, he has always struck me as a most polite and attentive man.” Catriona looked at Grace, lowering her voice. “Forgive me, dear, if I intrude in matters of which I have no right to ask. Understand that I am Scottish and we are quite open about such things.”

Grace nodded for her to continue.

“I presume, from your comments earlier, that you and Christian do not share a bedchamber...or, for that matter, a bed.”

Grace felt instantly awash with shame, her cheeks growing heated. Tentatively, she nodded. She didn’t need to voice an answer.

Augusta shook her head again. "Most odd indeed."

"One can only guess that because your marriage was arranged, perhaps Christian is resistant to admitting defeat."

"Defeat?"

"Oh yes," answered Augusta. "He is, after all, *a man*."

"Indeed. They can be so pig-headed about things, can't they?" Catriona shook her head. "I would assume, knowing what I do of Christian's family history, that his grandfather the duke arranged your marriage?"

Grace nodded.

"There is much hostility between the old duke and Christian. I would guess it is simply the fact that you were chosen by his grandfather that Christian is behaving the way he is toward you. Were he to show that he was pleased with you, to his *man's* thinking, that would be allowing his grandfather the victory."

Grace wrinkled her brow in confusion. "It would?"

"I know, dear, it makes no sense to sensible women like us, because we are clear headed and we see things as they truly are. Men, poor dears, can only see things in two respects: that of winning, or losing. If Christian were thinking rationally, he would instead give his grandfather the impression that he is blissfully happy with his choice of you, which, of course, he could only be with you as his wife."

"Yes," Augusta agreed. "Obviously with so much hostility between them, it would only rankle the duke more to think that he had given Christian such a gift when he had intended to give him misery. Mind you, *not* that you are any misery, dear. You clearly are not." She nodded, sitting forward now with both hands on Grace's knees. "As I see it, we must *enlighten* Christian."

Grace was only growing further confused. "I'm sorry... enlighten him?"

"Oh, yes, dear. It is your only hope of bringing this situation to its necessary conclusion." Catriona sat taller in her

seat and looked across the room, studying the crowd. “We must find a way to make our dear Lord Knighton open his hooded eyes and see what he has right before him. Either that or we shall have to conk him on the head with Augusta’s telescope to knock some sense into him.”

The two ladies laughed together, and then Catriona straightened more in her seat, peering past Grace to the doorway. “But we must proceed most carefully...it is a decision of the utmost delicacy...” She smiled then. “And I think I have found just the person to assist us in our endeavor.”

Augusta looked across the room to where Catriona was staring, a wide smile breaking across her face. “Oh, Catriona, I know what you are thinking and I must say, dear, it is a perfect solution. Indeed, almost *too* perfect.”

Grace turned in her seat to see what it was that had so captured the two ladies’ attention. But she could see nothing, nothing at all because the doorway was blocked by the figure of a man. She turned her attention back to them. “I’m afraid I do not see what you are talking about.”

“Look again, dear.” Catriona winked. “I understand he waltzes divinely.”

Grace turned a second time and it was then she realized that they intended her to notice the man standing in the doorway. Furthermore, they intended her to...

Grace looked back to them. “Oh, no, I couldn’t.”

“Oh, but you could, dear. You want to draw Christian’s notice, do you not?”

“Yes, but—”

“This will do much better than a conking on his head. And it will serve him right for having neglected you as he has. Trust us in this, my dear. We know well what we are suggesting.”

“But would it be considered proper? I do not wish to do anything that might cause Christian embarrassment. Shouldn’t I dance my first dance as a marchioness with my husband?”

“And you certainly would have, dear, had he asked you.” Catriona grinned. “Besides, I am the hostess this evening. It is perfectly within propriety—in fact, it is my duty—to find partners for the ladies who aren’t already dancing.”

Grace remained uncertain. Still, she had no better option before her and these ladies seemed so sure of themselves.

Catriona looked to Augusta with a devilish smile. “Shall I do the honors, dear sister?”

“Oh, by all means.” Augusta then peered at Grace through her spectacles as Catriona stood from her seat. “Watch and learn, dear.”

Catriona straightened her skirts and glided elegantly across the room. In seconds, she had caught the attention of the man at the doorway and they were soon engaged in conversation, smiling and nodding. Moments later, Catriona had taken his hand and was leading him over to where Augusta and Grace were still sitting.

“My dear Lady Knighton, allow me to introduce a friend of ours—and an acquaintance of your husband. Lord Whitly, please meet our newest friend, Grace, Lady Knighton.”

He was about as close as any mortal could be to a god on earth—blonde hair the color of spun gold, lazy hazel eyes, and a smile that could easily melt an iceberg. He was dressed in a coat of navy superfine with a superbly starched neckcloth worthy of Brummell himself. Even as he stood beside her, Grace could see other ladies nearby stopping their conversations so that they might watch him, fluttering their fans quickly before them, trying to draw his notice.

Yet even while one could not dispute that he was indeed handsome, Grace found she preferred Christian’s darker, more natural looks to the example of overdone perfection that stood before her. Lord Whitly seemed pleasant enough, though, and Catriona and Augusta obviously liked him, so Grace offered him her gloved hand in greeting.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Whitly.”

Lord Whitly took her hand and pressed a soft kiss to it. “It is, indeed, my pleasure as well, Lady Knighton.”

“Now, Whitly,” said Augusta then, “you needn’t waste your charms on Lady Knighton because she is thoroughly smitten with her husband, as any good wife should be. All we require of you is a turn or two about the dance floor. That should serve our purposes quite well.”

Whitly grinned. “Happy to be of service, my ladies.” He motioned toward the ballroom door. “Lady Knighton, shall we proceed?”

Grace looked at Catriona and Augusta one last time, even as she rose to her feet. As they headed off for the ballroom, she sent a silent wish to Nonny that she was doing the right thing.

fifteen

*When you go to dance,
take heed whom you take by the hand.*

-John Clarke

Christian took a draught from his port glass and as he did, he chanced to spy his sister, Eleanor, through the parlor doorway. She was standing with his mother and another, smiling radiantly, and he paused a moment, watching her. It pleased him to see her beaming so radiantly, and happy. And then he noticed she was talking with a gentleman—a gentleman whom he recognized in the next moment when the man turned with Eleanor to look out over the dancing area.

Christian nearly coughed over his swallow of port.

“Excuse me a moment, gentlemen,” he said to his friends, handing his glass to Noah before he headed across the room, steadfast in the direction to where his sister still stood.

He approached silently, and filled with dread.

“Eleanor,” Christian said, his voice cordial, showing no hint of the turmoil that was now churning inside of him. He came to stand beside her. He glanced once at the gentleman with her, then immediately focused on his sister again. “It is time for that dance I promised you, isn’t it?”

Lady Frances stood to Eleanor’s other side giving Christian a look that only the two of them could understand.

“Oh, Christian,” Eleanor said on a smile, “I was wondering where you’d disappeared to. I was just telling Lord Herrick here of your marriage. You know the earl, do you not?”

Far better than I care to admit.

Christian turned, giving the man an affected smile that never quite exceeded a cool politeness. “Herrick,” he said, his voice empty of any emotion, “you are looking well.”

It had been over twenty years since the two men had last faced one another; it might have been but twenty days. Richard Hartley, Earl of Herrick still had the same coal-black hair and harsh gray eyes he’d had as a boy. For the moment, it seemed almost as if Christian were standing across from him on the cricket field at Eton again with his shirttails hanging out the back of his grass-stained breeches, his cuffs rolled to his elbows.

By the time they had parted on that last occasion, Christian had sported a blackened eye—and Herrick had stood with a bloodied and nearly broken nose.

But now, Herrick simply returned a curt nod that revealed nothing, leaving Christian to wonder what was the man’s aim in speaking with Eleanor. “Knighton, my congratulations on your recent marriage.”

Eleanor smiled, blissfully unaware of the tension that had suddenly thickened the air around them. “Oh, so I was correct in thinking you do know one another.”

Christian’s eyes never left Herrick’s. “Yes, Eleanor, Lord Herrick and I have already been acquainted, although it has been some time. We were at Eton together actually. It is good to see you again, Herrick. Now if you’ll excuse us, I believe I owe my sister this dance.”

Christian didn’t wait long enough for Herrick to respond, but instead placed his hand at the small of her back and directed Eleanor toward the dance floor, as far away from the earl as possible. As he threaded them a path through the other people in the room, Christian didn’t realize the tightness with which he was gripping Eleanor’s hand until they had stopped

and she pulled away, rubbing her gloved fingers. She stared at him curiously.

“Christian, is something wrong?”

“No,” he lied. “Should there be?”

“You just seem agitated of a sudden.”

They prepared for the waltz that was about to begin and Christian caught sight of Herrick over the top of Eleanor’s head. Lady Frances had vanished and Herrick was standing at the edge of the dance floor. He was watching them.

Christian frowned. He had hoped the earl would have gone off in search of other company.

“Lord Herrick seems very nice,” Eleanor said, drawing Christian’s attention away from the side of the room. “You have spoken of so many of your friends from Eton over the years that I thought I knew of them all. Why have you never mentioned him before?”

How in God’s name was he supposed to answer her? He had thought he’d been so cautious, safeguarding against every possible situation. Of all the contretemps that could have taken place, he never would have expected this one. “I suppose I never mentioned him because the occasion never called for me to, Nell.”

Eleanor smiled as she always did when he used his childhood nickname for her. The mood eased. The musicians began. As they moved about the floor with the other couples, Christian sought to change the subject. “Are you enjoying the ball this evening?”

“Oh, yes, very much. It has proven a most pleasant event, indeed.”

As they danced, Christian noticed Eleanor looking to where Herrick yet lingered at the edge of the dancing area. He caught the smiles they exchanged, felt his stomach tighten in response. *Damnation!* This could not be happening. Not her. Not him. And not now. Christian turned his sister so that her back was to the earl.

“It is amazing,” Eleanor said, “the differences in being ‘out’ and participating in the season as compared to being relegated to our mother’s side to watch on in silence.”

Christian looked down at her. She was still searching the fringes of the floor for Herrick. His voice lowered. “You have all the time in the world, you know, Nell. You needn’t set your sights on the first buck you run across.”

Eleanor looked up at her brother, her face coloring at his having seen straight through to her budding attraction for Herrick. “I am not setting my sights on anyone, Christian—not yet, anyway.”

“That is good.” He turned her about again. “You shall have a love match. I promise you. No one will force you into a marriage you do not want.”

The undertone of his words was obvious.

“Are you so very unhappy with Grace then, Christian?”

The question was not one he had been prepared for and he wasn’t quite sure how to respond. “I don’t really know. I don’t even know her; we are truly strangers, and that is a difficult beginning for any marriage.”

Eleanor waited a beat before saying, “But you certainly don’t seem very interested in getting to know her any time soon, either.”

It was more an accusation than anything else and Christian looked at his sister, but she was focused away. He had to maneuver them a bit because it seemed as if the dance floor was becoming further crowded. He shifted their place as they moved through several more turns of the dance.

“And I might suggest, dear brother, that you perhaps concentrate your efforts on your wife a bit more, before others see to the job for you. That is, if it is not too late already.”

Eleanor stopped dancing. Christian noticed then that most everyone else around them had as well. He turned to where Eleanor had motioned for him to look near the center of the dance floor. Christian searched for whatever it was she was pointing to, but there were too many blocking his view.

Everyone's attention, it seemed, was focused there. He inched a bit closer and could see that there was a single couple dancing in the midst of the crowd. As he made his way around the onlookers, he soon saw the reason why. He wasn't surprised. Lord Whitly had a talent for drawing attention to himself, as an accomplished dancer, yes, but more so as a notorious rakehell. But in the next moment, Christian felt his breath give way when he noticed the lady with whom Lord Whitly was waltzing so finely.

It was his wife.

Christian fixed his stare on Grace as she glided smoothly through the steps of the dance. The skirts of her gown swept outward with her movements, her gloved hand resting lightly on Whitly's arm as he held her other hand in his. She moved as if she'd been born to waltz, her curls bouncing about her neck, and she was smiling, a smile more brilliant than he had ever seen her wear before. It was the sort of smile that should have been reserved for him, her husband, and not this stranger, especially not this well-known roué.

Christian noticed that several of the other guests around him were now watching him for his reaction, whispering conjecture. Conjecture, he knew, that often led to scandal. If he didn't proceed carefully, this could furnish the tea parlors of the whole of London with gossip enough for the next several days.

Christian relaxed his jaw, which he just realized he'd been clenching, and stood back until the first recess of the dance. When Whitly bent into a bow before Grace, Christian immediately began to applaud. He pasted on a smile that anyone would think was genuine, and even gave out a "Bravo!" Everyone around him soon quickly followed suit. Whitly turned and executed a second flourishing bow to the crowd while Grace smiled tentatively under the crowd's overwhelming admiration.

Christian then seized the opportunity to step forward and lay claim to his wife.

“That was lovely, my dear,” he proclaimed to everyone standing nearby. “True poetry in motion.” He took Grace’s gloved hand and kissed it. “I hope Lord Whitly won’t mind my taking his place through the next movement of the dance?”

Whitly wisely bowed his head. “Of course, Knighton. She is, after all, *your* wife—and a treasure at that. Lady Knighton, it was indeed a pleasure. Good evening, Knighton.”

Christian stood, watching Whitly’s prudent retreat with a smile that was more predatory than polite. He turned to Grace. “Shall we, my dear?”

Grace nodded just as the music resumed. Christian swept her close to him, his hand placed possessively at the small of her back, that same fixed smile on his mouth. They waltzed into the first several turns, a spectacle for all to see before the others around them slowly joined in on the dancing. He waited until he was certain they would not be overheard before speaking.

“I wasn’t aware you were acquainted with Lord Whitly.”

“I wasn’t,” Grace answered. “Catriona and Augusta just now introduced us. He seems a most amiable gentleman.”

“Gentleman, indeed.” Christian took her into a turn, leading them closer to the far end of the dance floor nearer to the terrace doors. “It is a good idea, Grace, to dance first with one’s husband after being wed. It can help to avert unnecessary conjecture.”

Grace stared at him. “And I would have, my lord, had my husband asked me to.”

Touché.

As he spun her into the next turn, Christian caught a breath of Grace’s fragrance, exotically unique. It immediately took him back to their first night together. He felt the palms of his hands grow hotter. He said, “That is an intriguing scent you wear, my lady.”

“It is a family recipe, my lord. A secret of sorts.”

“Indeed.” His pulse began to drum as if he had just run the length of the ballroom. He could hear it in his ears. He looked down at her, a fatal mistake, for in doing so, he was afforded an open view of her glorious cleavage. No doubt it had been the reason for Whitly’s smile. His breath caught and he felt his sex begin to swell beneath his breeches. Good God, he was a man of two-and-thirty, not some randy schoolboy. What the devil was wrong with him?

When next Christian turned in the dance, he faltered, taking the wrong direction. Grace had been unprepared for it and so when she stepped right, Christian went left. She lost her footing and fell directly against him, every inch of her pressed intimately against his. His response, or rather that of his body, was immediate.

“Good gracious,” Grace said.

An understatement to say the least.

Thankfully, they were just beside the door to the terrace, otherwise half of London society would have seen just how aroused Christian was for his new wife. Instead, he quickly recovered his footing and turned them both out onto the terrace.

As he closed the door behind them, Christian was thankful that it was a chill night and no one else had yet ventured from the ballroom. At that moment, he was beyond any thought but wanting Grace. He backed her against the far wall and pulled her against him, taking her mouth in a kiss that was fraught with impatience and lust. The curves of her body molded to his and he groaned into her mouth. She kissed him back. And the more he kissed her, the more he wanted her.

The more he *needed* her.

Christian tore his mouth away from hers, staring at her in the moonlight, searching for some sense of explanation for the almost enchanting effect she had on him.

Grace looked dazed. “Christian?”

“Come,” he said and he took Grace’s hand, striding across the terrace to the far side. At least he still had sense enough to

know he certainly couldn't take his wife there against the railing of a moonlit terrace. Blessedly, he found that the door to Robert's study was unlocked. He opened it, navigating their way in the darkness to the opposite side of the room. Grace said nothing, just followed behind him, the rustling of her skirts against the carpet the only sound between them.

Christian's pulse was pounding as he led her up the back staircase, one usually reserved for the Devonbrook servants. He went to the first bedchamber he could find, opened the door, and entered. He turned the key in the lock behind him. Then he turned to face his wife. He was breathing heavily. His body felt on fire. At that moment, he wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life.

“Grace.”

It was all he could manage to say before he had to take her against him again. He kissed her deeply while he slowly backed her across the room to the bed. He eased her down and then came over her, burying his face against her neck, inhaling the scent of her, his hands groping her everywhere, anywhere, all at once. He fumbled with the fastenings of his breeches, cursing himself aloud as he did.

“I am not a damned animal, Grace,” he said to himself more than to her. “I don't know why I can't seem to control myself. But I just need to feel you. Now.”

Grace looked at him, her eyes shining softly in the lamplight coming in through the window behind her. “I want to be close to you, too, Christian.”

Her words, so open, so accepting, only urged him on. This was not the way a man of his age and status in life made love to a woman, most especially to his wife. Nonetheless, his breeches were down around his ankles and he fell over her again, pulling at her skirts, searching through the layers of silken fabric, desperate to find her. When he had succeeded in pushing them up around her waist, he parted her legs. His heart was hammering now and he worked her with caresses until she was soft and sighing and needing him just as much as he needed her. He heard her gasp as her body responded to his

touch. He felt her body tense as she sought her release. He could scarcely breathe. He had to have her. He drew her against him then and entered her, his breath rushing out as he buried himself within her.

Within moments, he had realized his own climax.

Panting now, his forehead damp with perspiration, Christian held her against him, listening to her soft breathing against his ear. When next he regained his composure, even as he lay there atop her, he could not believe what he had just done. He had ravished his wife in a guest bedchamber at the home of one of his closest friends, while half of London danced in the ballroom beneath them, spilling his seed not just once—but now a second time. Somehow Christian knew, no matter where his grandfather was that night, he was grinning.

He suddenly felt sick inside.

Christian pulled himself away from Grace without a word. He stood to quickly fasten his breeches and set his clothing aright. He turned toward her. She lay there still, quietly watching him in the moonlight. One stocking was down around her ankle, and her hair was a tumbled mass of curls against the pillows. Her eyes were soft and totally filled with that same damned adoration she had looked on him with just moments before. She looked so damned beautiful that he felt even now a slight tightening in his groin.

Christian arranged her skirts back over her, noting unhappily that in his frantic assault, he had torn the edging of her gown. He didn't know himself anymore. He stared at Grace, and she him for several long moments.

Finally, he said, "I'm afraid we will not be able to return to the ball. I've quite ruined your coiffure."

Grace touched a hand to her disarranged curls. "It doesn't matter. I don't care about the ball. I am happy just to be with you."

Christian stiffened. These were not the words he needed to hear right then, not when he was cursing his grandfather for having brought him to that moment. While everything within

him wanted to return to the bed, to hold her again, he could not stop the thought of his grandfather and their bargain. The utter hatred he had spent the past two decades feeling for that man returned in a dousing of cold reality. Once again, the duke had bested him.

He said, almost in defeat, “I will notify my mother that we are leaving. I’ll see to retrieving our cloaks and calling for a carriage.” He looked at her. “Grace, I have no right to expect that you would understand—”

Christian never finished his thought. Grace had stood and gently placed her fingers to his lips. “*Shh*. Please don’t spoil this, Christian.”

Her eyes were shining brightly in the moonlight and her face was taken with a dreamy sort of expression. Why did she have to look at him like that, when he knew very well that he was not the man she thought him to be? He gently took her fingers away. “Grace, you do not realize it, but this is not the way relations are normally conducted between a man and a woman. Men who behave as I have, they are not gentlemen. A man should be able to control his impulses long enough to take a woman to a proper bedchamber and long enough so that she might at least remove her gloves.”

Grace looked at her hands then as if suddenly realizing she still wore them. She peered back at him. “But, Christian, this wasn’t terrible, not at all, nor was it even the first time on our wedding night. I’m sorry for whatever I did wrong to make you leave that night. It is just that I wasn’t aware it was going to hurt and it was only for a moment and everything else you had done up to that point—especially the kissing part—that had been so wonderful. And it didn’t hurt at all this time. What we shared, it startled me a little, but I think, at least I hope it brought me closer to you, too.”

Christian stared at her, incredulous at the fact that she was somehow blaming herself. He couldn’t believe she was apologizing to him for his having taken her virginity so badly. “Damnation, Grace...” He wanted to shake her, knock those fanciful thoughts right from her head. “I cannot tolerate this.

Don't you understand? I cannot stand for this to happen again!"

But she didn't understand. How could she?

"Christian, you are angry with me." She set her hand on his arm. "You are displeased that I danced with Lord Whitly instead of waiting for you to ask me. I shouldn't have listened to Catriona and Augusta. It was their idea. But it was a mistake. I know that now. I promise I will not do it again."

Christian closed his eyes, so frustrated with himself at having given over to his passion once again that he wanted to break something. Simply the thought of what he'd done—dragging her here from that crowded ballroom to a guest chamber in Robert's home, taking her as he did, and to completion once again, filled him with a sense of outrage that threatened to do him in. He was a marquess, the Marquess Knighton, heir to the esteemed dukedom of Westover. He had spent his life vowing to eschew all emotion, all feeling, to quash it beneath a blanket of indifference. For twenty years, he had cultivated this icy reserve that had served to keep him apart from the rest of the world throughout most of his life.

He didn't know what it was about this one woman that made him forget completely who he was, but whatever it was, this madness had to stop. He was determined that it would.

As he started for the door to make the arrangements for their swift departure, Christian drew on every ounce of detachment he could, hardening his heart against the memory of her eyes, her sweetness, while he made a silent vow to himself anew, one in which he would not fail.

If it meant he had to send her to the country, away from him, he was not going to break this vow he had made to himself.

Christian was not, under any circumstances, going to sleep with his wife again.

What, never?

No, never!

What, never?

Hardly ever!

-Sir William Schwenck Gilbert

Christian would repeat his vow of not bedding his wife again twice more over the course of the following fortnight. Each time he failed, he made the oath anew; each time he was just as determined to persevere in it.

And every time, he grew that much more embittered with himself.

Something had to be done about this madness.

Blessedly, for the past week, Grace had been occupied with preparations for hosting her first supper party. It had been Catriona's idea, apparently, a way for Grace to establish herself as a member of society. Other than to ask the advice of Eleanor or Lady Frances when necessary, or consult him on the guest list, Grace had embraced the venture wholeheartedly, as she would, taking it upon herself to make all the necessary arrangements. Invitations had been issued to well over a dozen guests—friends and associates of the Knighton family, as well as several principal society figures. Not one of the invitations Grace had sent had been declined—a good sign, yes, for it would seem to indicate she had been received well by the *ton*.

As he stood before his dressing mirror preparing for the evening's event, it wasn't the guest list or even what they would be serving that occupied Christian's thoughts. Instead, it was a peculiar message he'd received just two days before, an anonymous note that the Knighton butler, Forbes, had found lying upon the doorstep.

It was addressed to Christian and sealed only with a wafer, a *black* wafer, something customarily reserved for correspondence of mourning. The handwriting wasn't noticeably male or female, the stationery was indistinct, leaving it virtually untraceable. The message it contained was but a single phrase:

One can never know what it is to lose something precious until it is gone.

Frighteningly cryptic, the words written on the page were tinged with a good deal more insinuation than Christian cared to admit. He had read and reread the note a dozen times since, and each time it had given him the same sick feeling deep within his stomach. He would have considered canceling the supper party had it not already been too late. So instead, Christian told no one about the message, hoping he might discover its origin quietly and without causing anyone else alarm. What bothered him most was that he couldn't know for certain who or even what the letter pertained to; there were too many possibilities. No one in the household—Grace, Eleanor, Lady Frances, or himself—could be excluded from the thinly-veiled threat the message seemed to pose. And that left them all at risk, bringing Christian face-to-face with the very thing he had spent the past twenty years running from.

Was it possible someone else knew the truth about the past and had waited until now to reveal it?

After his marriage to Grace had taken place, and just when Eleanor was making her social debut...it couldn't have come at a more disastrous time.

Christian turned from the mirror as his valet, Peter, came into the room carrying Christian's newly polished boots.

“That coat looks fine on you, milord. A good choice, the dark blue.” He set the boots on the floor near the chair. “Will there be anything else, milord?”

Christian shook his head as the valet bowed and made to leave, adding as he went, “Lady Knighton asked me to tell you she would await you in the parlor with the other guests.”

Christian adjusted his cuff. “They’ve already begun to arrive?”

“Aye, milord. The Duke and Duchess of Devonbrook, and Lord and Lady Edenhall are here. Lady Frances and Lady Eleanor have gone down already as well. There were two or three carriages stopping at the front when I started up the stairs.”

Christian nodded. He quickly tugged on his boots, straightened his neckcloth in the mirror, then headed from the room, wishing he could put the menacing words from the mysterious message out of his mind for the night.

As he came down the stairs, he heard the sound of laughter and conversation coming from the formal parlor. He did not immediately go in, but stood just outside the door, peering quietly inside. As he studied the numerous faces inside the room, a terrible thought struck him. What if the author of the message was one of their guests who would attend that evening? Surely not the Devonbrooks or the Edenhalls, his closest friends, but a good number of the other guests had been acquaintances of his family back when his father had still been alive. What if one of them had known the truth all this time and had simply bided their time to present it?

As he surveyed the room, Christian spotted Grace near the fireplace, chatting with Augusta and Catriona. He paused a moment to take her in. The transformation over the past month of their marriage was remarkable. Gone was the meek, naïve country girl who had stood with trembling hands at the chapel altar in Little Biddlington. In her place now was a woman who was doing everything she could to successfully fulfill her new role as marchioness. He’d spotted the gown she had chosen to wear earlier that evening draped across the foot of her bed

when he'd passed her door. Pale lavender silk set with brilliants that glittered in the candlelight, he remembered thinking it would look lovely with her eyes. Indeed, he had been right.

If only he could have been as right about his ability to control his own lust.

Before the delivery of the message, Christian had considered the possibility of sending Grace and her maid away from London to Westover Hall for a while after the supper, to put her a distance away from himself while he figured out how he was going to find his way back to having a marriage in name only. Out of sight, out of mind, or so the saying would suggest. But sending her away now would no longer be possible, not when he needed to assure that she and the rest of the family stayed safe, in the face of that ominous message. If anything happened to any one of them because of it, because of *him*, he would never be able to live with himself.

At the sound of Eleanor's laughter, Christian looked and saw that his sister was standing off to the side of the room engaged in conversation. She, too, had blossomed over the past weeks and tonight looked radiant. Christian was pleased to see that she was enjoying herself—until he realized that the person she was chatting so happily with was Lord Herrick. His body tensed at the sight of the earl, and the casual, almost intimate manner with which he was speaking to Eleanor. Christian didn't recall having seen Herrick's name on the guest list when Grace had shown it to him. In fact, he distinctly remembered having looked for it to make certain the earl wouldn't be included.

Why, then, had Grace invited him?

Christian entered the room, working his way slowly toward his wife to ask her about it. His progress, however, was stopped several times by greetings from their guests.

"Knighton, good to see you," said Lord Rennington, an older earl who had been a member of his father's club. Lady Rennington was one of the few close acquaintances his mother had kept in town. They had known his family for over two

generations. He wondered, could either of them have been responsible for the message?

Christian paused a moment to exchange polite conversation, then broke away from the earl to join Grace. As he made his way around the room, he mentally catalogued the other guests present. Lord and Lady Faneshaw. Viscount Chilburn, newly wedded to his second wife. The Talbots. The Fairfields. The Sykes. Even Herrick. In truth, any one of them could have sent the note. He tried to remember if there had ever been anything mentioned among them that might indicate they knew more about the past than he'd thought. All he met with was a blank, virulent void.

“Christian,” Catriona said, noticing his approach, “I was just telling Grace that we must have the two of you up to Devonbrook Hall in the fall. You haven't yet seen the estate since it was rebuilt after the fire.”

Christian smiled, all politeness, in order to shield the tension stretching through his insides. “We would love to, Catriona. Set upon a date and we will be there.”

He touched Grace's arm to get her attention. “Now I hope you ladies won't mind if I borrow my wife for a moment? There is a matter to do with this evening's supper that I must discuss with her.”

As Catriona and Augusta nodded, Christian turned and walked with Grace across the room, leaving for the entrance hall. As soon as they were out of the parlor, his polite smile vanished. He attempted to subdue the irritation in his voice as he said, “Would you mind telling me just what in perdition Herrick is doing here?”

Grace looked startled at his harsh tone, glancing uneasily past Christian's shoulder to where Eleanor stood with the earl near the drinks table. “I...I had thought Eleanor would enjoy his company tonight. She talks of him so often.”

“His name was not on the guest list you gave to me.”

“I didn't think of inviting him until later. I had intended to tell you, but you haven't been at home much in the past

several days. I suppose I forgot. Is there some reason why I shouldn't have invited him?"

Christian frowned. "I just don't want Eleanor setting her cap on the first man she meets who shows an interest in her. I would prefer that she meet a number of gentlemen and not devote her attentions to just one so soon after her coming-out. But, it is too late now. The damage, at least for this evening, has been done."

Ignoring Grace's immediately wounded expression, Christian turned and left her standing in the hall, hoping that both the delivery of the cryptic message and Herrick's sudden presence in their lives were merely coincidental. Somehow, it didn't seem possible, and as he went back into the parlor, he hoped there wouldn't be any other unexpected guests that evening he didn't yet know about.



GRACE SAT at the far end of the long dining table set with various pieces of silver that gleamed from days of polishing in the candlelight. The service was impeccable, the room looked exquisite, and each course of the meal had been prepared to perfection. Yet there she sat, wondering to herself if the evening could be any more a disaster than it already was.

Everything that had felt promising about the evening earlier had disappeared behind the frown Christian still wore over his wine goblet as he sat opposite from her down the length of the table. His displeasure at discovering Lord Herrick was nothing compared to that at the guest who now sat to his immediate right.

Grace had thought that by inviting the old duke and seating him and Christian together, they might somehow be persuaded to talk to one another and perhaps even find a way to begin mending their rift. But again, she had erred. The unhappy looks Christian was sending her way only told her she couldn't have been more mistaken.

To make matters worse, the room was markedly silent. Supper parties were made for sparkling conversation, the reporting of news, the sharing of opinions and ideas. With the exception of the occasional request for salt or more wine, no one in the room was saying much of anything. The tension from their host had clearly set the tone. Instead, the others stared at one another across the table, occasionally glancing her way. Grace didn't know what she could do. Finally, blessedly, the amiable duchess, Catriona spoke up.

“Robert,” she said to her husband, “why do you not tell everyone about the fish little James caught when you took him trouting for the first time last month.”

As the duke began to relate the tale of their young son, Grace leaned toward Augusta, who sat at her left, and whispered, “Why aren't any of the others talking to one another?”

Augusta took a sip from her glass—a concoction of milk touched with cinnamon—a treat she found she craved now that she was with child, and which the Knighton cook had been all too happy to prepare for her. “I'm no expert on things pertaining to society—that was always my stepmother, Charlotte's forte—but I would guess they are not talking because before now, they have never been made to spend this much time in each other's company.”

Grace fretted her brow. “But I don't understand. I made certain to seat all the husbands and wives together.”

“That is precisely the dilemma, my dear.” Augusta nodded her head toward the other end of the table. “You see Lord Faneshaw there? He will not give his wife even the slightest nod of his attention, but he certainly has been throwing glances in Lady Rennington's direction three seats down and across from him. It is because typically at such events, the two of them are seated together.”

“They are?”

Augusta set down her spoon and said quite matter-of-factly, “Of course, dear. She is his mistress, after all.”

Grace covered her mouth with her napkin just quickly enough to stifle her gasp.

Augusta nodded. “And Lady Faneshaw is usually seated with Viscount Chilburn, whose new wife, Lady Chilburn is typically seated with Lord Sykes, for much the same reasons. Among the society set, a good many hostesses do not think it fashionable to seat a husband and wife together, which is why Catriona and I don’t normally attend such functions. We actually enjoy conversing with our husbands, but we are never seated together and thus are stuck with either a boor like Rennington, or a lecher like Chilburn.”

Grace could but shake her head in disbelief. “I had no idea. How stupid everyone must think me.”

“Not at all, dear,” Augusta went on. “I rather prefer your order to things. I am usually so very occupied in my observatory. I am awake in the evenings and rest during the day, so I don’t have the opportunity to see Noah as often as I’d like. Lately, I seem to be sleeping more and more, most likely because of the child. We have spent most of tonight catching up on what typically should be discussed over breakfast. It has been lovely to have this time where neither of us has to be off doing other things. So for that, I thank you. Don’t trouble over the others. Leave the situation to Catriona. By the time she gets through, you will have set a new trend in dinner seating arrangements.”

And as if in answer to her cue, the duchess spoke up again. “Lady Rennington, did you not tell me the night of our ball that your grandson, Charles, is quite the poet? I should love to read something he has written; I am such an admirer of verse. I wonder who he inherited the talent from—you, perhaps?”

“Oh, no, Your Grace,” the lady answered. “I was never one who did very well at poetry, but Lord Rennington, at one time, wrote the most wonderful verse. It has been so long since he last wrote any, I had nearly forgotten.”

“Now, don’t discredit yourself, dear,” her husband piped in. “When we were younger, you were quite the poetess yourself.”

The countess looked on her husband who was sitting beside her for the first time all evening. A flicker of long-forgotten tenderness passed between them, almost imperceptible, but that seemed almost to warm the room around them.

Lady Talbot chimed in then. “You know, Lord Talbot was also quite the artist at one time. He would send me the drawings he had made while on the Peninsula.”

“I was a young fool who was homesick,” said her husband, obviously uncomfortable with the soft subject matter.

“The letters you wrote were just as endearing. That is why I married you, Henry.”

Soon, they were all comparing memories of times and tenderness gone by. It was astounding. With the mention of that one small thing—a grandmother’s boast about her grandchild—Catriona had somehow reminded these people of what they had first been attracted to in one another. From then on, conversation throughout the meal was never lacking.

Later, after dinner, they retired to the parlor to play cards and enjoy music. Grace won two rounds, having been taught well by Nonny, who had been quite a cardsharp in her day. Eleanor then delighted them all with her flute playing, accompanied by Grace on the pianoforte. Eleanor’s talent was astounding. Grace had never heard the instrument played with such emotion and texture, much less by a lady; women were customarily relegated to the harp or pianoforte.

It was well past midnight when they stood at the door, bidding their guests farewell. Despite its worrisome and awkward beginning, the evening had ended up a veritable success.

Grace embraced Catriona as the Devonbrooks made to leave. “I cannot thank you enough for all your help this evening. I would hate to think of the disaster it would have been without you.”

“Nonsense, Grace, you don’t give yourself enough credit. You’re a wonderful hostess. It was you who made the evening

so pleasant for everyone. Some of them just needed their eyes opened to it, that's all."

Grace watched them walk to their carriage, then turned to her last guest. The butler, Forbes, was just helping the old duke with putting on his coat. Christian, she noticed, had absented himself.

"I thank you for coming, Your Grace," she said as he reached for her hand. "I hope your visit with us was pleasant."

"If only to see that I had been right about you from the start. I admit, child, I was a bit rough on you at first, but it is as I thought. You will make a fine duchess one day."

Grace smiled at him as he leaned forward to whisper to her, "A bit of advice, though, my girl. Don't waste your time trying to repair something when you don't know how deeply goes the break. Some things were just never meant to be."

Thinking his cane then, he covered his graying head with his hat, and shuffled off for his waiting carriage.

When the coach had pulled away, Grace closed the door and turned. She started when she noticed Christian suddenly standing behind her. He was leaning against the doorway to his study. His arms were crossed over his chest and his expression was shadowed.

"Brava, my lady," he said, but his voice held a sting. "You have succeeded in winning the approval of a man who I had thought patently untouchable."

His eyes grew flinty then. "Please don't make the mistake again of putting me in that same position you did tonight."

And with that, he turned, closing the study door firmly behind him.

What followed a moment later was the uncompromising sound of the lock being turned.

seventeen

*And darest thou then
To beard the lion in his den,
The Douglas in his hall?
And hopest thou thence unscathed to go?*
-Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion*

Grace glanced at the small clock that was tucked in the shadows of her bedside table. In the single beam of moonlight that shone through her chamber window, she could see its enameled face read three o'clock. Another hour had passed—a few hours more and it would be dawn—and still Christian had not come up to his bed.

Grace had purposely opened the door between their chambers so that she wouldn't miss hearing him when he came in. She'd even made certain to sit in the chair that faced onto his bed. They needed to talk. She had upset him tonight by inviting Lord Herrick and the old duke to supper. After Christian's sharp words to her in the hall earlier that evening, Grace knew she wouldn't find any peace in sleep without first talking to him, explaining her reasons, no matter how impolitic they might now seem.

For well over a month now, Grace had picked her way around Christian's sullen mood and guarded indifference, and she was no closer to figuring him out than she'd been that first morning when she'd met him at the marriage altar in Little Biddlington. They were husband and wife, and yet why did he

persist in avoiding being with her? Did he disapprove of her so much, did he think her an incompetent wife? She had tried to do the things she thought a marchioness should do. She took care with what she wore, where she went, whom she saw. Though she sometimes erred, in the long run, she felt she was learning, even succeeding, for in spite of his indifference, there were rare times when Christian would compliment her on her efforts, and then there had been the few times he had come to her and taken her into his arms, filling her with kisses and touching her more deeply than she could have ever imagined.

But then afterward, in the moments when they should be closest to one another, he would always pull away from her so abruptly, and then she wouldn't see him for days. She had tried and tried to figure why, but seemed only to end up asking the same question: What was it about her that continually made him turn away?

Well, the time had come for answers, and since Christian was making no attempt to come to her, she would simply have to go to him. Grace slipped on her dressing robe, belting it at her waist. She blew out her candle and headed for the door.

The hall outside her chamber was dark, quiet, the doors on Lady Frances' and Eleanor's chambers long closed for the night. As the tall case clock in the hall chimed the quarter hour, Grace padded her way slowly to the stairs in the faint light shining in through the high hall window. When she reached the bottom step, she saw the barest flicker of firelight shining from under the door to Christian's study. She hesitated, staring at the door, contemplating what she would say to him.

He would be difficult. He would resist her efforts to talk, but she told herself she would have to be firm. They simply couldn't go on as they were.

Taking a deep breath, Grace placed her hand upon the door handle, hoping it wasn't still locked. Slowly she turned, and heard it click to open. She took the first step inside.

Christian sat in one of the wing chairs in front of the fire, his brandy cupped in his palm as he stared into the sluggish flames. He'd removed his coat, had rolled the sleeves of his

shirt over his forearms. His cravat was loose and hanging about his neck and he had opened the first several buttons of his shirt. His hair was ruffled from the numerous times he had undoubtedly raked his fingers through it—a habit Grace had noted—as he'd sat there, alone in the dark, unwilling to go upstairs lest he should make love to his wife.

“Christian?”

He jerked his head around at the sudden sound of the very woman who was tormenting him. The abruptness of his movement set some of the brandy in his glass to splashing over the side and onto his fingers. He hadn't heard her come in. For a moment, he wondered if he had completely lost his mind, conjuring her up in his thoughts somehow.

And then she moved, and he knew she was real.

Grace came to stand before him in the low light from the ebbing fire, her hair falling loosely around her shoulders, looking so damned decadent in her white virgin's nightrail buttoned up to her chin. A picture flashed to his mind's eye then, a memory of how he had painstakingly opened those same buttons the last time he had gone to her bed. He pushed the image away.

She came forward, her toes bare against the carpet. She tucked the weight of her hair behind one ear and with that one simple gesture, he already felt the muscles in his stomach tighten, just as they did whenever he was about to lose all sense and reason and break his vow not to bed her. He had to do something. He had to stop himself from failing yet again. He fought to control his desire with the only defense he had in his arsenal: his anger.

“Go back to bed, Grace,” he said, his voice almost a growl before he turned back to the fire, waiting for her to leave, vanish, go back by whatever means she had used to come there. He'd been thinking about her all night, thinking about the things that intrigued him about her, and the danger her life was now in because of him. It pained him to think she might be the one targeted by that threatening message.

“No, Christian, I will not leave this time.”

He stared at her. “What did you say?”

“We need to talk.”

Her eyes had a light of determination in them he'd not seen before and he knew she was not about to be daunted by him. But he was not in the mood for talking. What he was in the mood for was to haul her to the carpet and take her in front of the fire, lose himself in the goodness she always, always offered him, and try to forget the misery that had been his life. And she would allow him to, because to her romantic thinking, it meant that he must care—and he knew very well that couldn't be. Caring meant feeling. Feeling meant vulnerability. And vulnerability meant weakness, something he had learned long ago he could never fall victim to.

The results could be—murderous.

“Perhaps another time, madam. I am occupied at the moment.”

Again, he waited for her to leave.

Again, she did not.

“Christian, what have I done to displease you so? You are so obviously annoyed with me. Is it because I invited your grandfather to supper tonight? You must know I only had good intentions in doing so.”

“There are no good intentions where he is involved.”

Grace took a step closer. “I do not know what it is that has caused you to hate him as you do. I wish I did know. Perhaps then I could understand it. I only know it has something to do with the death of your father.”

At the mention of his father, Christian's vision went black. “What did he tell you?”

He would kill the old bastard himself if he had dared to—

“Your grandfather said nothing. It was Mrs. Stone who told me that your rift with the duke was struck when you lost your father.”

He muttered to the fire, “Servants would do well to remember who pays their wages and hold their tongues accordingly.”

“I asked her, Christian. She did not offer the information to me unsolicited. And I only asked because I wanted to help you.”

“Do not pry into matters that don’t concern you, Grace. I don’t need your help.”

She came closer still, to where she was standing just beside his chair. He could feel the warmth of her and she wasn’t even touching him. Already her scent seemed to fill the air.

“I know what it is to lose a parent, Christian. I lost mine, too.”

A strange feeling, like kinship, came upon him at her compassionate words. Could he tell her? Did he dare? He felt himself starting to yield inside and fought against it, unwilling to leave go of the painful secret he had kept safely locked within him so long now. If he told her, she would know the truth about him. She would know who she had really married, not the noble heir, but a murderer. He couldn’t bear the thought of seeing the look of horror, of revulsion in her eyes. So, instead, he said, “You can know nothing of how I feel.”

“Christian, I am your wife. I care about you.”

“How can you care about a mu—”

Christian could only thank blind benevolence for stopping him before he could finish saying the word: *Murderer*. He closed his eyes, fighting to gain control of the emotions that were threatening to choke him. *You must not tell her*. After a moment or two, his pulse began to calm, he was able to breathe steadily again.

He said, his voice markedly quieter, “How can you claim to care for a man you know nothing about? Who is my favorite artist, Grace? What is my favorite color? Do you know how I take my tea? Do you even know the date of my birth?”

He looked and saw that Grace’s eyes were no longer pleading and soft. Instead, she stared at him, utterly resolute,

and said, “Milk, no sugar, and September the twenty-third.”

He stared at her in disbelief.

“I took note of one and asked your sister the other, and I might know the other two if you had but allowed me to. I didn’t expect to learn everything about you in the handful of occasions we have been together since we wed. We were married before we knew each other very well—”

“Very well?” Christian scoffed. “Madame, we did not know each other at all.”

“Other marriages have begun with just as little acquaintanceship and they somehow manage to succeed. I knew when I agreed to be your wife that we would need time to get to know one another. I had thought we would spend some time together in order to do just that. Did you not think the same?”

In a perfect world, that might have been true. But Christian’s world was far from perfect and he couldn’t allow the burden of his misery to ruin another life. No, he had to keep Grace from getting close to him, because getting close would mean getting hurt. Perhaps even killed. She had to stop rhapsodizing on girlish whims of romance and love, marriage and devotion. She had to face the fact that he was not this *beau ideal* she’d made him out to be. What she needed was a healthy dose of reality. The sooner she realized she had not married the perfect gentleman she believed she had, the white knight, all the better it would be for her.

“You are too much of a dreamer, Grace. Don’t you understand? I did not marry you because of some magical destiny that was written for us centuries ago. I did not read your name in the stars. Nor did you come to me through the prophetic ether of a dream. I married you, quite simply, because I had to. Because you were chosen for me by another.” He stared at her and then added, “Quite frankly, Grace, you could have been anyone.”

Every word he spoke struck Grace a telling blow, taking some small part of the light from her eyes until all that remained were broken clouds. Grace blinked a few times, as if

hoping the clouds would clear. She was fighting back tears, her lip was trembling. Finally she said, her voice no louder than a whisper, "I am sorry for having taken your time. sir."

She turned and walked slowly from the room, her step heavy, her arms hanging defeatedly at her sides. And as Christian watched her go, he could only think that his grandfather should be so very proud, for Christian had now become the very model of him, the man he'd spent a lifetime hating. He swallowed back his revulsion at the realization, at the terrible shame he felt for the words he'd just spoken to her. He was now well and truly a heartless bastard, and thus finally worthy to hold the title of Duke of Westover.

eighteen

*I am pressed to say why I loved him,
I feel it can only be explained by replying:
'Because it was he; because it was me.'*

-Montaigne

When Grace emerged from her bedchamber the following morning, it was later than her usual waking hour. Rather than breaking her fast in the parlor, with the usual biscuits and toast and sometimes eggs, she had taken her morning tea in bed, lingering there, listening to the sounds of Christian moving about in his chamber adjoining hers. She didn't attempt to speak to him again. She heard his footsteps on the hall passing her door, stopping there, and her breath caught as she stared at her door. She waited to see if he would knock.

He didn't.

Instead, after a moment, he continued on past, down the stairs, where he stopped to speak to Forbes before leaving the house.

Grace stood at the window, watched through the glass as he climbed into the Knighton coach, where he no doubt ordered Parrott to take him to his club, White's. He never once looked up to see her there.

As she stood in the doorway to his study now, it could almost seem as if the things he'd said the previous night had never been spoken. The darkness and shadow that had closed

in on her but a handful of hours earlier had vanished in the light of day. The fire was naught but a gray pile of ash. No imprint of his body even remained in his chair. Still nothing could take away the harsh memory of Christian's words to her—even now they echoed through her thoughts.

Quite frankly, Grace, you could have been anyone...

From the moment Grace had first seen Christian, staring up at him from where she had fallen at his feet in his dressing room the night of the Knighton ball, she had known in her heart that he was the one Nonny had spoken of to her, her perfect knight, the man she would love for the rest of her life. He could chide her for being a dreamer, but no dream had ever been so clear, so absolutely known. It had been just as Nonny had told her it would be—a realization that for as long as she might live, the man who would hold her heart would be this man. Without question. Without doubt.

Only Nonny hadn't told Grace what she should do when her knight didn't love her in return.

And Christian did not love her, that was clear. He didn't even much like her, she thought. Knowing this didn't lessen her love for him in any way, but with the dawning of the new day, her tears barely dried upon the linen of her pillow, came another realization upon Grace, as clear as the certainty of her love for Christian.

No matter how much she might love him, how much she might want him to love her in return, he never would. He just wouldn't.

Only in the moment that he had spoken those words to her had Grace come to accept the truth she had seen shadowing Christian's eyes every day of their brief and unfortunate marriage. There had always been something—something odd, something so obviously missing. Only now did she realize what it was.

Christian had been forced to wed her by his grandfather, the duke, unhappily and unwillingly. Despite the fact that her uncle had arranged the match for Grace, ultimately, she had made the decision to become Christian's wife. She had wanted

it—heavens, she had thrown her all into it. She had never considered that Christian might not have been a willing participant. She had been so taken with the idea of spending the rest of her life with the handsome, charming man she had met at the Knighton ball, so lost to the myth of Nonny's promises, she had never thought of what he might be thinking, what he might be feeling—or as it were, what he might be *not* feeling.

Now that Grace realized the truth of the feelings he had tried so carefully to conceal from her, she was left with but one more thought:

How on earth she was going to spend the rest of her life living with him, seeing him, being near to him, knowing he had never wanted her in his life?

It was the thought Grace had spent the early morning hours mulling through in her bedchamber. Over and over she saw Christian's face lit by the fire in his study the night before, the dullness in his eyes as he had spoken those words.

You could have been anyone...

It left her feeling emptier inside than she had ever thought possible.

Her parents had preferred to travel the world, leaving her behind to be raised by someone else, stopping for a visit now and again to remark on how much she'd grown as if it were more an obligation than a treat. Uncle Tedric, in the role of her guardian, had sought to dispose of her through the most lucrative and most rapid means he could find. Even Nonny, who had been the sole constant in her life, had eventually gone, and with her the only life Grace had ever known. And now Christian, too—Grace had to wonder if perhaps it was simply her lot in life to be abandoned by those whom she loved, those who should have loved her.

Much later that afternoon, near the supper hour, Grace sat in the parlor alone. The house was silent, for everyone else had gone out, and the atmosphere was solemn as if the very walls realized the futility of her future. Her afternoon tea had grown cold in its pot on the table beside her. The book she had been

attempting to read the past hour lay face down on the seat beside her. Christian hadn't returned all day and, according to Forbes, he hadn't said when or even if he would. For the barest of moments, Grace had wondered that perhaps he might be off elsewhere, with someone else, someone whose presence hadn't been forced upon him, but instead someone he had chosen freely. Even though she knew it was a thing considered quite normal among the *ton*, the taking of a lover, the idea of Christian touching another woman so intimately, bestowing on someone else the only affection he had ever shown her, caused her throat to tighten even as tears came to her eyes.

She pushed the thoughts away and took up her book once again, Virgil's *Aeneid*. She sought to distract herself with reading—anything to put a stop to the thoughts that had darkened the entirety of the day. Perhaps Virgil could offer some answers.

She promptly opened to a single, telling line: '*Fata viam invenient.*'

She whispered aloud its meaning in English. "Fate will find a way."

In what seemed the very next moment, there came a knocking at the door. Grace looked up from the page just as Forbes opened the parlor door.

"My lady, pardon my interruption, but there is a visitor for you. A Mr. Jenner."

"Jenner?" She shook her head. "I'm afraid I do not know such a person."

Forbes came forward to deliver the man's card on a silver salver, bowing his head. "He presented this to me with his request to see you."

Grace took the card up, reading its inscription.

Charles Jenner, Solicitor.

"Perhaps you misheard him, Forbes. I would think, given his vocation, he would need to speak with Lord Knighton, not me."

“He stated your name quite clearly, my lady. In fact, he referred to you as the former Lady Grace Ledys of Ledysthorpe.”

Curious, Grace asked Forbes to show the man in. At the very least, the visit would provide a much needed diversion. She set aside her book and the teacup, and stood to meet her caller.

Mr. Charles Jenner, solicitor, was a short man, stout, with spectacles that made his eyes appear quite a bit larger than they actually were. He was dressed as a member of his profession, brown frock coat over nankeen trousers, a beaver hat, and square-toed shoes with high quarters lacing up the front. He stopped just after entering the room and smiled, bowing his head in greeting. “Good day, Lady Knighton. Thank you for consenting to see me without an appointment.”

Grace nodded and motioned for him to sit, then lowered into the seat across from him. She asked Forbes to bring a fresh pot of tea and waited while Mr. Jenner removed a sheaf of papers from the satchel he carried with him.

“Lady Knighton, I shan’t take up much of your time. I have simply come with some documents requiring your signature.”

“Documents, sir? For me?”

“Aye, my lady. It is for the transfer of the property.”

Grace nodded then, her initial suspicions confirmed. “It is as I thought, Mr. Jenner. You should be meeting with my husband, Lord Knighton, or perhaps his solicitor. They have handled the particulars of my dower.”

Mr. Jenner shook his head, shuffling through his papers. “Oh, no, my lady, it is not a dower property I speak of. I come about a family holding that has been held until now in trust for you. It was previously held by your grandmother, my former employer, Lady Cholmeley. It was to become yours upon your marriage.”

Grace was confused. “But I understood that all of the Ledys family holdings are entailed to my uncle, Tedric, Lord

Cholmeley.”

“Oh, this is not a Ledys holding, my lady. It is a MacRath property.”

“MacRath? That was my grandmother’s family name.”

“Aye, my lady. ‘Tis through her that you have received this, a gift of real property, to be transferred to you upon your marriage.”

In all the times they had spoken of the future and Grace’s eventual marriage, Nonny had never said a thing to her of any property that would come to her. Obviously, she must have known of it. “But where is the property located, Mr. Jenner?”

“Let me see.” He shuffled through his papers a bit more. “It is a Scottish property, called Skynegal.”

“*Skeen-ghial*,” Grace repeated.

“Aye, my lady. It is the ancestral home of your grandmother’s family, located on Loch Sgiathach in the coastal north Highlands area of Wester Ross. Oh, and there is a letter for you here from your grandmother.”

Grace took the folded parchment from Mr. Jenner. Her breath caught as she read her name written in the familiar script of her grandmother’s hand. She felt a strange frisson, not unlike a chill, that reached to her fingers as she tightened them around the letter.

“Will you please excuse me a moment, Mr. Jenner? I think I should like to read my grandmother’s letter in private.”

The man nodded and Grace thanked him, leaving the room. Forbes was just coming from the kitchen with the tea tray and she instructed him to serve their guest while she crossed the hall to Christian’s study and closed the door. She sat on a bench nearest the window and slipped her finger beneath the imprinted seal to open her grandmother’s letter. Her fingers trembled a little as she began to read the words contained within.

My dearest child, if you are reading this letter then I have gone on to meet my loved ones in heaven. I hope you are not

grieving, dear, because I have long waited for this time. I shall miss you, of course. You have grown to be a lovely young woman, very much like myself at your age. You have been my only happiness since I lost my children, your father and mother, but I find myself growing more tired each year that passes. I welcome my eternal rest.

Since I have charged Mr. Jenner with bringing you this letter, you have also just learned of Skynegal and your inheritance of it. The name of the estate is derived from the native Gaelic, 'Sgiathach,' which means the 'winged' castle, and when you first see it, you will understand why. I had hoped to one day take you there myself, to see my great-grandchildren running about the same hills I ran about as a child, but if that is not to be, then I must charge you with the task. Skynegal is my own personal gift to you. It was my home as a child and a very special place. 'Twas here my own knight first came to me, where we danced, and where I knew he would be my only love.

Not long after I married your grandfather, Skynegal was left unoccupied. It was to have gone to your father and mother, and through them, to you, but as you know, that was not to be. Over the years, I have received news of the estate accounts and have done what I can to maintain it from afar. It is my dearest wish that you will do what I could not and use your special talents to see Skynegal restored to the special place it once was.

There is an account of substantial size that has been set aside to enable you to bring this wish to pass. Skynegal is a part of you, my dearest—your past and your future. It is your heritage and it is now my gift to you. Trust that it is there you shall find what you are looking for.

Now as ever...your dearest grandmama, Nonny.

Grace folded the letter carefully. She didn't immediately get up to leave the study. She turned instead to look out the window, staring down at the street, watching the carriages and the people passing by. A bird chirped happily from a nearby elm. A dog barked. Moments passed as she listened to the

sounds of life outside and thought over the words her grandmother had written to her.

Trust that it is there you shall find what you are looking for...

And in that moment, it all came clear to her. All of her life Grace had felt as if something were missing—some plan, a destiny that she was meant to fulfill. All her life she had known a niggling sense of searching, but she had never known what it was she was searching for. There had been an emptiness deep within her that at first she had attributed to the loss of her parents, and then later to Nonny. When she married Christian, she had thought that she could fill that emptiness with him, with being his wife, loving him, bearing his children, finally being a part of a family instead of someone left behind by the memories of one. But perhaps that hadn't been her purpose after all.

Grace believed that for everything in life—from the fiercest lion to the tiniest mouse —there was a purpose. *“Things happen for a reason,”* Nonny had always said. *“They take us further down the road we were fated to walk.”*

When she had been a child, Grace could recall having come dangerously close to losing her fingers when she'd been playing near some of the farm equipment. She had been reckless, racing about in the tool shed, upsetting an axe that had been leaning against a wall. But for some reason, when the axe had fallen, it buried its blade but a half inch from her fingers. Grace could recall having stared at the axe blade stuck in the ground so close to her hand and thinking how foolish, how careless she had been. For if her fingers had been but an inch further forward, she would have lost them and would never then have known her love of sketching, her joy at playing the pianoforte.

There were other things, too. At a time when young girls played with dolls and tiny china tea sets, Grace had only been interested in building blocks. She had studied the engravings of the master architects—Wren, Adam, Inigo Jones. Later, when she had grown older and had taken to sketching, it was not birds and flowers that filled her sketch books, but

buildings—houses, churches, follies—whatever structure that might have captured her eye. At ten years, when she might have been spending her daylight hours learning various dance steps and needlepoint stitches, Grace was designing a tree house. She had spent hours planning it, sketching and then resketching it, until it was just as it should have been, complete with sash windows and a dumbwaiter.

With Nonny's encouragement and the help of some of the estate workers, Grace saw that same tree house constructed atop a grand oak tree along the banks of the River Tees at Ledysthorpe, where it still stood today. It had been Grace's special place, where she had gone to dream and reflect while the birds had perched in the branches beside her. She remembered how she would look out from her treetop tower with the periscope her father had gifted her with, wishing for her parents to return off the North Sea, miraculously alive once again.

All of her life, no matter how she'd tried, Grace hadn't been able to conform to the image of what she should have been—the accomplished lady able to sing sweeter than a bird and dance as if the wind was at her feet. She realized now that she had spent all that time trying to be a person that in her heart she knew she could never be. It had taken her marriage to Christian, and the failure she had become as his wife, for her to finally realize the truth she had been avoiding for as long as she could recall.

Only now it was suddenly so clear.

Use your special talents to see Skynegal restored.

The words her grandmother had written were like the opening of a door, a door to her future. No more would she avoid it, refusing to heed the call. It was time she took charge of her life instead of blithely following the wrong, albeit the “proper” path.

It was time Grace made her destiny.

She finally left the study sometime later and returned to the parlor where Mr. Jenner still awaited. He looked up from

his tea, his mouth crumbed with one of the cook's lemon biscuits, and smiled warmly at her.

“Mr. Jenner, I thank you for waiting. I am ready to sign the papers you have brought to me.”

As the solicitor began setting out the documents for her on the table, she went on, “After we are finished, I wonder if I might trouble you to remain a bit longer? There is a matter I should like to discuss with you.”

“A matter, my lady?”

“Yes. I should like to hire you, sir, to act as my personal solicitor for the estate of Skynegal. There is something I should like to do, but I must warn you it is a matter that will require some delicacy and a great deal of fortitude on your part, for there may be opposition, namely on the part of my husband. He is an influential man, sir. His grandfather, the Duke of Westover, is even more influential. I do not know you, sir,” Grace went on, “but I can see that my grandmother trusted you and that is enough to recommend you to me. Would you be willing to help me?”

Mr. Jenner didn't immediately respond. For a moment, Grace thought that he might refuse her. The Wycliffes were, after all, one of the most powerful families in England. Few would dare oppose them for fear of the reprisal. The longer the solicitor remained silent, the more Grace convinced herself he would decline.

A few moments later, however, Mr. Jenner stood and extended his hand toward her. “I have always been a man inclined to a challenge, my lady. Serving your grandmother through the years I did was one of the greatest tasks of my professional life. She was a true and remarkable woman. You remind me of her somehow. Thus, I would be honored to be of service to you, my lady, in whatever capacity you seek.”

Two days later, Grace was gone.

part two

Adieu, She cries! and waved her lily hand.

-John Gay (1685-1732)

*The distance is nothing;
it is only the first step that is difficult.*

-Madame Du Deffand

Wester Ross, Scottish Highlands

The castle known as Skynegal lay nestled inland off the Minch, a restless sea channel separating the Hebrides from the Scottish coast amid a copse of oak and Caledonian pine, in a small cove along the pebbled shores of Loch Sgiathach. To some, this remote part of Scotland was considered primitive and wild—far too uncivilized for the Bond Street set. But to Grace, it was as beautiful a land as she could have ever imagined, vividly splashed with blues and greens, purples and pinks—majestic mountain and heather-swept hill flanking a landscape as diversely patterned as any tartan.

She had left London with her maid Liza nearly a fortnight earlier, after leading the Knighton servants to believe she was going out on a visit to see her uncle, Lord Cholmeley. They would have found out soon after that she had never arrived at Cholmeley House. Instead, she had taken a hackney coach to the offices of Mr. Jenner at Lincoln's Inn, and from there had gone to meet the post chaise that would start them on their journey.

The two women had traveled first by land across the midlands of England to Liverpool, then north by sea, since few roads ran through the rocky Highland terrain, and certainly

none wider than a pony trail as far north as Wester Ross. It had been a long, tiresome journey and the weather had only hindered their progress, raining nearly every day since they'd left London. Yet, despite her fatigue, Grace found herself standing on the deck of the small packet boat that brought them to the close of their voyage, captivated by everything that surrounded them.

Early that morning, the skies had cleared and a brisk Scottish wind blew chill against her nose and cheeks now, filled with a scent that seemed to characterize the Highlands—earthy heather, the salt sea wind, and the fragrant pine of the tall conifers. They passed a scattering of small cottages set beneath heavily thatched roofs that gave them the appearance of large mushrooms dotting the rocky shoreline. Word of the sloop's sighting spread quickly from one to the next, bringing the crofters outside to curiously watch the unfamiliar vessel skimming its way past on the rippling waters of the loch. Dogs barked in excitement, children waved, running barefoot to the water's edge as if to give chase. Shaggy orange Highland cattle barely gave them a moment's glance before returning their attention to the pasture beneath them.

Fed by the sea, the loch was studded by a string of small islands, each thickly wooded and ringed by the mist that skirted the water's surface. Rugged shoreline stretched farther than the eyes could see, and several small herring boats floated like bobbing apples in the distance. At the farthest end of the loch, like a doorkeeper to this mystical retreat, rose the gray stone tower of Skynegal.

From the moment its silhouette first took shape through the mist, the castle had brought Grace to drawing in her breath in wonder. It stood in a setting older than time and looked every bit as magical as she could have ever imagined it, filled with rich history—*her* family history. It was a place to which she could finally belong.

Atop a high slope, or *leathad* as the boatman called it, the main tower house had a steeply pitched roof and was flanked on either side by smaller towers, no doubt added at a later date. It was these two towers, outstretched to the sides, that

gave the castle its Gaelic name, *Sgiathach*—the winged castle. The closer one came, the more vivid the image grew, until it appeared as if the wing towers were somehow fluttering. Kittiwakes and terns were everywhere, hundreds of them, stark white against the weathered stone, perched upon the tower parapets, soaring overhead, nesting in the crenelles, calling out in noisy welcome to them.

“‘Tis beautiful,” Grace said aloud to no one in particular.

It was as the sloop pulled aground upon the pebbly beach that Grace caught her first notice of the crumbling stone walls and overgrown brush. They disembarked, trudging up the weed-thickened path from the shore to stand beneath the main tower. Grace craned her neck and saw the keep rose at least six stories, her gaze flitting past windows with weather-beaten casements that hung unhappily off rusted hinges, broken glazing blinking at them in the fading daylight. It was more ruin than dwelling, and even the cries of the birds looking down on them seemed suddenly mournful, as if bemoaning the castle’s sad state of neglect.

Grace chewed her lip as she studied the structure, but she wasn’t discouraged. Perhaps the castle was not as grand as some might expect, but with a bit of work to bring it back to its former splendor, Skynegal would soon soar again.

She looked past Liza, who stood beside her, to the two men who’d accompanied them there from Mallaig. McFee and McGee had met the two women at the dock, bearing a letter signed by the ever-resourceful Mr. Jenner. He had hired the men, he’d written, to guide them along the last leg of their journey into the Highlands. They would remain at Skynegal to help Grace to settle in afterward.

They presented a peculiar picture. Each man was draped in a differing tartan to the other, and their noses were reddened from exposure to the sea winds. The bottom halves of their faces were hidden behind full shaggy beards—one red, the other peppered gray. The only way Grace had managed to successfully tell them apart during their journey was to remind herself over and over again that McFee had the beard that was

fire-red, and McGee had the beard that was *pepper-gray*. A simple method, yes, but it worked.

With them had come the stout Flora, a woman who wore a perpetually serious expression set beneath mud brown hair that was scraped back beneath a linen kerchief. She was sister to one of the two men and had yet to utter a single word since leaving Mallaig two days earlier. While McGee and McFee would see to the provisioning of the castle with adequate peats for burning and the purchase of necessary foodstuffs and livestock, Flora would undertake any needed household tasks until other staff could be arranged for.

“Please, my lady,” Liza said to Grace then, “please tell me they’ve got it wrong. Tell me this broken pile of rocks cannot be the right place.”

Grace glanced at Liza before asking politely, “Excuse me, sirs? You are quite certain this is Skynegal?”

McGee grinned at her, scratching his grizzled head beneath his tattered blue bonnet. “Aye, my leddy, I sure ye ‘tis *Skee-na-gall*, it is.”

McFee nodded his agreement from behind the swirling smoke of his clay pipe, stroking his fiery beard as he said, “Dunna t’ink ‘tis changed a’sudden. Been *Skee-na-gall* for nigh on six hunder years, it has.”

“Aye, and looks as if it hasn’t been lived in for at least that long either,” Liza muttered.

Flora, of course, said nothing.

Grace turned once again to regard the structure, this time looking on what had been her grandmother’s childhood home with the even more discriminating eye of someone who had studied a good many buildings in years past.

It stood, of course, in dire need of improvements, first and foremost a roof, at least a complete one, for what was there seemed to be disintegrating in patches. The curtain walls would require immediate repair where they were crumbling, and the windows would have to be replaced. Grace could not see anything further of the actual structure because the sun

was setting behind them, casting the tower in a bit of a haze. A good deal of what she could see of it was covered by an overgrowth of ivy that crept along the weathered stone walls. Grace frowned, brow knit as she cocked her head slightly to the side, staring at the places where the stone was crumbling away. She wondered that perhaps it was the ivy that was keeping the castle standing altogether.

“Won’t make it any better looking at it that way,” Liza commented.

“Well, it cannot be completely devastated. Mr. Jenner said there has been a steward living here at all times. Perhaps it is time we met him.”

Grace proceeded toward the nearest door she could find, small and inconspicuous on such a large structure, with a heavy iron ring hanging from its center. When she lifted the ring, it screeched as if it hadn’t been moved since the castle’s first stone had been set, and flecks of black fluttered from it to the toes of her half boots.

Not a good sign, she thought as she dropped the knocker back against the door with a resounding *thunk*.

They waited to the accompanying sound of the sea and the perpetual *ock-ock-ock* of the birds perched in the various apertures above them. When there came no answer to her knocking, Grace looked to Liza. The maid raised a skeptical brow, but wisely said nothing. Grace tried the door again, this time whacking the ring several times against the solid wood of the door. Moments passed. Again no response. Grace could hear McFee and McGee shifting behind her. “Odd,” she murmured, “I’m certain Mr. Jenner had said that—”

The door scraped open suddenly and a figure presented itself in the doorway. He was short and round and really quite bald, reminding Grace immediately of the childhood story of Humpty Dumpty—a Humpty Dumpty in tartan, she amended, wearing a suit of crisscrossed red and white straining across an expansive girth, skin tight trews covering his quill-thin legs down to his buckled leather shoes.

The man took one look at them and immediately turned his back to them.

“Hoy, Deirdre,” he shouted to the castle interior, “you were right! Someone has come to visit us. Come, come help me to greet our guests!”

He was joined by a petite woman, perhaps four and a half feet tall, who wore an earthy-hued plaid cut long on her slight body, wrapped around her shoulders with the fringed ends of it trailing upon the stone floor. Her face was one by which age was not easily determined—she was somewhere, Grace guessed, between twenty and forty. Her hair was completely hidden beneath an elaborately knotted kerchief, and she wore full faded skirts that might once have been black beneath a bluish shirt, cut not unlike a man’s waistcoat. Her feet, Grace noticed, were bare on the stone floor underneath.

“Welcome, welcome to Skynegal,” said the man of the pair, coming forward to greet them. “I am Alastair Ogilvy, the castle steward, and this is Deirdre Wyllie. Deirdre is a widow to one of the former tenants here and she comes to keep house at Skynegal.”

Grace nodded, smiling to the woman.

“And who do we have the pleasure of knowing?” asked Mr. Ogilvy, his curiosity beaming on his rotund face.

“She’s the newly come leddy of Skynegal,” Deirdre answered even before Grace could respond.

Alastair turned an expression of astonishment on the small woman. “You knew this afore she told it to us, eh, Deirdre? How’d you do it? Was it the sight, Deirdre? Did the spirits tell you this, lass?”

Deirdre shook her head. “Nae, Alastair. I’ve told you and told you I dinna have this ‘sight’ you keep buffing on about.” She tucked her hand inside her plaid and took out a folded letter. “‘Twas this letter that was delivered yestreen.”

Alastair took the letter and read it quickly, his dark eyes growing large over the top of the parchment. “Och, Deirdre, why did you not tell me afore now that the lady of Skynegal

was to be coming?” Before she could reply, he bowed his head reverently to Grace. “My lady, please forgive me for not having greeted you properly afore you could reach the door. I wasn’t aware of your coming, else I would have been watching the loch for you to arrive.”

Grace shook her head. “There is nothing to forgive, Mr. Ogilvy. I prefer not to stand on ceremony. But might we come in and sit a spell? We’ve been traveling for some time and I think we’re all nearly ready to drop from exhaustion.”

“Hoy!” Alastair put both hands atop his bald head. “Where are my manners? Of course! Please, my lady, please come in! All of you!”

He moved quickly for a man of his width, taking them down a narrow corridor and up two rounded flights of stairs, chattering apologies all the way. They arrived at a cavernous room that rose easily two stories, nearly as wide as it was high. Grace heard several small birds chirping above, where they had no doubt nested in the great hammered beams that traversed the cracked and crumbling plaster ceiling.

The scene of many a Highland feast, the great hall had once played host to Robert the Bruce himself. According to Mr. Ogilvy, the original tower had been constructed in the twelfth century, the side wings much later. The tower birds had been residents from the very beginning.

“Legend has it that long afore a castle was ever built at this place, the Celtic goddess Cliodna came to visit. She was beautiful and fair and it is said ‘twas she who brought the birds, magical birds whose sweet song would soothe the sick into a healing sleep.”

As Grace listened to Alastair’s recounting of the legend, she walked slowly about the chamber. The hall was mostly vacant except for the two armchairs and a single crude table set near the cavernous hearth. A fire burned low in the grate with a small copper kettle hanging from a chain above it, the flames giving off an earthy scent, most unlike the harsh coal to which she was accustomed. The only other light in the room came from two tallow candles burning in holders atop the

table, throwing shadows on the bare stone walls. There weren't any windows, not a one, on any of the four walls. No wonder they hadn't seen them coming.

“Won't you sit, my lady?”

Alastair motioned Grace to one of the two chairs, its fabric worn through in places with bits of horsehair sticking out from the cushioning.

“Please accept my apologies for the meager furnishings, Lady...uh, Lady...? Dear heavens, I'm afraid I did not read far enough in the letter to know your name. “

“She is Lady Grace, Marchioness Knighton,” Deirdre answered as she stooped before the hearth to stir up the fire beneath the fresh peat she'd just tossed there. “She is granddaughter to Antonia MacRath, the last laird's daughter and heir.”

“Please,” Grace said then, hoping to keep things simple. “Lady Grace will serve adequately.”

“Lady Grace it is, and please do call me Alastair. Whenever I hear ‘Mr. Ogilvy’ I tend to think it a designation meant for my father, even though he's been in his grave for nearly ten years now.”

Grace smiled and leaned back against the cushion of the chair, suddenly aware of how very tired she was. Already her legs were growing stiff beneath her and she could very easily just close her eyes and fall asleep in this chair with its horsehair poking her bottom till morning.

“Alastair it is then.” She motioned across from her to the opposite chair. “This is Liza Stone, my maid,” then to the others, “and Misters McFee and McGee, and sister Flora. They've come to assist us in provisioning the castle.”

Alastair's eyes again went wide and he nodded slowly. “Provision the castle? So you'll be staying at Skynegal? You'll be making it your home for a while, will you?”

Home.

Grace looked at Alastair and said quite without hesitation, “Yes, Alastair. I plan to stay on at Skynegal...indefinitely.”

Alastair nodded on a smile. “And Lord Knighton? I take it he will be joining you here as well?”

Grace blinked once at the question, a gesture only Liza would have noticed. It wasn't something she'd been prepared for, especially so soon after her arrival, and it brought with it thoughts of Christian and London and the life she had left behind. Grace wondered for what must surely have been the hundredth time what Christian had done when he'd found her missing. Had he rejoiced at her leaving? Had he made any attempt to find her? Had he even noticed?

Grace knew it would only be out of a sense of obligation and not because he held any affection for her. He had made that quite clear that last night in his study. Still, he wouldn't have found her had he tried. With Mr. Jenner's assistance, Grace had traveled under her grandmother's family name of MacRath, so as to avoid the unwanted attention that would certainly come about if it had been discovered that the Marchioness Knighton, kin to the wealthy Duke of Westover, was traveling about the countryside.

But now that she was here, Grace was determined that she should never again look back on what her life had been. She was making a new start, and from this day, she would seek her own future, and make her own happiness—at Skynegal.

She looked at Alastair. “Lord Knighton shall remain in London. He is not expected to travel to Skynegal.”

Alastair's mouth formed an *O* and, wordlessly, he nodded.

Nowhere beats the heart so kindly

As beneath the tartan plaid!

-W.E. Aytoun

Thankfully, Alastair did not query Grace any further about Christian's absence. If he found it odd that Grace had traveled across two countries alone and with only a maid, he said nothing, nor did he give any indication that he may have suspected something was amiss in her marriage. Whatever his thoughts, Alastair kept them to himself, and instead began to tell her of just how he'd come to his position as steward at Skynegal some fifteen years before.

He began by telling her of his childhood on a crofting farm on the estate, and his subsequent years of schooling in Edinburgh. Grace listened politely, all the while fighting to keep her eyes from closing.

“And after returning to the Highlands, I—”

“Excuse me, Alastair,” Grace interrupted finally. “I would love to hear everything you can tell me about the estate and your life here, truly, but I fear our journey has taxed me far more than I had thought. I find I can barely keep my eyes open. If it wouldn't be too much trouble, might we review all this in the morning?”

“Oh! Will you have no supper then, my lady? Deirdre's got us a flavorful stew simmering in the kitchen. And her oatcakes are the finest to be had in Wester Ross. She bakes them with a

touch o' honey that is really quite good. Surely you must be famished after your long journey here."

Grace smiled obligingly. "It all sounds wonderful," she turned to Deirdre. "But I fear I am even too tired to eat. If I could trouble you perhaps for an oatcake or two, a pot of tea, and direction to the nearest bed, I would be most grateful."

"Beds!" Alastair wrung his hands together before him. "Oh, my lady, I am ashamed to say I haven't had any beds prepared since I didn't know you were—"

"There's fresh bedsheets and coverings on the bed in the laird's chamber a'ready and a truckle set aside it for the maid," Deirdre said. "The others can bed down here on box beds in the rooms off the kitchen. I thought Lady Grace would have guides with her, so I made ready several of the beds here, too."

Alastair looked at Deirdre, clearly astonished to hear that she had completed all the preparations for Grace's arrival herself and without him taking any notice of it. "But Deirdre, why did you not—?"

Deirdre just shook her head. "If I'd have told you they were coming, you winna have given me a moment's peace a'day. Everything that needs doing is done. Now you take about Lady Grace and show her to the laird's chamber, and I'll be bringin' her up her tea and cake of oat bread."

Alastair stared at Deirdre a long moment before he remembered his duty to Grace. He took up one of the candlesticks from the table, motioning for her to follow him. "Of course, my lady. I will show you abovestairs. If you'll follow me, please."

Grace held up a hand when she saw Liza stand to follow. "Liza, please, don't fuss over me. You stay with the others and eat your supper and come up when you are finished. I can manage well enough on my own tonight."

"But, my lady, you've not eaten since midday."

Grace shook her head. "I suspect the rough waters we had just shortly before landing caused my stomach a bit of an

upset. Either that, or I am simply too exhausted to have an appetite. The tea and cake will be enough, really.”

Liza shrugged. Grace gave her a tired smile before turning to follow Alastair across the great hall toward an opening in the far wall that in her fatigue looked more like a yawning mouth than any doorway. He led her down a darkened corridor that was quite chilly, set as it was away from the fire. The light of his candle threw odd shadows about the walls while their footsteps echoed on the stone floor. At the end of the corridor, Alastair opened a small arched door and started up a narrow stairwell that led to the upper tower floors.

Alastair chatted while they climbed. “As I’m sure you saw at your arrival, a bit of the castle has fallen into disrepair in years past. We did as best we could to keep it up, and we’ve managed to preserve most of the furnishings, moving the pieces to various other chambers for storage whenever it becomes necessary. I have a full inventory in the estate papers...”

Grace nodded on a yawn.

“...and we can go over that in the morning, of course.”

Alastair opened a door at the top of the stairs and stepped out into a hallway lined on each side with a number of closed doors. The walls and the floors were bare here, slight discoloration showing where tapestries and rugs had once been. Alastair came to the first door on the hall, lifted its latch and pushed it to open.

A fire was already burning in the stone hearth inside, filling the room with a cozy warmth that enveloped them the moment they entered. Several candles were set in tall holders about the room, lighting a poster bed hung with decorative crewel-work. The bed stood at the very center of the far wall, the coverings upon it already folded down. A small truckle had been set up at the foot of the bed just as Deirdre had promised.

Grace walked slowly across the room to the small window that peeked out onto the loch view. Standing ready beside it in the corner was a wash basin and a pitcher of fresh water. She dropped her cloak onto a chair and poured a bit of the water

into the basin, cupping it into her hands and dousing her weary face. It was icy cold, but even the shock of it against her skin failed to rouse her. She was so very tired, she wondered how she had remained standing this long. She patted her cheeks with a drying cloth, smoothed a hand over her hair, and turned back to face Alastair.

“This is a lovely room,” she said, crossing to the fire. The hearth was ridiculously large, nearly as tall as she, with no overmantel, merely a break in the wall. Black smudges from fires centuries past marked its rough stone surface.

“I cannot take the credit for the room or the fire, my lady. As you well know, ‘twas Deirdre’s doing, although I cannot for the life of me think why she would not have told me of your coming.”

“She likely didn’t wish to worry you.”

Alastair shrugged. “I suppose you are right. You probably haven’t yet noticed, but there are times when I have a tendency toward excitability.”

Grace simply smiled.

“Is there anything I can get for you, my lady? Have you any trunks that you’ll need brought up to you tonight?”

“There is other baggage, but you can ask Mr. McFee and Mr. McGee to see to them after they have had their supper. All I would like is the tea right now and if you wouldn’t mind, I’d dearly love nothing more than to just climb into bed while I wait for Deirdre to bring it.”

“Of course, of course.” But Alastair made no move to leave, until he realized that Grace meant to get undressed. Then he went wide-eyed again. “Oh! Of course, my lady. I beg your pardon. You wish to retire. I will go. I will go see to what is keeping Deirdre with the tea.” He bowed his head. Twice. “Good evening to you, my lady.” He finally backed out of the room.

When he had gone, Grace pressed a hand against the small of her back where the ache that had settled there hours earlier had begun to throb. It had been such a long and exhausting

day. They had risen with the dawn in order to make the last part of their journey up the coast to Skynegal by nightfall. And now that she was here, standing in the midst of her grandmother's childhood home, she was so tired, she could scarcely even consider the significance of it.

Grace dropped her head to the side, rolling it from one shoulder to the other to ease the tight muscles at the back of her neck. She glanced to the bed that looked so warm and so inviting. She sat in the chair and removed her half-boots and then her stockings, flexing her toes before her. She stood and reached behind herself, struggling to unhook the fastenings at the back of her gown, wishing she had worn something slightly easier to get out of. She worked for several moments at the buttons to no avail and was nearly ready to give it up and retire in what she wore, when a soft voice sounded behind her, taking her hands and lowering them to her sides.

“Let me put to a hand, my leddy.”

Deirdre set to loosening Grace's gown so that she could easily step out of it. Wearing her chemise, Grace pulled the pins from her hair, giving it a shake and loosening it about her shoulders and back. She turned toward Deirdre. She saw a kindness about the woman's eyes that set her immediately at ease. “Thank you, Deirdre.”

“Aye. I'll just be settin' the tea here at the table by the bed so you can take it afore you go off to sleep.”

Grace smiled, nodding. She was reminded how, as a little girl, there had been a good many nights when she had taken a cup of warm milk at bedtime while her grandmother had read some fascinating adventure tale to her. She remembered how she had fallen asleep to the soft, comforting sound of her grandmother's voice, how safe she had always felt there in her bed, tucked against the pillows as she had drifted off to sleep. It seemed as if it was a time forever ago, those days of childhood, of security.

Grace stooped to retrieve her gown from the floor. When she looked up again, she found Deirdre standing before her, holding out a white folded garment.

“I thought you might be needin’ something fresh to wear this night, so I took this from an auld chest up in the castle garret and washed it for you this morn. ‘Twas once your grannam’s afore she left from here to wed your grandie.”

Grace took the nightgown, holding it as if it had been sewn with threads of gold. Any thoughts of fear or isolation she might have had vanished the moment she slipped the soft linen over her head. The simple shift enveloped her from chin to toe, immediately filling her senses with the same lilac scent her grandmother had always worn. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine herself safely tucked away in Nonny’s embrace.

“Oh, Deirdre, thank you,” Grace whispered, her eyes filling with emotion as she watched the woman pour a cup of the tea for her. There was something about her that reminded Grace of Nonny somehow. She couldn’t decide exactly what it was, especially since there was nothing at all similar about the two women in either age or stature. Still, the likening between them, whatever it was, gave Grace a small sense of the comfort she had felt as a child.

Grace slid beneath the bedclothes, tugging the coverings up to her chest. She reached for the teacup Deirdre offered and took a sip from it. It was an unfamiliar brew—herbal, floral, immediately soothing.

“The tea smells so nice. What is it made with?”

“‘Tis valerian with a bit o’ *sobrach* and *brog na cubhaig*.”

Grace stared at her, oblivious of the Gaelic.

“Primrose and cowslip,” Deirdre repeated in English as she handed Grace a small pewter dish with a couple flat biscuits set upon it. “It will assure you have a peaceful sleep, my leddy.”

“I remember that my grandmother was fond of cowslip wine sometimes at night.”

Deirdre nodded and Grace took a bite from the cake, chewing it lazily. It was tasty, not rich, just right for her travel-

weary stomach. She took another nibble and then set the plate aside to finish drinking her tea.

Deirdre had stoked the fire and had snuffed all but one of the candles about the room, leaving the one sitting on the table beside the bed before heading toward the door.

“A guid night to you, my leddy. If you have need of anything, just call for me.”

“Thank you, Deirdre.” Grace set the tea cup aside and eased back against the pillows. They were soft as eiderdown, touched by a pleasant herbal scent. She closed her eyes, so very tired she could barely keep awake. “Deirdre?”

“Aye, my leddy?”

“Thank you for making our arrival so welcoming and pleasant. I know that it must ha—”

Grace was asleep before she could finish her sentence, finally giving over to her exhaustion.

Deirdre smiled, and snuffed the candle beside the bed, tucking the coverings up around her before she quietly stepped from the room.

twenty-one

*The bow is bent, the arrow flies,
The winged shaft of fate.*

-Ira Aldridge

Grace's first morning at Skynegal issued in dark, heavy under rain, with the wind blowing, thunder rattling what glass remained in many of the windows, keeping everyone tucked away by the fire behind the castle's stone walls. Grace postponed the tour she'd planned of the castle's surrounding grounds and McFee and McGee were left to wait out the weather before they could go in search of the additional stock and other provisions they would need in the days to come.

The rain did, however, allow them one occupation—that of counting the precise number of leaks in the roof of the main tower. There were eleven.

Sitting in the great hall, wrapped beneath a woolen shawl, Grace contemplated the extensive list they had spent the past hours compiling, repairs that would be immediately needed, supplies to be had from Ullapool, the nearest town which was a half day's sail away. Each time they would open one of the doors onto another of the neglected chambers, they would discover something more that needed doing. There were numerous fireplaces to be swept clean of the mice who had taken up residence there, gunholes, unneeded for centuries, to be covered over. The work needed was beginning to appear endless, but not, Grace thought resolutely, impossible.

She focused on the first and most pressing entry on the list, *a secure roof*, and called to Alastair where he stood by the fire, putting on the kettle for more tea.

“I was thinking—are there men locally skilled as masons and carpenters who we might hire to begin the repairs on the castle instead of sending off to Inverness for workers? It would seem a more prudent choice, both economically and to avoid the delay. If this rain continues, by the time they arrived, we might be living underwater with the way that roof is leaking.”

Alastair nodded in agreement. “Oh, yes, my lady, there are craftsmen close by, most within a half day’s journey from here. With the ‘Improvements’ taking place in the north and to the east, a good many of the Highlanders have had to move from the midlands here to the coast, but they have had a hard time of it making a living.”

Grace looked at him, puzzled. “But I don’t understand. Why would improvements on an estate force its tenants away?”

“*Improvements*, my lady, do not necessarily betoken a good thing in this part of Scotland. Here it is a term that has come to mean the displacement of many Highland tenants from their homes. Their leases are not being renewed by the landowners, and thus they must take whatever they can carry and go, leaving their crops, their homes, their very livelihoods behind. Many of the displaced are leaving the Highlands and are emigrating to New Scotland and America.”

“But if the tenants’ leases are not renewed, then what is to be done with their previous holdings?”

“They are put to sheep instead.”

Grace stared at the Scotsman, incredulous. “People are being forced from their homes to make way for sheep?”

“Aye. It is a more profitable means of using the land for many of the landowners.”

Grace was appalled. She thought of the feeling of community that had always been so prevalent at Ledysthorpe.

“But do the landowners feel no attachment, no responsibility for the livelihoods of their people?”

Alastair shook his head dolefully. “Many of the old Scottish lairds went into exile after the failed Jacobite rebellion, leaving their tenants here, dependent upon the strangers who came to take over their estates. The new landlords—a good many of them English, begging your pardon, my lady—view their tenants more as an inconvenience than anything else.”

Grace stood and crossed the room to stand before the hearth fire. She stared at the flames licking at the peat brick as she took this all in. She knelt to pour a fresh cup of tea, sipped the soothing brew, quiet for some time. She thought of the people being displaced from their homes, forced to leave all they had known and loved. It touched a chord deep within her, the injustice of it, the utter sorrow they must feel. It was a feeling she herself had felt when she had been made to leave Ledysthorpe for her uncle’s house in London, and then again when she wed Christian and removed to Knighton House. The only difference was she hadn’t been left without a means of survival. She, at least, had been provided with a roof over her head and food on her plate. These poor people were being left with virtually nothing.

Grace turned to face Alastair once again. “I should like you to put out a communication asking for anyone in the vicinity who is interested in working on the castle renovations to come here to Skynegal. Carpenters, stonemasons, plasterers, woodworkers, all. And if there are any who aren’t skilled, they can be taught.”

Alastair’s eyes went wide as they so often did. “But my lady, a good many will come!”

“And we will find work for them. There is much to be done here, not only the repairs to the roof. It was my grandmother’s wish that I restore Skynegal to the great estate it once was. But I will need your help in figuring a fair wage for their work. Once we have a preliminary listing, I will write to Mr. Jenner in London and instruct him to forward the necessary funds.”

Alastair's expression was fixed for several moments. He just stared at Grace, stunned it would seem. Finally his face broke into a smile and he closed his eyes.

“Alastair? Are you unwell?”

The Scotsman shook his head, his smile growing wider still. She saw that tears had come to his eyes. “Oh, my lady, I confess I could not sleep last night for the fear that your sudden interest in Skynegal was for the very reasons I spoke of to you moments ago. Skynegal lies on much good arable land, with oak and pine forests and rich glens. She is not an estate that turns a great profit by her tenant's rents, but she could were she to convert to a sheep walk. Factors from the neighboring estates have already come seeking to purchase portions of the estate in order to increase their own holdings for the same purpose, but with Skynegal held in trust, we could not even consider their offers, at least not until it reverted to its new ownership. And it has now, and I am so relieved that Skynegal has come to you, my lady.”

With every moment she stayed at Skynegal, Grace began to sense more clearly her purpose in being called there. “My thanks, Alastair, for your kind words. But I fear I am not as learned in estate management as I will need to be. I will have to rely upon you to advise me on a good many matters. I only know that I cannot abide what you have told me has happened to the tenants on the other estates. My grandmother always believed that the lifeblood of any great estate is its people. I will make a vow never to allow greed for pound profit to overstep my own sense of morality.”

Grace set down her teacup and crossed to the window. Outside, on the courtyard, the rain still fell steadily. “When the weather clears, I should like to take a tour about the estate and pay a visit to the tenants of Skynegal. I would ask that you accompany me, since you are acquainted with the people. I imagine my coming will give them thoughts similar to those which kept you up and worrying through the night. They will fear I have come seeking to evict them. They will not trust me. I want to assure them no such action will be taken here at Skynegal as long as I am lady here.”

Alastair nodded.

“Now,” Grace finished, “if you would please set to putting out the call for workers, I would like to make use of this afternoon’s inclement weather to acquaint myself with the inside of the castle.”

“Of course, my lady, I would be happy to take you about and show you—”

Grace put up a hand. “I appreciate your offer, Alastair, truly, but I think I should prefer to explore the castle on my own. Skynegal has been a part of my family’s heritage for generations, and yet I was never told of its existence. It has been home to people I have never known, setting to events I had never been told. I should like to spend some time getting acquainted with my history on my own, if you please.”

Alastair inclined his head in a gesture of complete understanding.

“However,” Grace added on a smile, “if I do not return by nightfall, you may have to come searching for me.”



GRACE SET ASIDE the last of the stack of books she’d found packed away inside the carved wooden trunk, one of several she’d discovered in the many rooms and storage closets of the castle so far. They mostly contained estate papers, small memorabilia of days gone by, and even some old clothing, long-forgotten and moldering from the damp.

Grace leaned back against the trunk and closed her eyes, rubbing the taut muscles at the nape of her neck. She had placed several of the books apart to study later, texts on estate management and crop cultivation that she thought might prove useful in the coming months. She had been in this particular room for hours, it seemed, her skirts pooled around her, smudged by the dust that had settled about the place over the past many years. A small timepiece hung from a ribbon tie around her neck and she took it up, studying it again as she had many times that day.

She had found the piece soon after she'd begun her explorations through the castle earlier that day. It had only one hand for the hour, and did not function at all accurately, its small dial going from sun to moon to sun again several times in the past hours. But that didn't matter to Grace. She wore the piece more for the sentiment of its engraving than its mechanics. Modest, oval-shaped, and cased in tarnished silver, it had inscribed upon its back words in Gaelic.

Is e seo m' uair-sa.

Deirdre had given her its translation—*This is my time.*

Grace could have no way of knowing what meaning the words had represented nor what purpose the original owner of the watch could have had for inscribing them. It didn't matter, for the words could not have been any more significant to her had she inscribed them herself.

This is my time.

In coming to Skynegal, Grace had finally found a sense of purpose, a feeling that her very existence had reason for being other than to interfere. Her parents, while kind and genuinely fond of her, had seen her as more of an inconvenience to the plans they had mapped out for themselves upon their marriage, a plan that didn't allow for the addition of a third. Nonny had cared for her, raised her in love and security, yes, but doing so was not a decision she had been given any choice in. It was a duty Nonny had assumed in the wake of her children's abandonment of their only *unwanted* child.

Grace's sudden place in the household of Uncle Tedric, a bachelor accustomed to coming and going as he pleased, had left her feeling like the proverbial burr beneath his saddle. He got rid of her just as quickly, and as profitably, as he could. And then there was Christian, who had made it abundantly clear he had been forced by his grandfather the duke—against his will—to wed her.

All her life, Grace had known a sense of waiting, of searching, as if the world was spinning past her and she could but watch from the outskirts. But now was *her* time, a time to

cease being an inconvenience, to cease being tolerated. Now was her time to pursue her own path.

Grace looked to the timepiece once again, then closed her fingers around it as she stood and headed for the door.

Yes, this was her time.

twenty-two

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again, I shall not live in vain.*

-Emily Dickinson

The following morning broke to a glorious sunrise that peeked over the mist-skirted mountains to the east. Together their little group shared a hearty breakfast of porridge, bannocks, and tea before Grace and Alastair set out to begin their round of visits to the tenants of the estate. Flora, Deirdre, and Liza set to mopping up the water that had puddled beneath the various roof leaks. To help pass the hours inside during the previous day's rain, Deirdre and Flora had baked shortbreads for Grace and Alastair to take along with them to the tenants. In doing so, they had depleted nearly all of the sugar and most of the flour and butter Grace had brought along with her at her arrival. McFee and McGee had gone that morning, sailing out of Loch Sgiathach, on a course north for Ullapool, where they would purchase sacks of meal, sugar, and the various other foodstuffs they needed to properly provision the castle.

They had taken with them a letter that Grace had written to Mr. Jenner at his offices in London, with a request for the

release of additional monies from the account set aside for Skynegal's restoration. Until then, she would have enough coin to keep them, thanks to Nonny.

It had been an early spring day, many years earlier, when her grandmother had come to Grace, giving her the gift of a small embroidered reticule.

“My mother gave this to me when I was a young girl of your age shortly before I wed your grandfather. Women seldom are permitted money of their own and oft are left desperate in times of need. When my mother gave this to me, she made me promise that I should only open it in time of great extreme. I was fortunate in that I never met with such a crises, and so I am passing this on to you, dear. I hope you shall never come to a time when you are faced with misfortune or deprivation, but one can never tell what Fate has in store. If you should find yourself in such circumstances, just remember, like Pandora's box, with this you shall never be utterly without hope.”

Throughout the years that followed, Grace had never opened the bag, not even to peek—until just before she had left London to travel to Skynegal. She had known that the bag had contained money, but she could have had no notion of the amount. She had been overwhelmed when, after untying the cords around the pouch, she had found several five guinea coins wrapped within four fifty pound notes.

It had been more money than she had ever seen in hand, and discovering it had removed the last obstacle to her departure for Scotland, affirming for Grace from then on that she was indeed pursuing the right course.

Grace and Alastair set out across the heathery Sgiathach hills on a pair of sturdy Highland ponies, riding over a verdant glen carpeted in bluebells and primroses. They traveled across strath and brae and along the river, a most peaceful scene, touched by the trill of bright red crossbills flitting about the fir trees as they passed. Along the way, Alastair passed the time recounting tales of his childhood on this same land, land on which his great grandfather had toiled more than a century before.

“You speak of your love of this land as some would the love for a woman,” Grace remarked, sitting with ease in the sidesaddle as her pony picked its way along the narrow glen pathway. “Have you never wed, Alastair?”

At this, Alastair immediately fell silent—not a thing he was prone to do—and Grace reproved herself for her too inquisitive nature. “I’m sorry, I should not have asked you something so personal. It is not my place to pry.”

“Nae, my lady, ‘tis nothing improper in your asking.” He shook his head. “It is just that I haven’t thought of it in some time. No, my lady, I have never wed. I thought to once, even got down on my knee to ask her.”

“She refused you?”

“Nae, my lady, not at all. Iseabail accepted and we even made ready to wed the following summer. I had a year yet to complete my schooling. ‘Twas while I was away to university in Edinburgh that she grew impatient. She wanted us to wed sooner, but I could not quit my studies. So she wrote to me that she had decided to wed another.” He hesitated a moment, his voice hushing slightly. “Evidently the attachment I had assumed between us was not truly extended to me in kind.”

Grace knew well the torment of loving another who did not love in return. “I am so sorry, Alastair.”

He summoned a resolute smile. “Aye, but she’s gone to New Scotland these past ten years, but for as long as I live, I’ll ne’er forget the first time I saw her. ‘Twas at a *cèilidh* and everyone came from hereabouts for the dancing and singing. I had never met Iseabail before, and when I first set my eyes upon her, she was singing an old Scottish ballad. Iseabail had the most beautiful voice I’d ever heard before or even since. I was awestruck, aye. Everyone listening was, too.”

A sentimental look came over his face then as the ponies continued on their way. Alastair gazed wistfully at the pathway ahead, singing softly in a brogue that he had heretofore kept hidden.

Ca’ the ewes to the knowes,

*Ca' them whaur the heather grows, Ca' them whaur the
burnie rows,*

My bonnie dearie.

*Hark, the mavis even' sang, Soundin' Cluden's woods
amang,*

Then a fauldin' let us gang,

My bonnie dearie.

They rode along a space, each lost to their own thoughts. Grace listened as Alastair sang, not so much to the words, but the love that was still so evident in them, the love he still bore for the girl who'd broken his heart so many years ago.

A small part of her wondered if Christian ever thought of her as she did him, with a wonder for what might have been had they met under differing circumstances, had he not been forced to accept her as his wife. Had he chosen her.

They were thoughts that stole into her mind far more often than she cared to admit, when she would lie awake at night, watching the moon through her window. She wondered if Christian ever reminisced, as she did, about the intimacy they had shared in their short time together, the emotions their union had brought. She knew the passion they had so briefly shared had touched him—perhaps not as deeply it had her—but there must have been something to have made him return to her as he had time and time again. Grace wouldn't believe that it was simply the sexual act for if he hated so much the place she'd come to hold in his life, he could have just as easily taken his pleasure with another. But he hadn't. Knowing that was what left the small kernel of hope deep within her heart.

Hope of someday...

They steered the ponies across a shallow brook that tumbled through the glen. A simple stone cottage lay snuggled close against the hillside in front of them. A column of smoke rose out of a small chimney—the *lum*, as Alastair had called it—above a thatched roof that was weighted down against the

Highland winds with stones hanging from ropes that stretched from one side to the other.

A handful of small sheep dotted the verdant hillside, picking among the moor-grass and heath, their distant bleating carried on the soft breeze that blew down from the mountains. As they approached the cottage, Grace spotted a small face peeking at them through an opening in the wall where there was no window, only an oil cloth flapping in the breeze for a covering. Dogs barked at their arrival, scampering around the ponies who were so docile, they barely gave the hounds any notice. A low stone wall enclosed a small byre where a stocky pony and a shaggy Highland calf stood watching them with interest.

They stopped the ponies and were just dismounting when a man came out from inside to meet them. He wore a coarse woolen shirt with the full sleeves rolled to his elbows and a tartan belted at the waist and draped from one shoulder across to the waist on the opposite side. Woolen stockings with a similar crisscross design covered his legs below the knee, leather brogues laced over his feet. Behind him, lingering in the doorway, stood a woman, her head covered by a kerchief, her feet bare beneath her skirts. Two small children clung to her on each side.

“*Là math, Alastair,*” the man greeted in Gaelic.

Alastair nodded to him. “Calum, you look well. How is the family?”

The man answered him in rapid Gaelic, all the while eyeing Grace with suspicion.

“Calum,” Alastair said, “I’d like to introduce you to Lady Grace, Marchioness Knighton. Lady Grace has inherited Skynegal. Lady Grace, please meet Calum Guthrie.”

Calum bowed his head respectfully, saying, “My lady.”

She noticed he no longer spoke Gaelic, but when he raised his head to look at her, she saw the unmistakable darkness of suspicion in his eyes, suspicion and fear of what her coming to Skynegal might portend for him and his small family.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Guthrie,” Grace said, smiling openly in hopes of allaying some of his misgivings. When he didn’t respond, she motioned toward where the woman still stood framed in the low doorway. “This is your wife?”

Calum nodded. “Aye, she is. ‘Tis Mary. An’ the two boys, wee Calum and Ian.”

Grace left her pony and walked over to the others, smiling in greeting at the woman. She made to hand her the shortbread they’d brought, wrapped in a linen. “Hello, Mary. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

But the woman did not look at her, nor did she move to take the bundled shortbread. Instead, she glanced uneasily to her husband.

“She dinna speak English,” Calum said, coming to join his wife. He said something to her in Gaelic and she nodded, then turned back to regard Grace, bowing her head with a tentative smile.

“This is for you,” Grace said, holding out the shortbread to her again.

Mary looked to Calum, who nodded, and took the bundle. When she saw what it was inside, she smiled although the same cloud of fear that Grace had noticed in Calum’s eyes now darkened her eyes as well. “*Taing is buidheachas dhut, baintighearnachd do.*”

Now it was Grace’s turn to look to Calum in bewilderment. “I’m afraid I do not yet understand Gaelic.”

“She gives her thanks to you, your ladyship.”

“Please tell her she is most welcome.”

As Calum translated Grace’s words to Mary, Grace crouched down and extended her hand outward to the first of the two boys. He looked to be about seven years old and was tall and thin like his father. She noticed his clothing was tattered and he had no shoes to cover his feet. He did not take her hand with his, but looked curiously at the fine kid glove

that covered it. The other boy did the same, peeking from behind him.

“She dinna have a hand, Da,” said the first one.

Calum quickly silenced him with a *hish!* and the child turned to her as if she’d suddenly sprung a second head.

Grace held up a hand and shook her head, saying, “‘Tis all right.” She tugged on the fingers of her glove while the boy just stared with a mixture of both fascination and fear. When all her fingers were loose, Grace drew off the glove to reveal her bare hand underneath.

She wiggled her fingers. “See, I do have a hand. It was just covered by a glove.”

The boy’s fear melted away beneath the light of curiosity. He took up the glove Grace offered to him, staring at it as if it were made by magic.

“Will you shake hands with me now?” Grace asked and he did, wrapping his grubby fingers tightly around hers.

“What is your name?”

“I’m wee Calum,” he mumbled, his attentions again focused on the glove, the way it was stitched, the small flower embroidered upon it. He set it up against his hand, comparing the size to his own.

“I should have known that your name was Calum because you look just like your da.”

She noticed the second boy then peering tentatively around his brother’s arm. He was perhaps three or four, with a mop of reddish hair and a sprinkle of freckles crossing his small nose. Grace removed her other glove and handed it to him. “And I would guess your name is Ian.”

“Aye,” he answered in a tiny voice, clasping the hand she held toward him and taking the glove with his other. “You are *vevy pwetty*.”

Grace smiled brightly. “Well, thank you, my fine sir.”

“What’s a ‘sir?’”

“‘Sir’ is another name for a grown-up boy like you.”

He grinned at her, still clutching her glove.

Grace stood then and peered inside the cottage, but she could see no more than a foot or two beyond the low doorway, for it was very dark inside. She glanced to Calum still standing beside Mary. “May I...have a look inside? I’ve never been inside a crofting cottage.”

The two exchanged a curious glance and then Calum nodded, seeming almost reluctant to allow her inside, while at the same time afraid to refuse her.

Grace removed her riding hat and stepped through the doorway into a large room that was at once a kitchen, sitting room, and bedroom together. Despite its meager furnishings, it was a place that gave one a sense of home the moment they entered. A fire burned in the small hearth, over which was an iron kettle hung from a hook. The far corner of the room was completely taken up by a huge pine box bed. An oaken table stood at the room’s center, the table covered with numerous wooden bowls of porridge. She counted a half dozen. Odd, Grace thought, for only four had come out to greet her.

Mary came inside and quickly began taking away the bowls when she noticed Grace’s interest in them. Grace turned to Calum. “I hope you will forgive us for interrupting your breakfast.”

He shook his head. “Nae trouble, my lady. We were a’ready finished.”

“You have a lovely home,” she said to Mary, noting the small feminine touches—fresh wildflowers set in a jug upon the table, a bit of colored cloth fashioned as a curtain over the window opening. Grace walked about the room. She stopped before a wooden peat box to admire a woolen blanket that lay across its top. Intricately woven, its design reminded Grace of the shawl her grandmother had given her years earlier.

It was as she was fingering the finely spun wool that Grace realized there were sounds coming from inside the peat box,

sounds not unlike the whimpering of a child followed after by the distinctive *shh*ing of comfort.

Without hesitating to ask, Grace swept the blanket away and lifted the cover off the peat box. Behind her, she heard Mary give a cry of alarm as Grace discovered a woman crouched inside with a small child no more than two years clutched tightly against her. The woman was staring at Grace in terror. Sensing her mother's fear, the child began to cry. Mary shouted something in Gaelic and then buried her face against Calum's chest, sobbing.

Grace turned to Calum. "What is wrong? Why is she hiding in there like that?"

Calum's expression had grown defeated. "I know I canna expect you to forgive such a thing, my lady, but by heaven, they had no other place to go."

"Forgive? What is there to forgive? I'm afraid I do not understand."

Alastair came forward from the doorway then to explain. "My lady, the woman inside the peat box is Mary's sister, Elspeth, and her baby daughter. She is a widow and they had previously lived on the neighboring estate until they were recently evicted."

He turned to Calum, his expression sympathetic, then looked to Grace once again. "What Calum realizes but you do not, my lady, is that there is an unwritten law among the lairds of the estates and the local magistrates that any family found offering their home to another family who has been evicted will, as punishment, suffer the same fate." He hesitated. "They fear you will now evict them from their home as well."

Grace looked slowly around the room at the myriad of faces that were all watching her—Calum, his boys, Mary, her face wet with tears, and Elspeth who was now standing, though still inside the peat box. All of them looked terrified.

Anger, fierce and raw, burned within her. It was barbarous and cruel that these poor people should live under such a terrible threat every day, fear of simply offering shelter to their

own family lest they should be turned out as well. She watched then as the two boys, Calum and Ian, walked slowly toward her, their eyes never leaving hers as they each of them gently placed her gloves upon the table, returning them to her as if hoping, praying that this one small gesture might keep her from punishing their loved ones.

Grace blinked away tears and turned to Elspeth, who still stood behind her. She was clutching her tiny daughter tightly in her arms, the child's face tucked away into the safety of her mother's neck. Grace held out her hands. "Please, let me take her for you so you can climb out of that box."

Elspeth looked confused. Calum spoke to her in Gaelic, nodding, his tone reassuring. Slowly, tentatively, Elspeth loosened her hold on the child, handing her to where Grace waited. Grace took the girl and held her up against her while Elspeth climbed out of the peat box with Calum's help. The child looked at Grace and sniffed, her chin quivering. Grace smiled at her and touched her softly on her cheek. "It will be all right," she whispered, and pressed a kiss to the soft ginger curls at her forehead before handing her back to her mother.

Grace took a deep breath and turned to speak to Calum. "You fear that I will evict you from your home because of the actions of others who hold a position similar to mine. I give you my word now, Calum Guthrie, that no such thing will take place here at Skynegal. Not today. Not ever. There will be no 'Improvements' such as has occurred elsewhere here at Skynegal. Never. And please be sure to tell the other tenants what I have just said."

Calum stared at her a moment in disbelief, and then his face broke into a broad smile. He quickly repeated what Grace had said to Mary and Elspeth in Gaelic. Mary covered her mouth with both hands in surprise while the boys, Calum and Ian, raced forward and threw their arms around Grace's skirts. Grace glanced at Calum who had drawn his wife and her sister close to his side. His eyes were closed and he looked as if he were fighting tears himself. She looked to Alastair, standing to the side, spectator to the scene. He was smiling, eyes glistening in the low light. When his gaze caught hers, he

nodded, mouthing the words, “Thank you, my lady. Thank you.”

twenty-three

Cherchons la femme.
(Let us look for the woman)
-Alexandre Dumas

London, England

Christian Wycliffe, Marquess Knighton, had misplaced his wife.

He preferred the term *misplaced*, because the words *abandoned by*, or *lost* sounded so final, so irrevocable, but *misplaced* still held the hope of a recovery.

And he had every intention of finding Grace.

He could never forget that day when he had found her gone. His first thought had been that she had perhaps been taken by whoever it was who had left that anonymous message on his doorstep.

One can never know what it is to lose something precious until it is gone.

The words kept repeating themselves in his thoughts with a menacing echo.

The thought that it could be Grace who would pay for his sins had brought Christian lower than he'd thought possible. He'd spent the first two days of her disappearance condemning himself for it, until one of the maids pointed out to him that she'd found some of Grace's gowns were missing. As it turned out, only the gowns she had brought with her to their marriage

were gone, along with the shoes, the stockings, even the hair ribands she'd had before becoming his wife. Still, it wasn't until Eleanor discovered Grace's sketching supplies missing as well that they knew for certain she had left of her own accord.

While staring at the empty space in her wardrobe, Christian remarked that he had never known of Grace's fondness for sketching. It was a fact his sister was all-too ready to comment upon.

"You would have noticed, Christian," Eleanor had said to him crossly, "had you given Grace even the slightest bit of your attention while she was here."

Christian had been humbled in the face of his sister's condemnation, quite simply because he could do nothing to refute her accusation. It had been he, no other, who had driven Grace away, and it was a thought he wasn't alone in, either. The servants blamed him, too. In fact, he was beginning to think the cook was purposely oversalting his suppers for it. He could see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices even as they tried to pretend she would soon be returning. The maids still brought fresh flowers to her bedchamber, replacing them anew when the blooms withered. Once he'd even found Forbes adding a bit of water to the vases as if by doing so, Grace might somehow turn the corner to notice his efforts as she always had, thanking him for tasks Christian had only taken for granted.

Each morning, when Christian woke to confront her empty bedchamber again through the door adjoining his, he would stand on the threshold and stare at her bed, neatly made in pale blue brocade, untouched for these three weeks now. He wanted to know how she was, where she was sleeping, if she was safe. The thought that she might still come to danger because of his having caused her to flee kept him up and pacing through most every night, pausing every so often to stare out the window to the street as if somehow, some way, she'd magically materialize.

But she never did.

It had gotten so he had begun to wonder if her appearance in his life had been naught but a dream, a brief stretch of his imagination. Flashes of her would come to him out of nowhere throughout the day, her smile the night of the Devonbrook ball when she had walked in on his arm for the first time as his wife, her complete acceptance of him, even when he had treated her so poorly. He might well have been persuaded to believe her an illusion, if not for the melancholy faces of the servants reminding him each successive day that Grace had been no dream, no illusion, but instead she had been a gift that he had stupidly, thoughtlessly tossed away.

Not an hour after he had found her gone, Christian had hired four of Bow Street's best to search for her, each going off in a separate direction—to the north, south, east and west. He had expected to have Grace back within days, but thus far the runners hadn't been able to turn up so much as a footprint. Christian couldn't help but begin to fear the worst. The longer Grace remained missing, the worse he felt about her leaving, and the more he knew that when he found her—*if* he found her—of the many things he wanted to do, most important among them, was to tell her how very wrong he'd been.

It had taken Eleanor's barbed scorn when they had discovered her gone to finally open Christian's eyes to the fact that Grace was as much a victim in their marriage as was he. He'd been so consumed with his own bitterness toward his grandfather, so angry at his powerlessness, that he'd taken his anger out on her, as if she had been to blame somehow. But he had treated her abominably. Whenever he thought of that last night, when she had come to him, nearly begging him to care about her, he winced. It was a plea to which he had only responded with selfish indifference. He'd been so frustrated with himself because no matter how he had vowed not to allow her to affect him, despite his conviction, he had found himself utterly unable to resist her.

Grace had been an easy target that night, standing before him in her nightdress, so vulnerable. And when she'd finally laid open her heart to him, he had simply stared at her, arrogant and unfeeling like every other Westover before him.

You could have been anyone

He hated that he'd said those words, would never be able to forget her expression, so utterly cast down. He'd been a bastard, and he couldn't fault her for leaving because of it. What he could fault her for, however, was being so damnably good at hiding herself away from him. He wanted to go after her himself, and would have, if he'd had any idea where she might have gone. Instead he was left to sit idly by, powerless and waiting. And there was still the matter of Eleanor to trouble over.

With nearly every marriageable nobleman in England in town for the season, Eleanor, it seemed, was hell bent on falling in love with the one man she could not possibly wed—Richard Hartley, the Earl of Herrick. Over the past weeks, while Christian had spent his days trying to figure out where his wife might have gone, he had done everything in his power to keep Eleanor and Herrick from forming any sort of lasting attachment. It was not an easy task, for he had to do so without drawing any suspicion from Eleanor. Unfortunately, since the time when they had been children, his sister had always had the uncanny ability of being able to see right through him.

She had noticed Christian's reserve immediately, had even asked him why he was so opposed to Lord Herrick. Christian had simply responded that he would prefer that she take the season slowly and allow herself to meet any number of young men, rather than committing herself to the first one who had noticed her.

In other words, he'd lied.

Blessedly, just that morning, Christian had learned that Herrick had been called away from London to his estate in York. His absence would give Christian several weeks respite. Perhaps fortune might even smile upon him long enough to have Eleanor fall in love with another.

Christian stared thoughtfully at a miniature portrait of his sister that stood on the fireplace mantel. If he could only tell Eleanor the truth for his objections to Herrick, then she would understand the reasons why she could never marry him. She

would have to. But Christian knew he could never tell her that truth, for if he did, then the even deeper truth would come to light, something Christian had spent his life trying to hide.

A knocking on the study door pulled his attention from his troubled thoughts. Christian set Eleanor's portrait back on the mantelpiece just as Forbes came in.

"My lord, Lord Cholmeley is here to see you."

Christian peered at his timepiece. It was only nine o'clock in the morning and he'd barely finished his breakfast coffee. He was certainly not in any frame of mind to face Grace's uncle.

"Tell him I'm not in."

"He is most insistent, my lord. He has...begun making certain threats."

Christian raised a brow. "Threats?"

"Yes, my lord, of the sort that would only serve to further breed scandal."

Christian frowned. He had been afraid of this. His time to repair matters in his marriage without all and sundry knowing about it had apparently passed, and the time he had dreaded most was now upon him. He could hide the truth of Grace's absence no more behind excuses of headaches and upset stomachs. With Cholmeley spouting off, all of London would know that his lordship, Marquess Knighton, had been abandoned by his wife before the ink was barely dry on the marriage documents.

Christian drew a deep breath. "Then I guess you must show him in."

While Forbes returned to the waiting marquess, Christian poured himself a second cup of coffee, adding a splash of brandy to it, knowing somehow he would need it.

Tedric, Lord Cholmeley, came issuing through the door with all the polish and refinement of a hurricane. He didn't wait to be acknowledged, but sputtered without preamble, "What the devil have you done with my niece, Knighton?"

Christian stared at the marquess, attempting to maintain a measure of calm. "Sit down, Cholmeley."

But Grace's uncle ignored him. "Everyone knows how secretive you Westovers are. What did you do? Did you kill her? Is she buried outside in the garden, pushing up your pansies even now as we speak?"

Christian looked to the door where Forbes was standing, mouth agape. "You may leave us, Forbes. And please close the door behind you." All he needed was for one of the other servants to overhear Cholmeley's blithering.

Christian waited until after the butler had gone. He took a sip from his coffee, looked at Cholmeley again, and said quite distinctly, "Sit down, Cholmeley."

The elder marquess shut his mouth and took the chair in front of Christian's desk. His expression, however, remained just as agitated, his fingers gripping the carved arm of his chair.

Christian looked at him. "First, you can cease with the theatrics. You know very well I would not kill Grace."

"Then where is she? I know she's not here. I've questioned your servants. No one has had sight of her for quite some time."

"No, not since she had apparently gone on a visit to you, or so we were told. You should have been the last to see her." He looked at the marquess. "Perhaps it is I who should be questioning you on her whereabouts."

Tedric shook his head in disgust. "It is a poor example of a man, Knighton, who can't keep track of his own wife."

Christian couldn't argue against the insinuation, but that didn't mean he liked hearing it, especially from someone like the marquess. "Be that as it may, let me assure you I am making every effort to find her."

Tedric came to lean forward at the very edge of his chair. "Every effort? If you want so badly to find her, Knighton, why the devil are you sitting here," he pointed to the desk, "instead

of out there,” he waved a hand toward the window, “finding her yourself?”

“Yes, Christian,” came a sudden familiar and unwelcome voice from the doorway then, “do tell us, why are you here instead of out tracking down your wayward wife?”

twenty-four

*They do me wrong who say I come no more
When once I knock and fail to find you in;
For every day I stand outside your door
And bid you wake, and rise to fight and win.*

*Weep not for precious chances passed away!
Weep not for golden ages on the wane!
Each night I burn the records of the day
At sunrise every soul is born again!*

-Walter Malone, Opportunity

Christian glanced with unfeigned reluctance toward the door, already knowing who was there, and wishing to the very heavens he was wrong. Surely the saints must be punishing him to demand that he face both Lord Cholmeley *and* his grandfather together on the same day.

The Duke of Westover stood, cane in hand, listening to the exchange between Christian and Grace's uncle. His mouth was turned decidedly downward, his eyes glinting with their usual disapproving light. Christian could almost hear the old man's thoughts as loudly as if they were echoing now throughout the room:

What's this, boy, I get you a perfectly acceptable wife and you go and lose her? What kind of duke do you expect to make if you can't even keep a simple woman happy?

But even as he thought this, Christian knew he could no more hold his grandfather responsible for his predicament than he could blame Grace for having left after the way he had treated her. He alone had brought this on.

Christian waited in giving his response until the duke had come fully into his study, taking the chair beside Cholmeley. They exchanged a short nod before both men turned to stare at Christian with twin looks of censure.

Christian took a deep breath. "Yes, it is true, Grace has left, and yes, whether you wish to believe it or not, I have tried to find her. I have hired runners from Bow Street to track her, but thus far they have turned up no trace of her."

"She can't have gone far," Cholmeley sputtered. "She is, after all, only a woman."

Only a woman.

Somehow it wasn't a designation Christian would ever think of attributing to Grace.

"I learned quite some time ago, my lord, never to underestimate the fairer sex." Christian exchanged a private glance with his grandfather before continuing. "We checked Ledysthorpe first, thinking perhaps she would have returned to her childhood home, the only place she would know, but she is not there. Otherwise, she could be anywhere, however, given that Grace had very little, if any, ready resources to provide for her, I find it difficult to believe that she could have gotten far from London, if she did leave the city at all, which is why I have remained in town. I am hoping she is yet somewhere within the city. If she is, I will eventually find her. But she must have had some monies available to her to have stayed hidden away as many weeks as she has. Were you aware of her having any ready funds, Cholmeley?"

The marquess shook his head. "No. She couldn't have. I'd have known it."

And spent it, Christian thought to himself.

“Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless my mother happened to give her some sort of pin money before she died. It would be just like the old bird to have done something like that. She favored independence in women, as confused a notion as that is.”

The duke cleared his throat and leaned forward on his cane. “I suppose it is a possibility, but is it feasible to believe that ‘pin money’ could support a girl and her maid— since I assume she took one with her—for this length of time? Sooner or later she will run out of money. The question is, what will she do then?”

A knocking came to the door before anyone could reflect further on the thought. Forbes came in, bowing his head. “My lord, there is a Mr. Jenner here asking to see you. He says it is an urgent matter, my lord, concerning Lady Knighton and a missive he has received from her.”

“Jenner?” spouted Tedric, “My mother’s man of business? The one who drew up the marriage contracts?”

Christian turned then to Forbes and told him to show in the solicitor.

As the butler left to fetch him, Christian looked first to his grandfather then to Cholmeley. “Not a word until I get to the bottom of this. I will speak to Mr. Jenner.”

Within a few moments, Forbes returned, showing the man into the study. The solicitor glanced nervously at the other two gentlemen before taking the seat previously put to use by Cholmeley.

Christian had no notion of how much, if any, Jenner knew about Grace’s disappearance. He chose his words carefully. “Good day, Mr. Jenner. Am I to understand you have received some sort of communication from Lady Knighton?”

Jenner glanced at the duke, and then at Cholmeley who had come to stand beside him. Both men were staring at the

solicitor, obviously unsettling him. “Yes, uh, Lord Knighton, I have received a communication from Lady Knighton, but I believe it is a matter that might best be discussed in private, my lord. With you.”

Christian waved a hand. “Speak freely, Mr. Jenner. As you already know, these two gentlemen are members of the family. They are aware of Grace’s...” he paused and said for want of a better term, “...*relocation*.”

Jenner cleared his throat nervously. “Lady Knighton has sent this letter to my offices.” He held out a folded bit of parchment. “It is actually the third such correspondence I have received from her.”

Christian took the letter and began reading as Jenner went on. “I cannot forward her any of the funds she seeks without your signature as her husband, even though the account is hers, so I—”

“Account?” Cholmeley broke in. “What’s this about an account?”

Christian glanced at the marquess over the top of the parchment. “Calm yourself, Cholmeley, until we know what this is about.”

When he had finished reading the letter, he looked to Jenner. “Would you care to apprise me of the particulars of the situation?”

“It would appear I must, my lord.”

Jenner shuffled through his documents, handing several sheets to Christian. “The estate was held in trust until such time as Lady Knighton married, although, by its government, it was not to be any part of a marriage settlement. It is hers, until her death, when it shall pass to a direct issue of her choosing since it is not entailed in anyway. I had been charged with the duty of informing Lady Knighton of the existence of the trust and her part in it but only *after* her marriage, as stipulated by the trust. I came here to Knighton House many weeks ago and did so.”

Christian scanned the pages that formalized the Skynegal trust. “And this account you speak of?”

Cholmeley drew closer.

“Again,” Jenner said, eyeing the elder marquess askance, “the account is a separate enterprise from the dower contract, the funds of which can be used only for the betterment of the estate.”

“You keep talking of this estate?” Cholmeley said, “What is this about? I know of no estate that isn’t already entailed to the Cholmeley marquessate.”

Christian returned the trust papers to Jenner. “It seems,” he said to Cholmeley, “that upon her marriage to me, Grace became the beneficiary of an estate in northern Scotland, one Skynegal Castle.”

Cholmeley snorted. “That rotting pile of stones? I know of it. It was some holding from my mother’s family. No one has lived there for decades. Can’t even be reached by road. I’d have thought it in ruins by now.”

“Oh, I rather doubt that will ever come to pass,” Christian said, “especially since there exists an account of some three hundred thousand pounds to ensure its continuance.”

“Three hundred thousand!” Cholmeley began to choke on his brandy. “You mean to say that little chit has had a fortune at her disposal while I am forced to live in near-poverty?”

“The monies are not *at her disposal*, Cholmeley,” Christian reminded him. “According to the specifics of the trust, they must be used exclusively for the betterment of Skynegal. And from her letter to Mr. Jenner, it would seem that is exactly what Grace means to do.”

“With your approval,” Jenner interjected, gently bringing the subject back to his reasons for coming there. “As Lady Knighton’s husband, all transactions on the account must bear your endorsement.”

“Well, at least this trust has some sense to it,” the old duke muttered. “Imagine turning three hundred thousand loose to the hands of a woman!”

“In turn,” Jenner added, “any transaction must also bear Lady Knighton’s endorsement as well.”

The solicitor seemed inordinately unsettled in the presence of the old duke for although he never spoke directly to him, he kept shifting his glance to the old man time and again as he talked.

“Well, then, let’s be done with it,” Christian said, taking his quill from its holder and dipping it into the inkwell. He started to sign the document Jenner had given him, authorizing the release of the funds from the account.

“You aren’t really going to lend your signature to give all that money to her for that moldering old castle, are you?” Cholmeley exclaimed.

“That is precisely what I’m going to do. It is Grace’s inheritance.” Christian set his quill back in its holder and returned the documents to Jenner’s waiting hand. “If you would please inform me when the transaction is complete, Mr. Jenner, I would be obliged.”

Jenner nodded. “Of course. Shall I also arrange for a courier to deliver the funds to Lady Knighton then, my lord?”

“She does not know of your visit here today?”

Jenner shook his head. “You see, I did not know of the stipulation requiring your signature, as well as hers, until after Lady Knighton had already departed for Scotland. It wasn’t until her first request for funds that the bank told me of the provision. That is why I waited so long in coming to you. But after receiving her third letter, I grew concerned for her circumstances. I only hope Lady Knighton will forgive me for breaking her confidence. Begging your pardon, my lord, but she wanted no one to know where she was going.”

Christian looked at the solicitor. After a moment, he nodded. “No, sir, a courier will not be necessary. I mean to deliver the news to Lady Knighton myself. In person, in Scotland. I will leave immediately.”

twenty-five

*I was a stranger,
And ye took me in.
-Matthew, xxv, 35*

Skynegal Castle, Highlands

Grace stood in her nightdress, at her bedchamber window, and frowned at the cloud of smoke snaking its shadowed way through the morning sky to the east.

Would the burnings never end?

How she hated knowing that as she stood there, tucked safely within the fortress of these castle walls, yet another Highland family was being forced from their home on the neighboring estate. It was an event that was happening far too frequently of late, the horizon seeming almost perpetually stained.

It would begin with an unexpected knocking on the door. The family would answer, only to find that a company of soldiers awaited them on the other side. They would be handed a Writ of Removal, signed by the estate factor, and they would be ordered to vacate the premises, refused any time for preparation or reflection. Chaos would lay claim to what once had been a place of comfort. They would be granted only long enough to grab what little they could carry before those who had come to evict them would put their torches to the thatched roof, setting everything they'd worked for, every last thing they owned in the world, aflame.

As the fire began to blaze, the crofters would scramble to save the single most important possession they could claim, the cottage's roof beam. Without it, they might not have the timber needed to rebuild elsewhere. They would end up like so many of their neighbors, turned out, seeking shelter in caves, or worse, forced to live out among the elements.

If they were fortunate enough to have their health, the Highlanders could wander toward the coast where they might have a chance to begin life again, if they could master the skills of fishing to that of farming. The elderly and the infirm, however, fared far worse, for if they were too incapacitated to leave of their own volition, they were simply carried out of their homes without care, dropped upon the bare ground, and left to face the elements.

Taken by a sudden shiver, Grace reached for her shawl on the chair beside her, and wrapped it closely about herself. The cloud in the distance billowed and grew, as the dry thatch was quickly consumed. She felt a sudden tickle on her hand and looked down to where Dubhar sat, licking her finger and patiently awaiting a scratch behind his ears. She willingly obliged. For as long as anyone could remember, the lanky deerhound had traveled about from croft to croft in search of scraps and a warm fire to sleep beside. Everybody knew him, yet none would lay claim to him.

Grizzled gray, not unlike McGee's beard, on hind legs the dog stood a full head taller than Grace. When he'd first come to the castle one rainy morning not long after Grace's arrival, he'd been weak with a fever that had left him panting despite the water they offered him. Beneath the mud that had caked his wiry coat, his body had been naught but hide and bone, his gait sluggish and marked by a pronounced limp. Alastair had suggested the dog might have been bitten by an adder, and indeed they found evidence of a bite festering on his rear leg. The Scotsman predicted he'd likely die, but Grace would have none of it. She'd taken the dog in, staying up through the night with him, and with the help of Deirdre and a poultice she'd made from rowan bark, the fever had broken by the next afternoon.

To see Dubhar now, one would never believe him the same dog. He had added flesh to his bones in the past weeks, and could now run swifter than the wind. They had christened him Dubhar, the Gaelic word for the shadow he had become at his mistress's side, following Grace from one room to the other as she walked about the castle. She had saved his life, and thus he now devoted himself to her.

As Grace stroked her fingers through Dubhar's coarse fur, she looked below her window onto the castle courtyard and the numerous people milling about. Just like Dubhar, they had come to Skynegal hoping to be saved.

They were most of them crofters from other estates who had wandered to the ancient stone towers of Skynegal, having heard of the mistress there called *Aingeal na Gàidhealtachd*, the Angel of the Highlands. Word had spread quickly that the lady of Skynegal had vowed never to take out a single eviction on her estate, and as Alastair had predicted, they had come in droves, seeking shelter, food, clothing, a touch of compassion. A number of them made arrangements to emigrate further on to New Scotland or America, and simply sought a safe place to sleep until the ship that would take them across the sea departed from Ullapool. Others planned to wander further south to Glasgow, or the Borders, looking for work. Grace hadn't the heart to turn a single one of them away, so instead she devoted her days and nights to helping prepare them for their new lives.

After the failed Scots' rebellion in 1745, a writ had been passed by the Crown called the "Act of Proscription," and it had taken the Highlanders into what was known as "the time of the gray." The wearing of the colorful tartans they had so proudly donned for generations, the teaching of Gaelic, even the playing of the bagpipes, things that encompassed their very identities as Scots, these had been forbidden under the threat of transportation. Though the proscription had been repealed some forty years later, its damage had by then been wrought through a full generation.

When Grace learned of the proscription and its eventual repeal, she immediately set to work on the design for a distinct

new tartan, collaborated on with Alastair, Liza and Deirdre. Its colors were created by using the various plant life found at Skynegal. Predominantly, there was a lovely dark green made from the heath pulled just before flowering from a dark, shady place. A rich, deep red was made from the *crotal*, or gray lichen they scraped from moorland rocks. And a peaty black resulted from the rich bark and acorns of the Highland oaks. The tartan they created, with these colors interwoven, was then used to make the clothing for the refugee Highlanders, so that no matter where they might go, be it to other parts of Scotland or the new world, they would always have a remembrance of Skynegal, and their Scottish heritage with them.

Since the majority of the Highlanders spoke only Gaelic, together with Liza, Alastair, and Deirdre, Grace had begun teaching them English, as well as reading, writing, and simple mathematics. They had set up pallets stuffed with heather and gorse in the great hall for those who had no homes or family with whom they could stay, and when that chamber had been filled, they moved on to the others in the castle tower and attached wings. In addition, a good many of the Skynegal tenants had begun taking in the strangers to their cottages as well, echoing the goodwill shown by their mistress, no longer under the threat of eviction as before.

In turn, those who sought shelter did their share. While the women were employed in the weaving and sewing of new clothing for those in need, the men busied themselves with tending the new stock of cattle and sheep in the fields, while others still contributed to the renovations at the castle, or repairs needed at various tenants' cottages across the estate. In the space of the handful of weeks since Grace had arrived at Skynegal, this once abandoned estate, overgrown and in disrepair, had been transformed into a small, efficiently-working community.

But Grace knew that a community needed funds to grow and thrive, and that was a commodity fast growing scarce. To date, Grace had had no reply to the missives she had written to Mr. Jenner requesting additional funds. By her calculations, he should have received them beginning nearly a month earlier, ample time for him to reply. After the first couple of weeks,

she'd written again, and then a third letter nearly a month earlier, for fear that the first and even the second had never reached him. The funds she'd had from her grandmother's reticule were fast running out from keeping the castle stocked with meal and just the simplest of necessities. The week before, Grace had found herself beginning to sort through her small cache of jewelry, trying to decide which pieces she might sell when next McFee and McGee made the trip to Ullapool for supplies. In the end, she'd decided she could part with almost all of it, with the exception of the inscribed timepiece she'd found her first day at Skynegal, and one other item, her wedding ring.

Grace turned from the window when she heard a stirring come suddenly from behind her and was greeted by Liza coming into her bedchamber with an armful of freshly-washed clothes.

"I was beginning to think you were going to sleep through the day," the maid said as she set out a fresh gown, shift, and stockings for Grace to wear.

Grace shook her head. "I don't know what it is, Liza, but I am so tired of late. I can't seem to pick myself out of bed as early as I used to."

Liza cocked a brow. "You work yourself too much, my lady. 'Tisn't right for a lady of your station to be toiling as you do"

"So what should I be doing? Standing around glancing at myself in the mirror when there is so much that needs to be done?"

Grace took up her hairbrush and began pulling it through the tangles in her hair.

"I suppose your fatigue might have something to do with all the work you do," the maid said. "But, it could also have a mite to do with the fact that you're increasing."

The hairbrush clattered noisily to the floor. Dubhar sat up on his haunches, wondering at the cause for the disturbance. Grace turned to stare at Liza, silent, and disbelieving.

“Oh, my lady, did you not know?” and then she added immediately, “Of course you didn’t. No one’s ever told you about women and babies and such. But surely you noticed you’ve not had your monthly since we’ve been to Scotland?”

Grace shook her head, saying at the same time so softly, she barely heard her own words, “There have been times when I haven’t bled before and I wasn’t—I wasn’t—I—”

Grace felt a shadow threaten to come over her, as if she might faint. She had never fainted in her life, but she supposed if there ever were a time when fainting would be called for, this was it. She braced herself against the edge of the dressing table and waited for the dizziness to pass.

Liza immediately dropped the clothes and came to her, helping her to sit at the edge of the bed. She took Grace’s hands in hers. “Oh, I am so sorry, my lady. I thought you knew of it and just didn’t want to tell anybody because of the troubles between his lordship and you...”

Christian. Grace closed her eyes against a new wave of what she felt certain now would be a full swoon. Liza squeezed her hand and patted it.

“My lady, I could be mistaken in this. I just figured what with your monthly going missing and your bodice getting tight like it is—I am a maid, after all, and thus would notice these things.”

Grace looked down at her breasts, suddenly noticing the fullness of them swelling beneath the thin fabric of her nightshift.

“Do you ever feel tender...there?” Liza asked.

Grace chewed her lip. She nodded.

“And I’ve seen you’ve been needing to use the chamber pot more often, too. My ma once said ‘tis from the babe growing and pressing upon you inside.”

Still, Grace shook her head against the idea. “But it’s been too long since we left London. Wouldn’t a babe be more evident?”

Grace looked down at herself, placing a hand against her abdomen. She had noticed a thickening at her waist, but had put it off as too many of Deirdre's oatcakes. To think that it had nothing to do with the oatcakes at all, but that a tiny life quite possibly grew there...

"Some ladies don't show they're with child right away. Are you all right, my lady? Are you upset? Does this news of the babe trouble you?"

Grace looked at Liza. At the first mention of it, the thought of a child had frightened her completely, for she knew nothing of raising children other than the scarce bits she'd seen while growing up at Ledysthorpe. But now that she'd had a moment to reflect upon it, getting past the shock of it, she found herself filling with a warmth inside that brought her to smiling.

"No, Liza, the possibility of a child does not trouble me at all. In fact, it makes me very, very happy."

Liza grinned. "Oh, I am so relieved to hear you say that! It will be such fun having a little 'un around here, the next generation to carry on at Skynegal."

Grace remembered Liza's pessimism when they had first arrived at Skynegal. "You've come to like this *pile of rocks*, as you once called it, have you, Liza?"

"'Tis the sort of place that grows on you," Liza said, tossing her becaped head. "But it is only due to the hand you have put to the place, my lady. If your grandmama were here and could see all that you have done, she would be very proud."

Grace smiled. "Thank you, Liza."

"Now," the maid said then, "when the little 'un grows older, can I teach her how to plant a facer?"

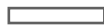
"Liza! Girls should not learn to fight!"

"You'd think differently if you'd been born into my family. With seven older brothers and sisters, 'twas a means for survival."

Grace laughed. “Well, then I suppose it wouldn’t do any harm for her to learn the proper form of it.” She looked at Liza. “But, what if the child is a boy?”

Liza thought for a moment, cocking her head to the side. “Then...I’ll teach him how to darn his own hose!”

Grace hugged Liza as they laughed and sat together at the side of the bed, all while the morning sunshine suddenly beamed down, banishing the cloud of smoke in the distance.



NOT UNTIL THE sun was starting to set that afternoon did Grace finally manage to steal a few moments to herself. It had been an unusually busy day, filled with small chores and unexpected interruptions.

Another family of crofters had arrived shortly before midday with naught but the clothes they wore and terrible tales of the eviction that had driven them from their home. A man, a woman, and four young children, they had been walking for three days, eating berries and foraging for earthnut to stave off the pangs of their hunger.

After hearing their tale and seeing their forlorn faces, Grace had promptly brought them in, offered them hot porridge and fresh milk, and arranged for pallets for them to sleep on. She’d spent the rest of the morning updating the record books, adding to the growing list she was compiling of who had come to Skynegal and who had gone on. She was determined not one of the Highlanders who had come to the castle would be forgotten once they traveled on.

During a small midday meal of cheese and bannocks, Grace had done a little refining of her sketches for the castle refurbishment while she had listened to some of the children at their English lessons. Later, a disagreement had broken out among two of the workers. When Grace had happened upon the scene, one of them was readying to strike the other with a sizeable stone that was to have been used for the curtain wall. He pulled back in the moment he noticed Grace staring at him

in horror, the rock just inches from the other man's skull. He himself had sported a bloodied nose and was obviously retaliating for whatever wrong the other had committed before her arrival. After separate explanations from each, Grace had been no closer to understanding the cause of their discord, but she did manage to cool their tempers enough to have them shaking hands and retreating to opposite ends of the curtain wall to resume their work.

Now, having seen that everyone had received their supper, Grace slipped on her half-boots and pulled the pins from her hair, letting it billow in the breeze off the loch as she walked along the brae that ran north from the castle tower.

Before going out for her walk, Grace had changed into the new woolen gown and stockings that had been presented to her earlier that day by several of the women. The garment was made of the Skynegal tartan, and while simple in its cut, the gown offered warmth against the evening chill, Its full skirts would allow her to wear it in comfort throughout most of her pregnancy.

As Grace walked along through the high reedy grass, Dubhar ambled alongside her, neither racing ahead nor straying behind, but keeping right at her hip while occasionally sniffing at a tuft of marram grass. He wouldn't leave her, even for a moment to fetch the stick she tossed for him. The crofters who yet remained in the fields where they were planting oat, potato, and barley, waved to her, calling out greetings to her in both the English they were learning and the Gaelic they were teaching her. She called out in response to one of them, Hugh Darsie, when he'd asked if she'd had a good day.

“Glè mhath, Hugh. An danns thu leamsa?”

At his puzzled expression, Grace quickly thought back over her words, and realized she had just asked him if he would dance with her instead of how he was faring. She quickly corrected herself with a shrug and he laughed, applauding her for a valiant, if mistaken, effort.

A distance away from the castle, there was a small bluff that overlooked Loch Sgiathach's cobbled shoreline, where Grace enjoyed watching the oyster catchers as they picked among the rocks for limpets and sea urchins. At this time of day, with the sun just setting to the west, the water looked like a thousand twinkling diamonds in the distance. A matting of ox-eye daisies and golden rods waved to her as Grace lowered to sit against a machair tussock. After a few moments, Dubhar meandered a short distance away to poke his snout among the marram grass on the shore.

Grace closed her eyes and leaned back upon her arms, losing herself to the soft breeze against her face and the gentle sound of the water lapping at the shore. As she sat, she thought of how very different her life had become in the past few months. No more did she spend her days and nights worrying over the perfect ball gown, or the placement of her curls. Instead, she clung to the pleasure of simpler things—heavy woolen socks on a chill night, the smell of Deirdre's oatcakes baking in the oven, the touch of a Highland breeze against her face.

She wondered what the society ladies in London who flitted from shop to shop along Bond Street for their "necessaries" would think of the Marchioness Knighton, who, instead of emeralds and pearls, now wore necklaces made of seashells and colored pebbles crafted by the many children of the estate. Would they gasp to know she drank tea brewed from blueberry leaves? That she forsook her gowns of silk for the more practical Highland woolens?

How curious, she thought, knowing that at this very hour, a world away in London, members of the social elite were busy preening before their looking glasses, fearful of having a single flounce out of place lest it should bring ridicule down upon them. From the moment she had been thrown into that life—even on the outskirts as she had been—Grace had never felt a proper fit, not in the way she did here at Skynegal, where she felt truly needed for the first time in her life. Even more so, she did not want to see a child of her own born into that world of fickle snobbery, to grow up hardened and unfeeling just like...

The sound of a sudden harsh howling broke Grace from her thoughts. She sat upright, searching for Dubhar around her, and whatever it was that was causing him to create such an unholy din. But when she spotted the dog, he was not making any noise at all, but was instead sitting calmly several yards away with his head cocked to the side, staring at the true source of the howling, something hidden in the tall grass.

What in heaven's name...?

A leg surfaced briefly above the tall grass.

Goodness, she thought, someone was injured.

Grace got to her feet, and rushed over to find a man, his face hidden by a large-brimmed hat, hunched over himself, holding his bare foot, which was pierced by the spiked head of a rather large thistle. Grace acted quickly. She took up a length of her woolen skirts and covering her hand with it, she grasped the thistle head, careful not to stick herself as she jerked it free. The man let out another howl, and then promptly silenced. Grace walked several feet away, dislodged the hooked thistle from her skirts, crushing the sharp spikes of it beneath her boot, before turning to see if the man required any further assistance.

“Are you all right? Those can be terribly sharp and I—”

Grace lost her words when she found herself face-to-face with the very last person she would have expected to see standing there.

It was Christian.

He was there, in Scotland.

He was wearing no boots or any hose.

And he was doing the oddest thing.

He was smiling.

At her.

Grace found herself wondering if he'd perhaps hit his head when he'd fallen to the ground, and she almost voiced that thought aloud.

Until she saw that he had started toward her.

She immediately froze, at a complete loss for what she should do next.

twenty-six

*Surprises are foolish things.
The pleasure is not enhanced,
And the inconvenience is often considerable.*

-Jane Austen, *Emma*

“Hello, Grace.”

Christian came toward her, approaching slowly almost as if he thought she might bolt—a ridiculous thought really. Where on earth could she possibly go? Grace simply watched him, a small part of her wondering if he was truly standing there on that windswept bluff with her, or if Deirdre had brewed something strange into her tea.

But of course Christian was there. Grace had always known that someday she would see him again. What she hadn't expected was to still be so mesmerized by just the sight of him. The setting sun shone on his hair, burnishing it a sable brown. He wore no coat and the full sleeves of his shirt billowed in the breeze, pulling at his neckcloth as he walked toward her. His eyes were fixed directly on her and Grace knew the moment she felt her heartbeat traitorously quicken that the weeks they'd spent apart had done nothing to lessen her feelings for him. If anything, living without him had only made her regard for him that much stronger.

No matter how she might try to deny it to herself, she still loved him.

Even as Grace admitted this to herself, she knew she could never allow him to know her feelings. The risk was too great, the memory of his words too sharp, just like that thistle, even now. She could never reveal how empty she had felt without him, how she had longed for his touch, his look, the sound of his voice. How many times would she have endured even his chill indifference if only so that she could see him again?

Grace struggled to focus her thoughts onto what had driven her to leave London, ignoring her first instinct to go forward to meet him. Instead, she waited until he stood right in front of her. She lifted her gaze to meet his. He smiled at her again, and she felt her breath catch. So, instead, she focused her attention down at his feet, on his bare toes peeking out through the tufts of grass, anything to avoid looking into those silver-blue eyes and thoroughly losing herself once again.

“You’re not wearing any boots,” she said, absurdly obvious, but at least it was something to divert him from staring at her so intently.

“Yes, they are back there near where I stuck my foot. I had taken them off so that I might approach you quietly.” She heard him smile. “A poor job I did of that. Apparently I was so intent on watching you, I wasn’t paying any heed to where I was going—or rather on what.”

Grace chanced a glance at him—a mistake for he was still staring at her and his eyes were so warm, she hardly noticed the chill of the breeze off the loch anymore. She drew a quick breath and looked out at the rippling waters beyond him, crossing her arms before her.

“Deirdre tells that there is a legend of when the Danes had come to invade Scotland centuries ago. Much the same thing happened. They had come at night and had removed their shoes so to approach without notice. They stepped on the wild thistles and yowled so loudly, they woke the sleeping Scots, warning them of their coming and allowing them to spring to their defense. It is said this prevented the Danes from a successful invasion and from then on, it was the thistle that had saved Scotland. Deirdre says it is because of that history

that the thistle is so highly regarded among the Scots even now.”

Grace could think of absolutely no reason for her to have just told him that old folktale other than that she would do or say just about anything at that moment to avoid the subject of her having left London, or of his having come now to retrieve her.

Unfortunately, Christian was not a man easily diverted.

“I’ve missed you, Grace.”

His voice wrapped over her like the glow of spring’s first sunshine. Grace clung to her fast-fleeting reserve.

“I suppose I should have told you where I was going.”

“It is all right.”

Could this truly be Christian? Her husband, the aloof Marquess Knighton? His understanding was not something Grace had been prepared for. She had played this scene through her mind many times over the past weeks, knowing eventually it would come. But in her mind’s eye, it had always been far off in the future with Christian scowling and angry, railing against her for her desertion. This acceptance, this understanding was not at all what she’d expected. In fact, she didn’t quite know what to do with it.

“Yes, well, it is growing late,” she said for want of anything better. “I probably should be getting back.”

She turned and started back toward the castle, a direction that unfortunately necessitated a path around Christian. She prayed he would just allow her to leave, giving her time to gather her wits.

She was nearly past when Christian reached out suddenly and took her arm, gently stopping her. Grace’s heart leapt at the touch of him. She closed her eyes and forced herself not to look at him.

“Grace, truly, if I could, I would take back the words I said to you that night.”

Damn the tears that were coming even now to her eyes. She blinked them back. “I asked for your honesty, Christian, and you gave it.”

“Do you not think we should at least talk a bit more about this?”

Grace drew in a long breath, releasing it slowly. “Yes, Christian, we should talk. We have much to discuss, but not here. Not now. I need some time. I wasn’t expecting to see you here. I need to think about what this will mean to the life I have made here.”

She looked at him. He was staring at her.

“Grace, have you?” he hesitated, “Grace, is there someone else in your life now?”

Grace saw something change in his eyes—was it fear that she had found someone else? Hope that she had not? If only he could know how impossible a notion it was. Just the thought of feeling about another the way she did him was absurd. Grace shook her head. “No, Christian, there is no one.”

No one but you.

It was a thought Grace kept to herself as she turned and started walking back toward the castle.



AT SKYNEGAL, Grace was met with yet another surprise when she found that Robert and Catriona, the Duke and Duchess of Devonbrook, and their young son, James, had traveled along with Christian to Scotland. At first, she thought it odd that they should have traveled so far, until Catriona told her that their own Scottish estate, Rosmorigh, was located along the coast south of Skynegal on the Knoydart Peninsula, a day’s sail away. It was with their assistance Christian had found his way to Skynegal.

They sat now, the five of them, in the small antechamber set off from the great hall that Grace had put to use as an estate office. While they had waited for Grace’s return from the brae,

Deirdre had brewed tea for the guests, which Grace now poured into their crockery cups—a far cry from the fine porcelain the Devonbrooks were no doubt accustomed to.

“Please forgive the tea,” Grace said. “It is a local blend made with blueberry leaves, and while I find it very tasty, some might think it a bit tart.”

Catriona took up the cup. “We, too, take blueberry tea often at Rosmorigh, isn’t that right, my dear?”

She looked to her husband, the duke. Robert nodded from where he stood beside Christian. Grace noticed that Christian no longer smiled as he had earlier when he’d met her on the bae. The frown she knew so well had once again darkened his eyes, but before Grace could consider what she’d done to displease him, Catriona went on.

“One day I must show you how I add a bit of clover to the tea as well.” She leaned a little closer, whispering, “I quite prefer it to the China teas.”

Grace smiled at her. She had expected such a celebrated society duchess to show disdain for the simplicity they adopted at Skynegal. She was pleased to find that she was mistaken in that assumption.

“I’m afraid we’ve already eaten supper,” Grace said, “but if you are hungry, I can ask Deirdre or Flora to see if they might yet have some of the stew for you in the kitchen—”

Just then, the door opened and Alastair wandered in. He hadn’t knocked—Grace had made it a point that he shouldn’t feel the need to, that they were fellows in the management of the estate, not master and clerk. He started when he noticed the others in the room so unexpectedly.

“Och, my lady, I didn’t know you had visitors.”

He made to bow, stepping back as if to leave, but Grace waved him back into the room. “It is all right, Alastair. Please, come in and meet our guests.”

Alastair wore his usual attire—tartan trews, matching waistcoat and jacket, his spectacles pushed low upon his

rounded nose as he always wore them when he was checking figures in the account books.

“Alastair, allow me to introduce to you the Duke and Duchess of Devonbrook...”

As she would have expected at such a noble pronouncement, Alastair’s eyes went wide and he bowed his head several times in deferential greeting.

“...and this is Lord Knighton.” She added, “My husband.”

Alastair looked quickly to Grace before turning a bow to Christian. “It is an honor to finally make your acquaintance, my lord. A great honor indeed.” And then to Robert and Catriona, “And to you as well, Your Graces.”

“This is Mr. Alastair Ogilvy. He is Skynegal’s steward and a fine one at that. I don’t know what I would have done without him here to advise me these past many weeks.”

Alastair’s face colored nearly as red as his suit of clothes as he beamed under Grace’s compliment. “Thank you, my lady. ‘Tis been a pleasure, I assure you.”

With the introductions done, a sudden awkward silence fell over the room as if no one knew what next to say. Grace endeavored to put an end to it.

“Did you have something you’d come here to see me about, Alastair?”

“What? Oh, yes, indeed, my lady. McFee and McGee have just returned from Ullapool. I’ve a list here of what they were able to purchase and trade.”

He handed her a sheet of paper and Grace scanned the list, nodding. “Looks as if they were able to secure a fair price on the supplies.”

“Aye.” Alastair hesitated a moment before adding quietly, “My lady, I’m afraid there was bad news as well.” His dour expression told Grace something was very wrong.

“What is it?”

“‘Twas said just before they’d gone that the ship *Prospect* went down afore she reached the coast of New Scotland. It is believed everyone aboard her was lost.”

Grace felt a shiver at the news. She set the list she had been studying down atop the desk and turned from the others a moment to face the small window overlooking the courtyard. As she watched the children at play there, she remembered one small smiling face, thumb perpetually stuffed in his mouth, happy blue eyes laughing beneath a mop of blonde ringlets.

Thomas McAllum had had all the innocence and energy of a three-year-old bundle of mischief. He had arrived at Skynegal late one soggy night with his Ma and his Da and several siblings, and had immediately stolen his way into everyone’s hearts. Expressive, curious, when Grace would come into the office to work on the castle’s accounts, she would often find him curled up in the kneehole of her desk, waiting to pop out his head with an exuberant “*Boo!*” after which he would throw his tiny arms around her neck and squeeze her tightly as he could.

When his parents had finally booked passage on a ship bound for New Scotland, Thomas hadn’t wanted to go. Grace would never forget the way he had clung to her, crying that he wanted to stay at Skynegal, until she had convinced him to go. She could still see the image of him, standing on the deck of the sloop, waving to her as they had drifted off onto Loch Sgiathach, bound for Ullapool and their new life.

When she turned from the window moments later, she could scarcely see Alastair standing before her through her tears. “It was *Prospect*, wasn’t it, that Thomas’ family had sailed upon?”

Alastair nodded solemnly, even though she had known what his answer would be. She had so hoped she would be wrong.

Grace realized that all eyes in the room were upon her then and dashed away her tears. She looked to Christian, Robert, and Catriona where they were still sitting before her. She suddenly wanted—needed—to be alone.

“Alastair, might I trouble you to show the duke and duchess to the set of chambers across the hall from mine? Deirdre and Flora should be finished readying them now and I’m sure our guests are tired after their journey. And please ask Deirdre to see if she can put together a supper for our guests. I’d wager young James would love to try some of Deirdre’s shortbread.” She smiled at the lad. “She puts a bit of lavender in it.”

Alastair nodded and waited while Catriona and Robert bid farewell to Grace and Christian before leading them from the room. When they had gone, Grace turned to face her husband.

“Christian, I—”

“He seems an able man,” Christian said in obvious regard to Alastair.

Grace nodded. “He has been more helpful than I could have ever imagined. He is a wonderful friend.”

Christian looked at her queerly, as if he didn’t quite take her meaning. “Has he been steward here long?”

“Since long before my arrival here. He was born and raised on Skynegal land.”

“That is good.” Christian nodded. “He ought to do well in handling things then after you return to London.”

Grace stared, as if Christian had just told her the sky was green and the moon was made of pudding.

Return to London.

He truly thought she would just leave Skynegal? She had, of course, expected this from him, though not so soon after his arrival. It was as if he stood blind to what had just taken place before them, to all that surrounded them in the many faces of the crofters who had watched them when they had returned from the brae.

An anger Grace had never given in to suddenly surged through her. “How dare you? Does your arrogance know no bounds? You suddenly appear here and expect that I would put aside everything to return to London with you, abandon these

people for a life I willingly left behind? Simply because you expect me to?" She shook her head. "I will not be returning to London now, Christian. Not while I am needed here."

Christian stared at her, stunned.

Grace strove to maintain her calm. She saw now that she had been mistaken in thinking Christian had changed in the time she'd been away, for while he might regret the bluntness of his words to her that night, he still did not hold any true regard for her feelings. If he did, he would know how terrible the words he had just spoken to her were.

"Grace, what you have done here is commendable, but I am a marquess and I have responsibilities which demand my presence in London. I shouldn't even have left to come here now, but—"

"Then why are you here?"

Christian stared at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"It's a simple question, Christian. Why are you here? Why did you come all the way to Scotland to find me if your presence is so needed in London?"

"That should be obvious, Grace. You are my wife."

She couldn't keep the scorn from her voice when she said in response, "I am the wife you did not want."

Christian stared at her a long moment. "I cannot go back and change what happened, Grace."

"Tell me, my lord, was it untrue? Are you telling me now that you truly wanted to marry me?"

"Grace, don't do this."

But she wasn't about to let it go. Not now. Not when he was threatening to overthrow everything she had come to care about the past weeks. "Has my absence in your life suddenly endeared you to me, Christian? Or is it that my leaving you as I did was merely too much of an embarrassment for you? Can you honestly say that you love me, Christian?"

Pressed for the truth, Christian could only fall silent.

“I didn’t think so,” Grace whispered, suddenly wishing she hadn’t gone as far as she had. Her insides were knotted and her throat felt suddenly tight. It was a question she hadn’t really wanted to know the answer to—again.

Grace turned to leave the room. She stopped at the door when Christian finally spoke.

“Damn it, Grace! I don’t know that I know what loving someone means, or if I *can* know what it means. I don’t even know you. I need to spend time with you, to learn more about you. And there are things about me you do not know. Perhaps once you learn of them, of the true person I am, your feelings for me will change. All I do know is that I am here because I came to realize that I had treated you unfairly in London. I would have come sooner had I known where you were all this time.”

Grace turned, staring at him in silence.

His voice softened. “Grace, I cannot know what the future may hold for us. Neither of us can.”

She closed her eyes, folding her arms over herself. She wanted so badly to believe him, to believe that even someday he might be able to love her as she did him. But could she do what he wanted of her? Could she return to London at the risk of losing everything she had accomplished over the past weeks here at Skynegal? To Grace, loving someone meant lending support to their ambitions and dreams, yet Christian had been at Skynegal a matter of minutes and already he had asked her to abandon everything that mattered to her. He wanted her to leave the very people who depended upon her here for the uncertainty of a future with him in a place she most certainly didn’t wish to be.

What if once they were back in England, he cast her aside again as he had before? And what of their child? If she told Christian now that she was carrying his heir she might never know if he had changed for her, or simply because of the responsibility he felt for the child.

It was too great a risk to set the rest of her life balancing upon.

“I am sorry, Christian, but I cannot leave Skynegal. Not now. I have begun something here that I cannot abandon. Something I *will* not abandon.”

“Grace, from the looks of things and from what your steward was saying, you are barely making do as it is. Look at yourself. You are a marchioness, a member of one of the wealthiest families in England, and yet you wear woolens like one of your tenants. You drink tea out of crockery cups.”

“Does it taste any better, my lord, when drunk from porcelain? Why should you be offended that I prefer the perceived crudities of life here to your false ‘polished’ society in London? Life here is *real*, not some grand and noble masquerade. The people may not wear imported silk, but they also do not wear the arrogance, the privilege that you do with it. When I look in the mirror, Christian, I see a person, not a rank I was born to. Yes, we have grown short of funds. Feeding dozens of people at a time is costly, but it is only until I receive the monies I have requested of Mr. Jenner from the account set aside for Skynegal. I have written to him thrice now and I hope to hear from him at any time. I—”

Grace suddenly realized how it was Christian had discovered her whereabouts. She let go a resigned breath. “Mr. Jenner. It was he who told you where I had gone.”

“Do not blame him, Grace. He required my signature approving the disbursement of the funds you’d requested. He knew you needed the money. He had no choice in the matter.”

“But it is an account left to me in trust.”

“And as your husband, the management of the account falls under my direction. According to the way in which the trust was written, I cannot use the monies for reasons other than the improvement of the estate, but I can disallow their being disbursed if I do not agree with the purpose of their use.”

Grace felt a shiver slither through her. Perhaps it was his use of the word *improvement*, that term which signified so much more here in the Highlands than anywhere else. But suddenly, she felt as if all she had worked for over the past

weeks was about to take a drastic turn. “Are you saying you will not release the funds needed to me?”

“I did not say that, Grace. I have only just arrived. I will have a look about the estate, to know firsthand what it is you hope to accomplish here. I will stay for a few days to assess the situation. Then, and only then will I make my decision.”

twenty-seven

*I am not the sort of person
you and I took me for.*

-Jane Carlyle

Christian turned from his quiet study of the moon at the sound of someone approaching behind him. In the darkness, he could see Robert coming down the pathway to join him on the shore of the loch. He'd been standing there for the past hour, maybe longer, pondering his relationship with his wife, trying to bring reason to this most unreasonable situation. His years of study at Eton could offer no remedy.

“Has Catriona gone to bed already?”

Robert smiled as he often did at the mention of his wife's name. It was something he still did even after five years of marriage. “When last I left her, she and Grace were sitting with James engrossed in one of Deirdre's stories. I never thought I'd meet another who could spin a yarn as well as Catriona's da, Angus.”

A moment passed in silence. Two. Robert said, “I take it things didn't go well with Grace then?”

“Not particularly.”

“Tell me, friend, if I'm intruding where I shouldn't be.”

Christian took up a flat stone and skipped it carelessly across the surface of the water, watching as the ripples from it fanned outward in the moonlight. “Perhaps it would do me

good to hear a differing perspective. I seem to be at an impasse.”

“She won’t return with you to London?”

“No.”

Robert sighed. “Aye, once Scotland’s in the blood, it’s a part of you forever. There’s no leaving it behind.”

“Yet you managed to convince Catriona to leave Rosmorigh to go with you to England.”

Robert shrugged. “I didn’t have to convince her. Catriona loves me and she knows no matter where we might travel, we will always come back to the Highlands. Devonbrook Hall is a ducal mansion, more a museum than a dwelling, and no matter how I’ve altered it, it will always hold memories of the fire. The other Devonbrook properties are merely holdings, the London house more a convenience than anything else. But Rosmorigh...is our home. It’s as much a part of Catriona as that fiery hair and her Scots’ stubbornness. I’d live there with her even if it were as small and poky as Angus’s cottage on the moor. But I love her, and love makes a person do unusual things sometimes.”

Christian stared at his friend, considering his words.

And then it struck him all at once, the very answer to his troubles—how he would convince Grace to return with him to England.

He was going to have to make his wife fall in love with him.

And he had just three days in which to do it.



EARLY THE FOLLOWING MORNING, after a breakfast of Deirdre’s oatcakes and cheese and Catriona’s own special blend of blueberry and clover tea, Christian asked Grace if she would take him on a tour of the castle and surrounding grounds. She

had looked at him queerly, no doubt taken aback by the request, but then, after a moment's thought, she agreed.

Over the next three hours, she took him through what surely must have been every inch of the venerable keep, one that had stood on this site nearly five hundred years before there had ever been a Duke of Westover. As they threaded their way through each corridor and time-haunted chamber, Grace related to Christian in detail the repairs they had accomplished, and the work yet to be done. She showed him the garret, where they had repaired the roof, and described how they had taken down the ivy that had once liberally covered the outer barmkin. He saw that Castle Skynegal was a formidable stronghold. The donjon, its central tower, that housed the main residence, rose some sixty feet to the battlements. It was constituted of six storeys with a garret that was housed under a center pitched roof. The private chambers took up the topmost three floors, the great hall the middle two, and the service rooms were at the bottom, all accessed by a narrow spiral staircase at one corner. Several smaller side chambers had been niched into the thick walls for use as dressing rooms, storage closets or wardrobes. The two side towers, its wings, housed the kitchen and its accompanying chambers, a pantry, bake house, kiln, brew house, and the estate office.

It was like a small village.

Grace concluded their tour by taking Christian up to the battlements on the north tower overlooking Loch Sgiathach. Ordinarily when she came here, she would stand, sometimes for an hour or more while the legendary birds of Skynegal soared through the sky around her. The wind blew in harsh off the loch, pulling at her shawl, and if the day were clear, she might see all the way to the Hebrides. She would toss bits of oatcake to the birds and sometimes she would prop her sketching easel on the battlements and draw the crofter's cottages that lay nestled in the distance along the loch shore. But always, whenever she would come here, she would find herself filled with a sense of peace unlike anything she had ever known, wholly connected to this unique place.

But today, even that peace could not ease the disquietude of Grace's thoughts.

In the short space of twenty-four hours, she had discovered she was with child, had had her husband, whom she had abandoned, suddenly appear. And now she had to face the very real threat of a dissolution to all she had worked for. All through the night before, she had tried to think of a way in which she might convince Christian to grant her the funds she needed to continue her work at Skynegal. She had passed hours in her bedchamber, poring through texts by candlelight, searching for something—anything—that might aide her in her mission until the dawn had begun to break over the Sgiathach Hills, bringing in the start of a new day.

But as she stood with him now on the tower, watching him as he peered out over the loch, her thoughts turned from the future of the estate and the Highlanders. Her thoughts turned to Christian.

Many times during the morning, Grace had wanted to tell him that she carried his child. She had stopped herself each time from speaking the words aloud. Weighing heavily on her mind was the knowledge that Christian had been forced by his grandfather to accept her and she realized now how foolish she had been to have expected that Christian should fall in love with her, a woman he had never known and certainly had never wanted. Even now, Grace knew his only reasons for having come to Scotland were more from a sense of duty. If she told him of the child she carried, he might stay, yes, but would he only end up resenting her for it? Or worse, would he withhold the monies in effort to force her to return to England so that she would give birth to his heir there? It wasn't the sort of life Grace wanted, not for herself, not for Christian, and certainly not for their child.

By the time Grace left the tower and returned with Christian to the estate office, it was midday. He had asked if he might have a look at the estate account books so that he could have a full understanding of the expenditures. Grace fidgeted with her teacup as she watched Christian studying the ledgers across the desk from her. His eyes skimmed each column, but

he said nothing, his expression remaining unreadable. What if he decided the estate wasn't in need of further restoration? Surely, it was habitable now, but there was still so much more she wanted to do. If only he could have seen Skynegal as it had been at her arrival so that he might better appreciate the progress they had made since.

During that morning, through each chamber she had led him to, Christian had listened with genuine interest as Grace had pointed out all of the renovations that had already been completed. Would he see the importance of her work there? Would he lend his support to it?

“As you can see,” she said, unable to stand the silence any longer, “we were able to avoid a great deal of expense by hiring the workers locally, and teaching the others.”

Christian nodded. “It was a provident choice. They have done excellent work.”

“And we have really only just begun the castle's restoration. The repairs to the roof were finished last week, and the curtain wall is very nearly rebuilt. Once that is completed, I had hoped to begin work on the kitchen.” She removed a handful of sketches she had made for an addition to the eastern façade from the desk drawer.

“You drew these?” he asked.

Grace nodded. “I've always had a fondness for sketching buildings.” She scarcely noticed his expression as she went on. “Where the kitchen is now located is too small an area and a potential fire hazard. If we were to enclose the courtyard and relocate the kitchen here, should a fire occur, it would be prevented from reaching the donjon by the passages here” — she pointed to the drawing— “and there.”

As Grace nattered on about roof slates and window glazing, Christian could hear the passion she felt for the work she had done at Skynegal in her words. It was impossible not to. Her enthusiasm was palpable. It was in her eyes, bright and alive, and her passion for the plight of the Highland people was equally as evident.

Grace had spent a good deal of the morning telling Christian about the clearances taking place on the neighboring estates, describing the cruel evictions and the hopelessness of a people who suddenly found themselves without resources. She introduced him to many of them, young and old alike, and told him what each of them had personally suffered. While their stories did certainly move him, Christian held the unusual position of having been born a noble landowner, understanding of the motive for profit from the land as well as an estate owner's right to do what he wished with his own property. Still, having seen firsthand the impoverished Highlander's plight, he could not morally approve of what had been taking place on the neighboring estates.

The unfortunate fact remained that no matter how she might want to, Grace could not singlehandedly assume the responsibility of feeding and housing every displaced Highlander in Wester Ross. There would come a time when the account set aside for Skynegal's support would run out. He wondered that she had even thought of it.

"Grace, I think it is commendable that you have found a way to employ the displaced Highlanders with the renovations to the castle. But you must know that the work will not go on forever. Have you given any thought to what you will do when there is no more restoration to be done here?"

If he had expected that she wouldn't have a prospectus in mind, he was mistaken.

"Actually, I *have* thought about it. I have even hatched upon an idea that will serve to benefit everyone concerned." She reached into the top desk drawer and withdrew what proved to be a map of Scotland, complete with notations and figures drawn upon it.

She pointed to the map. "Roads."

"Roads?"

"Roads," she repeated on a determined nod. "I have been doing some reading. Some fifty years ago, there was an English general named Wade who was assigned to help keep peace in the Highlands when the Jacobite threat was imminent.

His soldiers had a difficult time moving through the countryside so he established a network of military roads that would give easier access into the more remote parts of the country. General Wade only built his roads as far north as Inverness, and he used the soldiers under his command for the labor. I have read many of the publications that have been printed by the landowners who are carrying out the evictions in favor of the ‘Improvements,’ as they call them, here in the Highlands. Despite the fact that they greatly understate their measures, their main motive, they say, is to modernize what they believe are a primitive people whose only ability lies in rudimentary farming. But there are so many other gifts the people here have to offer. There are just so many obstacles before them—language certainly one of them. One of the biggest obstacles I can see is the inaccessibility to the Highlands. Transport of any distance must be made by water. But if we were to follow General Wade’s example—”

Christian stared at her. “You are telling me you want to outfit the entire Scottish Highlands with a road system?”

Grace smiled. “Not by myself, of course. I was thinking instead of making a request to the Crown for a grant of monies.”

Suddenly, an image presented itself to Christian, an image of Grace standing before England’s own indolent and arrogant King George IV, dressed in her Scottish woolens, trying to convince the newly-crowned king that he should cease spending Crown money on his ridiculous palace at Brighton, and instead give it over to the aid of the Scottish peasantry.

Looking at her now, Christian realized she would do it, too.

Was this the same timid young woman who had once viewed a London ballroom as if it were a lion’s den? Or had Grace never actually been that person, instead only seeming so because it was the role he had *expected* her to play? He hadn’t given her credit for the ability to pour a proper cup of tea, yet here he stood, in a castle she had almost singlehandedly refurbished, before scores of people who worshipped her,

listening as she exuberantly laid out plans for spending Crown money.

Somewhere, in the past weeks, in a way that could not be attributed to any one feature such as a different way of wearing her hair or a new gown, Grace had truly blossomed. It was in the way in which she moved about the estate and spoke with the people with a confidence and ease—and even more, a contentment that had freed her as he had never seen before. He found himself wondering what he might do to make her smile at him in that same way.

All during that morning, he had watched her as she spoke in basic, halting Gaelic with several of the women who were spinning the wool, or as she had listened intently while a young child had repeated his latest English lesson. Grace truly listened to what each person who came to her had to say. If they spoke to her in Gaelic, she did her best to comprehend and did not scorn them for not having a grasp of English. Grace knew each one of the crofters by name, from the eldest grandmother to the tiniest toddler. She knew if they had been ill, if it was nearing their birthday. Watching her thus only made Christian realize his own inadequacy.

He did not know much more than the surnames of those who peopled his own family holdings. It was a reserve that had served to keep him apart from them, detached; something he had been instructed in by his grandfather from an early age.

“If you become too familiar with them, they will no longer respect you. Without respect, you cannot hope to rule.”

The difference was Grace had no desire to rule these people. Yet the respect they had for her, the allegiance they gave her, was more than he could ever hope for from his own tenants, people who had lived on and tended his family’s lands for generations. These people had known Grace for only a matter of weeks, and it was clear they would willingly fight for her, defend her as they would their own—to the death if necessary. It was a fact made even more evident by the distrustful glances they had given him when Grace had introduced him as her husband and the new laird of Skynegal.

Christian had never before felt as uncomfortable in his own clothes as he had when he had stood among the population of Highlanders. His dress was not pretentious by London society's standards, but here in the rugged Highlands, his velvet coat and nankeen breeches seemed almost flagrant when compared to the crofter's woolens, woolens which Grace had adopted in lieu of fine silk. They all wore the tartan—the Skynegal tartan Grace had told him—modeled after a scrap of the tartan of her grandmother's family, the MacRaths, which she had discovered while rooting around in the castle's upper garret. To the people of Skynegal, it was a symbol of their allegiance, of belonging, and it only made him feel even more the outsider.

What Grace was doing here, rebuilding the estate and coming to the aide of the people, felt right in every way. It had reason. It had purpose. If he refused Grace the funds in effort to compel her to return to London with him, the separation and distrust that already existed between them would only become a gulf they might never recover from. He knew in that moment that he would never be able to refuse her the money she needed for Skynegal. He didn't want to refuse her. In fact, he wanted to be a part of it.

“Grace, you will have a difficult time convincing the Crown to grant you monies for the road-building project.”

She frowned at his defeatism. “But I will not know for certain unless I try. And I do plan to try, Christian.”

He held up a hand. “You didn't allow me to finish. What I was going to say is you would stand a better chance of getting a grant if the idea were presented to the House of Lords instead.”

“The Lords?” She furrowed her brow. “I rather doubt they would be willing to listen to the whims of a woman, no matter how sensible those *whims* might be.”

“Perhaps, but they would be willing to listen to one or more of its members.”

Grace looked at Christian, staring at him with an expression that showed she clearly suspected what he was

offering to do, and prayed she wasn't mistaken.

“Let me help you, Grace. I would discuss your idea with Robert. He also holds a place with the Lords and, as a Scottish landowner, he would obviously have an interest in the project. He might manage to influence some of the other Scottish lords to lend support to the idea as well.”

Grace could hardly contain her hope. She came around the desk and threw her arms around Christian's neck. “Oh, Christian, thank you...”

The touch of her body, the scent of her, impacted upon Christian in an instant. He told himself to step away from her even as he tightened his arms around her. For the weeks while she had been gone, he had never once known a sexual thought. Numerous ballrooms filled with variously lovely women hadn't so much as given him a stir of interest. Now, as he stood there, he could feel his pulse quicken, and his only thought was that of having her, this woman.

When she tipped her head up to look at him, she wore that same smile he had longed for earlier. Her eyes shone brilliantly blue. It was to be his undoing. His only possible response was to lower his head and touch his lips to hers.

It was a kiss that held all the emotions they had both forsaken the past months. It was long and deep and utterly sense-stealing. And it was interrupted all too soon.

“Oh—good heavens, my lady, my lord—do forgive me. I had no idea.”

It was Alastair, of course, simply following Grace's wish that he should not feel the need to knock before entering the castle office. His face was cherry-red with his embarrassment.

Grace immediately broke away from Christian's embrace. “It is all right, Alastair. I am supposed to be helping Deirdre with the children's reading lesson now.”

She looked at Christian briefly, before she skirted around him and out the door.

An awkward silence fell over the room the moment she had gone.

“My apologies, my lord, I seem destined for the curse of bad timing.”

Christian shook his head, patting the man on the shoulder even as he thought that at that particular moment, he couldn't have agreed more.

twenty-eight

*The eyes of man are of no use
Without the observing power.*

-E. Paxton Hood

Christian passed the better part of the next two days riding about the estate with Robert and Alastair. He had discussed Grace's idea of putting the displaced Highlanders to the work of building roads with Robert, who enthusiastically supported it. Together, they would prevail upon some of the other members of the House of Lords, and present a proposal for it at their next session.

It would mean that Christian would need to remain longer at Skynegal in order to get a more accurate scope of the landscape the estate comprised, and to set down a detailed plan for the building of the roads. And there was still the situation with Eleanor and Lord Herrick to consider. He had spent the night before mulling it over to no happy conclusion. No matter how he tried to find a way around it, he kept coming back to the same inevitability. He was going to have to break the one promise he had made to his sister. He had to bring an early end to Eleanor's first season, and summon her and Lady Frances to Skynegal. He had no other choice.

As they rode along the brae to the east, Alastair educated Christian on the particulars of Skynegal and its neighboring estates. According to the Scotsman, Skynegal was not a vast holding by Scottish standards, such as that of Sunterglen to the

north and east, but what Skynegal lacked in size, it more than claimed in physical riches.

Touching on the mist-covered shore of Loch Sgiathach, the estate moved inland across a verdant glen, following the River Kerry eastward toward Dubh Loch. It was glorious country mottled here and there with dense deer forest, shimmering loch, and the occasional ancient broch. Along with the beauty, Christian received a firsthand view of the burnt-out cottages that littered the silent and deserted hillside close by to the border of the neighboring estate where the Highlanders had once worked and thrived, where stories had been handed down for generations around a smoky peat fire, where memories had been made.

Christian stood beneath a sober drizzle, oblivious of the rain. He found himself caught by the sight of a tattered scrap of tartan waving in the breeze from a tree branch that had been stuck in the ground beside one of the deserted cottages, a last proud symbol of a time that was seemingly gone forever. He wondered how the British people could know more of what was happening across an ocean in America, but had heard nothing of the injustices being wrought here. The British had fought for so many years to keep other countries and peoples from being oppressed, by the likes of Napoleon, yet at home, they would oppress their own. The hypocrisy of it sickened him.

“‘Tis difficult for the landlords to understand,” Alastair said, staring at the makeshift tartan flag. “We Scots think of our past and our native land with a passionate attachment. Many of us have lived on plots that had been occupied by our fathers and grandfathers before us. In the beginning, the landlords promised improvement. They offered plots to replace those that were formerly occupied, yes, but they did this by driving the people from their fertile land in the glen to new homes perched upon rock and moorland, with far less arable land than what they had originally.”

“Could the Scots not resist, perhaps apply to the authorities for intervention?” Christian asked.

Alastair shook his head. “Unfortunately, my lord, it is these same landlords and their factors who serve as the justices of the peace. The Scots are a devout people and some of our ministers have even begun to exhort the people to submit and quiet their protest, telling them that these Clearances are punishment from God for the sin of the Jacobite uprisings. In truth, the ministers are just accepting tithes in the forms of bribes from the landowners.”

As he listened to the Scotsman’s words, Christian began to more fully understand Grace’s commitment to what she had begun here at Skynegal. She was on a singular crusade to save the Highland populace from extinction. “It would seem there must be some way to bring charges against those who have treated the tenants so inhumanely.”

“Aye, my lord, the people did manage it—once. ‘Twas the most notorious factor of them all, Patrick Sellar, four years ago back in ‘16. Ne’er a more callous man has come to the Highlands since Cumberland in the ‘45. Even the mention of his name will bring the lassies to tears.”

“I remember reading that he was brought to trial for his misdeeds,” Robert said, having come along on the trek.

“Aye, Your Grace, and summarily acquitted, too.”

Christian looked to Robert. “And you have seen nothing of this at Rosmorigh?”

“We had heard of the Clearances, yes, but they have thus far not extended near to Rosmorigh. Had they, you could wager your last pound Catriona would be making every bit the effort Grace is. My wife was raised as a crofter. It is not until one is faced with it like this that one can comprehend the fact that such a thing has happened.”

They had been riding at a slow walk, talking as they made their way around the eastern border of Skynegal to circle to the north before heading back to the castle. The horses came around a small copse of oak trees and Christian spotted something lying discarded in a bog ditch. At his first glance of it, he had thought it merely a bundle of rags left behind by one

of the evicted crofters. Looking closer, though, he realized that out of that bundle of rags, there reached a single pale hand.

He pulled his mount to a halt and swiftly dismounted, hastening to the ditch. He took the outstretched hand, felt along the wrist for a pulse. He found a faint beat beneath the covering of ice-cold skin. He called to the others for help before gently urging the figure over to face him.

Christian sucked in his breath when he saw what appeared to be a woman, perhaps thirty years of age. Her hair was matted, disheveled about her dirt-smudged face, a face so gaunt she appeared to have not eaten in days. She moaned when Christian moved her as if her very bones threatened to snap from the effort. Alastair handed Christian a small flask of water he'd brought along and Christian touched it to the woman's parched mouth. "Here, miss, please drink."

After a moment or two, her eyelids began to flutter. She slowly opened her eyes, squinting against the harsh light of the day. But when she focused on Christian's face, she let out an unearthly howl, struggling to push away from him as she cried out, over and over, "*Oh! Sin Starke! Sin Starke!*"

A moment later, her body went limp in his arms, her cries suddenly silent.

"She's fainted, my lord," Alastair said, shaking his head dolefully. "She must come from Sunterglen many miles north of here. She thought you were Mr. Starke, the new factor of the Sunterglen estate, a man as feared as Patrick Sellar ever was." He shook his head. "Poor thing. I fear she's lost her mind."

Christian knelt down and took the woman up in his arms. She whimpered at the sudden movement before she fell silent again. He found she weighed no more than a child.

"Help me to get her onto my mount, Robert. We will take her back to Skynegal and get her some warm clothing and something to eat."

GRACE WAS STANDING in the courtyard with Deirdre, and they were discussing the list of food supplies that would need to be purchased when next McFee and McGee made the trip to Ullapool. Deirdre had just set some of the older children to peeling the potatoes for that evening's supper. "We'll be needin' some salt to cure the cod afore the winter comes and—"

The Scotswoman fell silent. She stared over Grace's shoulder with an expression that was in one moment curious, and in the next filled with dread.

Grace turned and saw that several figures were approaching down the hillside on horseback, no doubt Christian, Robert, and Alastair returning from their ride. She started across the courtyard to meet them, shielding her eyes against the ebbing sunlight. She recognized Alastair first atop his pony, for his bright tartan suit made him the most conspicuous. Robert rode beside him, but Grace barely took account of him for she was focused completely upon Christian. He was on his horse and seemed to be carrying something before him and then she realized it was not *something* he carried, but *someone*.

"Deirdre!"

Together, the two women hurried to meet them.

"Christian, good heavens, what has happened?"

"We found her near the east border. I am afraid she has fallen unconscious."

He pulled his horse to a halt at the door leading inside the castle where Flora at that moment stuck out her head, no doubt wondering what the commotion was about.

As the others followed, Robert and Alastair quickly told Grace of how they had found the woman lying near dead and delusional at the other side of the estate, a distance of nearly two miles. Christian took the woman to the warmest room in the keep, the kitchen, and lay her in the pine box bed that was built into the wall near to the bread oven where Flora usually slept. As Christian stepped away, Deirdre came forward to see

to the woman. As soon as she turned her face into the light, Deirdre let out a gasp.

“What is it, Deirdre?”

“I know her.” Deirdre’s eyes were wide with concern. “She is Seonag, my Tom’s sister.”

Just then the woman, Seonag, cried out, conscious now, clutching at her belly. “*Leanabh!*”

And in that instant, Grace froze.

She had recognized the Gaelic word for *bairn*.

twenty-nine

But love's a malady without a cure.

-John Dryden

Seonag moaned as another pain tightened around her. Through several long moments, the contraction grew, swelled, bringing the bedraggled woman upright on the box bed in the shadowed corner of the castle kitchen. Since bringing her there, day had given over to night, leaving them with only the light from the fire and a scattering of candles set about the room to guide them.

Deirdre murmured to her in Gaelic, urging Seonag back on the bed. “You must lie down, *piuthar*.”

Seonag’s cheeks were heat flushed, her hair damp and sticking to the sides of her face. She was so weak, she struggled for a breath, fighting against the pull of the contraction as she dropped her head back on a weak wail that echoed to the rafters of the great hall.

Deirdre spoke soothing words to her, smoothing a cool water cloth over her brow while Flora set to boiling water, fetching clean cloths, lighting another candle, anything to keep herself occupied in the midst of the prolonged chaos.

They had removed Seonag’s clothing, and washed the mud and soot from her in a wooden tub before covering her in a large man’s sark. A swathe-band had been placed beneath her, under her arms so that Flora and one of the other women

might lift her slightly from the bed to ease when it came time for her to bear down.

It grew late as one day moved on into the next, yet no one inside the castle slept. Upstairs, in the great hall, the others sat upon their sleeping pallets, murmuring quietly to one another until one of Seonag's moans would sound from the kitchen beneath them. They would hush whenever they heard her, waiting for that anticipated cry of an infant, while holding close to their own children.

And when that cry did not come, they waited again, whispering wishes of hope in Gaelic.

Seonag was the sister of Deirdre's deceased husband, Tom, and the only family Deirdre had left to her. By Deirdre's estimate, Seonag was not to have given birth for at least another month; she had seen Seonag when she had gone to visit her just three weeks earlier, and all had been well. All would have remained well, too, had the eviction's agents not come in the twilight hours soon after.

Seonag had been alone at the small croft she and her husband, Eachann, worked on the Sunterglen estate, where they had been tenants for the past seven years of their marriage. Seonag had already retired for the night when the soldiers had come to her door. She could have had no idea what lay in store for her when she was summoned by the sudden knocking. Eachann had gone from their croft only the day before to take their stock of cattle over the brae to where relatives lived on the other side of the vast Sunterglen estate. He planned to leave them to be tended, so that he could keep close to home after the birth of their first child. Eachann was confident he would return within ample time of the birth, else he would never have left Seonag alone as he had.

That night, as darkness fell, the eviction's agents ordered Seonag, heavy with child, out of her home, giving her only enough time to gather up the soft woolen blanket she had been knitting by the light of the hearth for her child. She was left to watch in horror as the soldiers set their torches to the meager cottage's thatched roof, setting the night sky aglow. Helplessly

she'd watched on while everything they owned in the world was consumed by the flames, helpless to do anything.

When it was done, they ordered her to leave the estate. She asked if she might remain among the smoldering ruins of her home long enough for her husband to return, but was refused. Seonag had had no choice but to begin the arduous trek to Skynegal, knowing she would find shelter at the home of her brother's widow. Eachann would return to find his home razed to the ground, and his wife and unborn child having vanished.

It was well after midnight in the tiny kitchen at Skynegal when the struggling infant's cry finally broke the veil of expectant silence. A relieved cheer went round the great hall and toasts were given over ale around the grand stone hearth, welcoming the tiny life that had survived despite the terrible circumstances its mother had endured. It was a boy, with a silken down of his father's carrot hair and eyes as blue as the clearest Highland summer sky. Both he and his mother, despite her exhaustion, were soon resting, tucked together in the box bed.

Christian and Robert had retired soon after the birth for they planned to leave in the morning to return to Sunterglen in hopes of locating Eachann to bring him to his wife and child at Skynegal. Flora had collapsed from nervous exhaustion, having fretted her way through the many hours of the birth. Deirdre was yet with the mother and child, leaving Grace a few moments to walk out alone among the cool moonlight, and confront the emotions she'd barely managed to hold in check throughout that night.

Witnessing the birth of Seonag's son had given Grace a new reverence for all that life represented—the vulnerability of its beginnings, the wonder at its continuous renewal. Brought on prematurely by the terrible deeds of others, and despite great odds, that tiny child had overcome it all. Grace had watched on in awe as Deirdre had guided that new life into the world, at once astounding and frightening. But Deirdre had been remarkable, knowing just what to do, what to say to ease Seonag's laboring. And at the moment that struggling cry finally came, nothing else had mattered. The soldiers, the fire

—all of it vanished for that single instant in time. It was truly the most precious moment, a hope for the future.

Grace lowered to sit on one of the granite slabs that lay at various places about the quiet courtyard. It was a chill night and she pulled her shawl close about herself while the moon shone down overhead. For the first time in many days, the sky was clear, the clouds that usually hung about at this hour oddly absent. Grace thought that it must surely be a harbinger of good fortune for the new life just arrived.

She rested the flat of her hand against where her own belly swelled so very slightly beneath the loose skirts of her gown. She thought to herself that she had never felt the absence of a mother's presence more.

Grace had been raised to such a sheltered existence, where the things most fundamental to life were never discussed. She had been stunned witnessing the harsh reality of birth, the unadulterated truth of one life begetting another. How she wished she could talk to Nonny, ask her the dozens of questions that were racing through her mind. How would she know when it was time for the baby to come? Had anyone ever fainted in the midst of bearing a child? How would she learn how to feed her child, to care for it?

She heard the sound of footsteps on the gravel behind her, turned to see Deirdre just emerging from the glowing light of the kitchen. She had removed the kerchief that normally bound her head, letting her hair fall freely down her back in dark waves well past her waist. As she drew near, Grace noticed that without her kerchief in place, Deirdre looked a much younger woman than she had thought, closer to her own age, which was remarkable for one so knowing.

“Your feelin’ a bit of upset after the birthin’, are you?”

Grace shook her head. And then, “Not much really.”

Deirdre came to sit beside her. “It frightened you, it did, milady, seein’ the birthin’ up close like that. Makes you frightened, does it not, for when ‘tis time for your own bairn to come?”

Grace looked at her. She had thought no one but Liza knew of the tiny life she carried, but then she wasn't really surprised Deirdre had sensed the truth despite her silence. Deirdre had a mysterious way of seeing things others never noticed. It often left Grace wondering that Deirdre didn't perhaps possess this "sight" Alastair seemed ever ascribing to her.

"It was a little startling to see, yes. I didn't know it would be so... so..."

"So messy?" Deirdre nodded. "I would imagine all you've seen of mams and bairns is wee bundles o' sweetness wrapped in soft white blankets, cooing and smelling like mornin' sunshine."

Grace nodded, suddenly ashamed at her own ignorance.

"Birthin's an untidy business, my leddy, naught a bit elegant about it. But dinna worry yourself o'er it. Seonag had it worse than most. She was brought to the birthin' too early and the bairn wasna yet ready. I had to turn him and—"

Deirdre must have sensed that Grace didn't have the faintest idea of what she was talking about. She fell silent and set her hand gently over Grace's middle, splaying her fingers outward. Grace could feel the warmth of the woman's tender touch through the woolen of her gown and took comfort in it, covering her hand with her own.

"That bairn you carry now has his head nestled up here, 'gainst your belly. A wee bit afore a bairn is to come, nature turns him," she moved her hands, "bringin' his head down, to deliver him through the birthin' the easiest."

Grace looked down at herself, wondering at the child she carried, suddenly able to see the babe as more than a thought, a prospect, a dream, but as a reality growing within her. Would it be a boy, or perhaps a girl? Would she be dark like Christian, or would he be fair like her? Grace closed her eyes. Would he be loved by the father who didn't yet know he existed?

"I'm so frightened, Deirdre."

Awash with emotion, Grace finally gave over to the tears she had kept at bay for so long. Her shoulders shook and she

wept freely while Deirdre said nothing, simply enfolded her in her arms, tucking Grace's head against the warmth of her cheek. Grace leaned into the woman's smaller frame and they sat together for some time, rocking softly, neither speaking, neither feeling the need to. The evening breeze blew gently over them, stirring up a tiny whirlwind of leaves as Deirdre stroked her fingers lightly over Grace's forehead, through her hair, smoothing a stray lock of it behind her ear.

Twice now, when she had most needed, Deirdre had comforted her with a mother's touch. And just as on her first night at Skynegal, that touch had served to put Grace's fears at ease.

"You havna told the laird yet about the bairn?"

Grace shook her head in silence.

"How long will you wait?"

"Until I know for certain if he will try to force me to leave Skynegal."

Deirdre's fingers went still against Grace's forehead. "Do you mean to say that the laird hasna come to Skynegal to stay?"

"No, Deirdre, he has not. He has already asked me to leave, return with him to London and the life I left there. I told him I will not go."

Deirdre was quiet for several moments. "You think to discover if he loves you by your refusal to go back with him to London?"

Grace lifted her head. "If only it were that simple, Deirdre, but it is much more complicated. Christian never wanted to marry me. He was forced to it by his grandfather, the duke. His coming here was more out of a sense of duty than any concern for me."

Deirdre shook her head against the thought. "Oh, I think 'tis more than that."

"Oh, Deirdre, I wish it weren't, but I promise you, it is."

Deirdre nudged Grace into looking at her. She smiled gently, smoothing a tendril from her eyes. “But it makes no sense, my leddy, these words you speak. ‘Tis obvious he has some bit o’ regard for you. You are carrying his bairn, aye?”

Grace drew a deep breath. “Deirdre, you have never lived the life I had before coming here to Skynegal. It is so very different. You might find this difficult to believe, especially after the love you shared with your husband, but in some circles of society, a man and a woman couple for reasons other than love or even attraction. In London, it is more often induced by money and the desire for the continuance of that money through a male heir” —she frowned— “no matter how unappealing a chore that might prove to the gentleman.”

“Och, my leddy,” Deirdre chuckled. “Nature has ensured that for the man at least, coupling is no’ a chore. I’ve yet to see the man who dinna think on it both night and day. ‘Tis in their blood, it is.” Deirdre looked at her, one brow slightly cocked. “I’m thinking from what you’re saying’ ‘tis that the laird cares for you more than he may like to think.”

Grace shook her head against the thought.

“But you love him?”

Grace stilled, peering at Deirdre. “I do.”

“Then you must tell it to him.”

Grace opened her mouth to give voice to every reason she had against it, but Deirdre held up a hand, stopping her. “If you ne’er tell him that you love him, my leddy, then you will never know if he feels the same for you. Dinna wait too long, for there is no certainty of the morrow.”

Grace felt the weight of a single tear trickle down her cheek. “But I do know his feelings, Deirdre. He left me with no doubt of them. He never wanted me in his life. Don’t you see? It was for that reason I left him to come to Scotland.”

Deirdre simply smiled, shaking her head again. “Nae, my leddy, ‘tis you who doesn’t see. For if he truly dinna have a care for you, I promise you, he wouldn’t be here now.”

thirty

*There was a laughing devil in his sneer,
That raised emotions both of rage and fear;
And where his frown of hatred darkly fell,
Hope withering fled, and Mercy sighed farewell!*

-Lord Byron, *The Corsair*



There exists a tradition in the Highlands known as the *cèilidh*, begun in olden times, when neighbors and friends would gather together for an evening of food and drink, singing, storytelling, and most especially, dancing. It was an event that was looked upon with much anticipation, and long after remembered with joy, a celebration built on clan tradition, kinship, characteristics which sadly faded away during the past half century since the Jacobite defeat at Culloden. What better way could there be, Grace thought, than to honor the arrival of Seonag's son?

The warmth and good spirit that had enveloped Skynegal at the coming of the newly-born bairn was soon coupled with relief at the safe arrival of Seonag's husband, Eachann, at Skynegal two days later. Christian and Robert had happened upon him soon after he'd returned to his devastated cottage. The crofter's very worst fears at discovering his wife missing vanished behind his joy at hearing that Seonag and his new son were alive and safe and being cared for at Skynegal.

They had ridden through the night to return to the castle, coming at dusk the night before, road-weary and soaked through from the rain that had showered down upon them. But Eachann had scarcely noticed the damp. He had gone at once to where Seonag lay in a small chamber off the kitchen and hadn't left her side since.

The family would remain now at Skynegal for clan tradition embraced the bairn born there. A cottage was being planned for them on an arable plot of farmland in the glen where they might begin anew without the threat of eviction again. Until the cottage was finished, Eachann and Seonag would share their first precious weeks together in a pair of chambers situated at the far side of the east castle wing. A carved cradle had been discovered stored away in the castle's garret, and the other tenants had donated clothing, furniture, and other household necessities to help the young family begin anew.

The *cèilidh* was to be held the following week, on the grounds surrounding the castle, allowing Flora and Deirdre ample time to prepare. It was a perfect time for a celebration. The most-needed renovations at the castle, as well as many of the tenant's cottages, were nearly finished. Summer had come to the Highlands in a full regalia of rich heather and primrose, and brilliant golden broom. The Skynegal that Grace had looked upon at her arrival those few months earlier was but a memory to the glory the castle was now.

Standing atop a heather-swept hillock, looking on the castle from afar, Grace couldn't help but believe that Skynegal was very much a place of fairytales. The sunlight glittered on the water of Loch Sgiathach behind her, winking on newly-glazed windows. In her pastures, shaggy Highland cattle grazed contentedly on lush grass while the legendary birds soared in white abandon about the castle parapets. Never had Grace felt more at home. She knew now that she had found Skynegal, she could never leave. She also knew that although he had agreed to the release of any funds for her to continue her work, Christian had made no indication that he would stay—but, as Deirdre liked to point out, he wasn't making any plans to leave either.

Grace reached to where Dubhar stood at her side and scratched him behind his ears, gifting him with a nibble of cheese from her pocket before she turned toward the small gathering of children and mothers who awaited on the haughland ahead. It was a delightful day, carefree with the morning mist having burned off under the summer sun. She had dressed plainly in a gray homespun gown, her hair tucked beneath a kerchief like Deirdre wore, in preparation for an afternoon that would be spent gathering blueberries and blackcurrants for the baking they would do for the *cèilidh*.

“*Fàilte na maidne ort,*” one of the women, Morag, called out to Grace as she approached.

Grace returned the greeting and began to hand out the willow baskets she’d brought with her to the eager hands of the waiting children. She watched on with a smile as they then bounded off to fill them. A prize had been promised to the one who gathered the most berries, so they scattered into the surrounding heath fields, laughing and calling out amongst the ling and gorse, snatching a berry every so often for themselves as they began filling their baskets.

Grace was just starting off with her own basket when she spotted a figure running up the hillside toward them, arms waving haphazardly. “Lady Grace! Lady Grace!”

Grace shaded her eyes against the sun and saw that it was one of the boys who tended to the ponies in the stable. His name was Micheil and he was in an obvious state of upset, but Grace wasn’t alarmed for she knew that one of the castle mares was due to foal soon, and she’d asked to be called when it was her time.

“What is it, Micheil?” she asked as he reached her. “Has Jo begun to foal?”

“Nae, milady...” He came to a halt before her, breath heaving from having run so fast and so hard. It took him several moments, gulping air, bent over at the waist to calm himself. Finally, he said, “You must come right away. The man has come.”

“What man, Micheil?”

“‘Tis *Donas*.”

One of the women standing nearby dropped her basket to her feet, spilling berries. Grace peered at her and saw that the woman’s eyes had gone wide. She started speaking to others in rapid Gaelic, but Grace only caught a sparse few words, her limited knowledge of the language making it impossible to understand. But she repeatedly heard the word Micheil had used—*donas*.

And then, suddenly, Grace remembered that *donas* was the Gaelic word for *devil*.

She took the lad by the arm. “Micheil, what is it? Who is this *Donas*?”

“‘Tis Mr. Starke, come from Sunterglen.”

Grace felt a sudden chill that had nothing to do with a change in the weather. Starke was a name she had heard more times than she cared to count since coming to Skynegal. When spoken, it was a name that evoked upset and fear in anyone familiar with it—and far too many were. The fact that he was there at Skynegal was something that could only bode badly.

Grace set her basket on the ground and started for the castle, walking at first, then hurrying down the hillside with her skirts in hand. Any doubt she might have had as to whether the man had truly come vanished at the sight of the faces of those standing about the castle courtyard.

When Grace had departed earlier, there had been a feeling of good cheer, with women singing while they hung the laundry to dry, others weaving baskets, grooms mucking the stalls in the stables. Now, however, no one uttered a sound. They stood by quietly, watching where two figures conversed a distance away in front of the castle’s barmkin. When they noticed her approach, some of the onlookers began to whisper to one another; they had been watching for her arrival.

Grace strode across the courtyard, easily recognizing Christian as the taller of the two men. The other man standing with him was not quite so tall as he, but, in spite of this, his

figure stood in a manner that spoke of his belief in his superiority above everything, and most everyone around him.

Grace did not hesitate, even to catch her breath, but proceeded boldly forward, stopping only when she stood at Christian's side. Dubhar, who had run with her from the hillside, took his usual place at her hip. The dog did not, however sit as was his custom. Instead, he remained standing, on guard, his eyes watching the unsavory stranger.

Starke glanced once at Grace when he noticed her arrival, but briefly as he might an annoying midge. It was all the notice he gave her. Given the fact that she was dressed like any of the other women about the estate, her hair loosened now from her run, no doubt he thought her one of the Highlanders. Grace made use of his inattention to give the man a thorough study.

From the stories she'd heard of him, she would have expected someone more formidable, but in truth, he lacked most of the characteristics of authority. He was short and his clothing was garish, his manner more plebian than well-born. His prolonged smirk revealed a somewhat sadistic pleasure at the atmosphere his coming there had created.

"My lord," Starke said to Christian then, "might I say what a fine effort you have made in restoring the Skynegal estate?" He turned his back on Grace purposefully, as if to disregard her. "'Tis amazing what actually lay hidden beneath all that ivy overgrowth."

"Thank you, Mr. Starke," Christian said, "but the credit for it should go to my wife, Lady Knighton. It was she who has undertaken the castle's restoration."

Starke was silent a moment, digesting this, then turned to regard Christian again. His eyes seemed almost to narrow when he noticed that Grace was still there.

"Pray tell me, my lord, are you of a mind to sell the estate?" And before Christian could respond, "Perhaps you have heard tell of my employers, the Earl and Countess of Sunterglen? They are fine people. They have expressed an interest in purchasing the estate of Skynegal, and have charged

me, as their factor, with the honor of presenting an offer to you.” He peered at Christian. “They are prepared to pay a handsome sum.”

His words were so honeyed, and so transparent that Grace had to swallow back her distaste.

“I’m afraid, Mr. Starke,” Christian said, “that you are speaking with the wrong person. The estate of Skynegal came to my wife through an inheritance from her grandmother, a MacRath who was born and raised here. While, as her husband, I might advise the marchioness and manage certain affairs of the estate, the decision of whether or not to sell Skynegal would be entirely hers.”

Grace looked at Christian and felt her heart lighten. He had turned to her and she was suddenly reminded of the first night at Eleanor’s ball when she had fallen through the wall panel at his feet. A feeling she had spent the past months pushing away began to spark to life.

Starke nodded. “Indeed, well, then perhaps you might direct me to her ladyship so that I may present my offer to her personally?” He glanced around, completely ignoring Grace who still stood not three feet away from him. “Is Lady Knighton within the castle then? Shall we seek her out?” He glanced at Grace as if intending to charge her with the task of summoning the lady, herself, but thought the better of it. “Or perhaps I might just wait for her, if she is presently away from the castle.”

Christian quirked a smile, obviously enjoying the man’s oblivion. “No, Mr. Starke, Lady Knighton is not within the castle, but in fact, she is very close by.”

“Splendid. Shall we go to her then, my lord?”

Two burly Scotsmen standing closest to them chuckled softly to one another. Starke threw them a quelling look, one he no doubt employed often to effect.

“But there is no need to seek out Lady Knighton, Mr. Starke,” Christian said. “Lady Knighton stands before you even now.”

Starke turned to look where Christian finally gestured to Grace at his side. The realization of her identity played visibly across the factor's face. She looked no different than she had upon approaching a handful of moments earlier, but somehow, now that he knew who she was, she warranted his full attention—and without the dismissal he'd given her moments before. In fact, Starke went so far now as to bow his head reverently.

“Lady Knighton, indeed, it is my great honor to make your acquaintance.”

Grace did not respond in kind. She might be wearing woolens and her hair might not be formally dressed, but she had been born and bred the daughter of a nobleman. She reminded herself that she was the wife to the grandson of one of England's most powerful and wealthy dukes. Grace had never worn her position in life as did many of her peers—but she did now. Her expression remained fixed as she regarded the man, her only thought that for the many people whose lives had been ill-effected by the actions of this one man.

For months now, Grace had seen how the very mention of this man's name would bring terror. It was because of Starke's orders that Seonag and Eachann had been evicted from their home, very nearly losing their child. Even now, on the outskirts of the castle courtyard, the onlookers hung back in fear.

Starke looked to her. “As I was just saying to his lordship, my employers, the Earl and Countess of Sunter—”

“I heard what you proposed, sir,” Grace said, abruptly cutting him off. “I was standing right here. I decline your offer, Mr. Starke. Skynegal is not for sale.”

Starke frowned at her. “Perhaps then, instead of the estate entire, you might consider selling off a portion of the lands to the east, which border on the Sunterglen estate—”

Grace crossed her arms before her, raised her chin as she continued to regard the man with indifference. “Pray tell me, sir, do you seek this land because you have finally run out of tenants to turn out of their homes at Sunterglen, in order so

that you might graze sheep upon the graves of their ancestors?”

Starke glanced at Christian as if expecting him to intervene.

Christian remained a silent spectator to the exchange.

“I can assure you, madam,” Starke said, keeping his voice controlled, “any tenants we did wish to move would be relocated to alternate plots on Sunterglen.”

“I see.” Grace nodded. “Just as you *relocated* Seonag MacLean whilst her husband, Eachann, was away, and she in the last weeks of her pregnancy?”

Starke’s face paled at the accusation, one he wisely did not seek to refute.

“Pray, look around you, Mr. Starke.” Grace gestured to the onlookers that surrounded them on the courtyard. “Many of the people standing around you now are those who once peopled the estate of your *benevolent* employer, those who managed to survive your evictions. They have been forced to come here, to Skynegal, seeking shelter and aid. As I understand it, the earl and countess are newly come to Sunterglen, from England. They purchased the estate as an investment. I am the great-granddaughter of the last laird of Skynegal. This castle and this estate have been a part of my family for generations before there ever was an Earl of Sunterglen. Do you honestly believe I would sell off so much as one ell of this estate so that you might continue your merciless assault?”

“I had thought since,” Starke faltered, “you also come from England and—”

“My grandmother, while married to an English marquess, was a MacRath down to her kirtle. So long as I live, sir, I can assure you I would never disgrace the memory of my ancestors for a few pound’s profit.”

Starke stared at her, suddenly speechless. His eyes, which had before been deferential, now narrowed on her with hostility. He looked one last time to Christian, as if dismissing

Grace, a woman, entirely. “If you should happen to change your mind, my lord, you will find my employer’s offer a generous one.”

It had been intended as an affront to Grace, a discounting of her position in front of everyone who stood by. It was an insult that Christian was less than willing to allow.

He came forward, forcing Starke to step back, retreating further across the courtyard to where he almost stumbled. When Christian spoke, his voice was sharp with warning.

“Mr. Starke, I believe Lady Knighton has communicated her decision to you on the matter. Thus you no longer have any business here. I direct you to your horse so that you may leave the premises. Immediately. I would further suggest that you refrain from returning. Once you have crossed that border, if I learn that you have placed even one boot print on Skynegal soil, I will have you arrested and charged with criminal trespass. Do I make myself clear?”

Dubhar reaffirmed Christian’s words with a warning growl.

Starke stared at Christian. “With all due respect, my lord, you are making a mistake.” He bowed his head almost imperceptibly to Christian, then glanced at Grace, his mouth turning as if he’d just tasted something unsavory. He looked her up and down. “Your *ladyship*.”

Starke started walking to where his mount awaited with the three soldiers who had accompanied him. He pulled himself up slowly to settle into the saddle, tugged on his gloves, and then set his heels to the horse’s sides as he called to the soldiers to follow.

As he trotted from the courtyard, his departure was followed after by the jeers of the very people he had once maligned.

When he was gone, vanished over the hillside, the jeers became cheers for the Laird and Lady of Skynegal.

thirty-one

*She is a winsome wee thing,
She is a handsome wee thing,
She is a bonny wee thing,
This sweet wee wife o' mine.*

-Robert Burns

The conversation around the fire in the great hall that evening was of little else but Grace's swift dismissal of the despicable factor from Sunterglen. Toasts were raised, and those who had been witness to the scene related the tale for the others who had missed it. Each time the story repeated, the embellishment of it grew until, by the time they had finished their supper, it had taken on near-epic proportion.

No, she had not ordered the factor away at sword point, Grace informed, nor had she delivered him a blow, or had him seized and thrown into the loch. The more the *uisge-bheatha* flowed, the more elaborate the tale became. Soon, someone began composing a ballad in her honor. Though embarrassed by the attention, Grace was happy to allow the Highlanders this much-deserved celebration.

When they began making effusive toasts to her fingers and toes, though, Grace decided it was time to break away from the table. She crossed the room to join Liza, who sat holding Seonag and Eachann's son, Iain, in a secluded corner. Miraculously, the baby was sleeping soundly, despite the activity that filled the room.

Grace smiled at the maid as she took the seat beside her near the hearth. To see Liza now, one would never believe that she had once been a proper English ladies' maid in London. Echoing Grace's example, Liza had abandoned her prim maid's habit, favoring instead the looser, chemise-like blouse over ankle-length skirts of the Highlanders. She had even taken to leaving her hair hanging free and undressed.

“‘Twas a good thing,” Liza said to Grace, “your having ordered that devil away like you did.”

“I did nothing more than anyone else would have done under the same circumstances.”

“You minimize your efforts, my lady. Someone else could have taken the earl's offer. And it is not just what happened today. It is all you have done here in the past months.”

“We have so much to celebrate,” Grace said, smoothing a finger over the slumbering Iain's soft cheek, “Everyone has worked so hard and the castle looks so much better. I—”

Grace noticed that Liza wasn't actually listening to her. Instead, the maid's attention seemed to be focused squarely upon a handsome Highlander who was standing across the hall. He was a great hulking figure of a man, with midnight black hair and adventure-filled eyes. Those same eyes, Grace noticed then, were fixed keenly upon Liza in return.

He smiled, raising his whisky cup in silent salute. Liza drew in a slow breath. She broke away from her study of him only briefly when Seonag returned to claim the sleeping Iain. Settling back in her chair, Liza glanced once again to where the Highlander still stood, watching her with a gaze that rivaled the warmth of the fire beside them.

“Goodness, my lady, but have you ever seen such a man?”

Grace grinned. “Ah, I see you've noticed Andrew.”

It was as if Liza couldn't take her gaze away from him. Had she been a cat, Grace wouldn't have been at all surprised to hear her purring.

“Noticed him, aye, I have, indeed. Why haven't you told me about him afore now?”

“His name is Andrew MacAlister, and he arrived at Skynegal just yesterday. He fought in one of the Highland regiments against Napoleon, and has just returned to Scotland from the Continent. His family emigrated to America, but he decided to remain in the Highlands. He’s come seeking work and a place to settle.”

“Have you ever seen legs such as that?” Liza went on, appreciating the fit of his kilt. She actually sighed, giving Grace a chuckle.

“Perhaps I could introduce you...”

Liza turned to stare at Grace with wide eyes. “Oh, no, my lady, I look so...disheveled. My hair is—” she smoothed back an errant curl, “and my clothes are”

Grace glanced over Liza’s shoulder to see that Andrew was already approaching them. She grinned. “Well, it looks as if you won’t have much choice in the matter for he is headed in our direction as we speak.”

Liza’s eyes went even wider and she froze, suddenly too anxious to turn. She remained rooted to her chair, her back to the hall, peering at Grace with a look of pure panic.

A moment later, a rich brogue sounded from behind her.

“Guid evening, milady Grace. I hope I’m no’ disturbin’ you.”

“Not at all, Andrew.” She smiled at him in greeting. “How are you this evening?”

“Well, I was hopin’ I might beg an introduction to the fine lassie you have sittin’ aside you.”

Grace winked at Liza. “It would be my pleasure.” She stood. “May I present to you Miss Eliza Stone? Liza, please meet Mr. Andrew MacAlister.”

Liza turned slowly in her chair to face the waiting Highlander. The look on her face as she peered up at him was akin to wonder. Andrew took her hand, bowed over it with a gallant kiss. “It is an honour t’ make your acquaintance, Miss Stone.”

“Liza,” the maid murmured. “You can call me ‘Liza.’”

“Oh, aye, but only if you would call me ‘Andrew’ in kind,” he answered on a grin, the sort of grin that would make any girl’s knees turn to jelly.

It was a good thing, Grace thought to herself, that Liza was still sitting.

“Andrew,” Liza repeated.

He motioned outward to the center of the hall. “They’re preparin’ to play a bit of the fiddle. I wonder, would you care to partner me in a wee dance?”

Liza’s face fell. “Oh, but I cannot. I am afraid I do not know the steps of the Scottish reels.”

“‘Tis nothin’ to it, lass. I’ll teach it to you.”

Andrew drew Liza up from her chair, leading her away with a nod of parting to Grace. Grace stood by and watched as he set his great arms gently about Liza’s smaller frame, and slowly demonstrated the movements of the dance. They made an attractive pair, she thought, both dark haired, with him standing nearly a head taller than she did. It wasn’t long before Liza began to shed some of her reserve, and was laughing even as she misstepped onto the Highlander’s toes.

As she stood watching them, Grace wondered what it would be like to have a man look at her in the way Andrew looked at Liza, the same way Eachann watched Seonag now, with such open regard in their eyes. This was love, she thought to herself, the beginnings of it for one man and woman, and the perpetuation of it for another. It was an indefinable kind of connection that brought two souls together as one, where words weren’t necessary, and where thoughts could be conveyed with just the single exchange of a glance.

It was indeed the stuff of fairytales.

“Good e’ening to you, my lady. ‘Tis a fine night, is it no’?”

Grace turned to see that Alastair had suddenly appeared beside her, taking up the cup of whisky one of the others had brought to him.

“Alastair, good evening. I was wondering where you had gone to.”

He took a sip. “I was in the office, going over some figures with Lord Knighton and His Grace, the Duke of Devonbrook, for the proposal they plan to make to the Lords about the building of the roads. The duke has also offered to help us find passage for some of the evicted tenants who wish to travel to New Scotland and America, and has promised to move still others who are willing to his family’s estate in the south. He has a number of fine plots of land there. Also, it seems the duchess’s father, Mr. Angus MacBryan, has a small importing venture that he’s looking to grow, and thus will need able hands to help him.”

Grace smiled, nodding over a sip of her tea. Robert and Catriona had proven a true treasure in their efforts to help with the displaced crofters. After viewing firsthand the full scope of the people’s plight, they had pledged funds and supplies to help see the tenants resettled. They had even offered temporary housing at their estate to the south, Rosmorigh, as a stopping-off point for those wishing to move onward toward Glasgow or Edinburgh.

They had also lent their hands, along with Grace and Christian, to a letter that would be sent to all the noble landowners in the Highlands, Scottish and English alike, asking for their support in the road-building venture. With the signatures of a powerful duke such as Robert, as well as the Westover heir, they would hold a much better chance of gaining their support. Grace’s most fervent hope was that they might induce the landowners to look at the benefits of putting their efforts toward the betterment of their tenants, instead of the marketing of sheep, so that they might perhaps put a stop to the Clearances all together.

“Alastair, do you know where I might find—”

Alastair, however, was no longer standing anywhere near her. While Grace had been lost to her thoughts, the Scotsman had moved away to stand with the others. His attention was focused at the center of the crowd, where it seemed everyone else’s attentions were focused, as well. Grace hadn’t even

noticed that the dancing had stopped. The music still played, only now it was softer, with a timbre that was as misty as the Scottish hills. A moment later, there came a lyrical voice unlike anything she had ever heard before.

*She on the wings of sacred duty flies
With shepherd's care to bless the untended flocks;
And like an angel missioned from the skies,
They greet her coming from the old grey rocks;
Like the healing birds of Cliodna in the tower high
'Tis the Lady who loves the Highlands
Poor island-dwellers by the lonely sea,
Whom all forget but God in heaven and she,
Of English blood, but true to the Celtic she
'Tis the Lady who loves the Highlands.*

It was an ancient Scottish poem that Grace could recall having read in one of the old tomes she had found stored away in the castle garret. Only now, the words had been slightly changed and were being sung to the lilting strains of the Highland harp.

Grace moved from the hearth, drawing closer so that she might see who was singing so beautifully. The torch lights flickered on the stone walls, casting the great hall in a glowing embrace. She moved quietly to stand beside Alastair. At first, she could not see above the heads of the others, but then someone shifted in front of her, affording her a view to where there was a woman standing in the midst of the circle of Highlanders.

When she saw who was performing, Grace could scarcely believe her eyes.

It was Flora, who rarely spoke above two words at any time, who had as much strength in her arms as a good many men, who always seemed so gruff, and so robust. She was singing with the voice of an angel. Gone was the prosaic linen kerchief that always covered her head. Her hair hung loosely

now, down her back in thick waves of chestnut. Her eyes sparked in the light from the torch fire, and her hands moved before her as she sang with the gossamer lightness of a swan. With just her voice, Flora had transformed herself, captivating the masses with her song—a siren who, it seemed, had utterly mesmerized Alastair Ogilvy.

The look on the steward's face was awestruck. He was spellbound by the sweet words Flora was singing. When she finished the song on one high silvery note, everyone standing in the hall broke into applause. None so loudly as Alastair. He was clapping his hands and calling out "Brava!" with a beaming smile on his rotund face.

Flora smiled shyly, her cheeks coloring from the attention in the light of the fire. Grace watched as Alastair stepped forward through the crowd, bowing his head while asking Flora for the honor of the next dance. The look in her eye as she nodded to him spoke clearly of the beginnings of something tender between them. Grace thought to the story Alastair had once told her of his long ago love, and how he had lost his heart to her after first hearing her sing. She wondered that he might be given a second chance to find that kind of love again.

All around her that evening, enchantment had woven its way into the lives of the people of Skynegal. Seonag and Eachann, who sat together with Deirdre and their son, Iain, were a family so recently threatened, but now safely reunited. Liza and Andrew, who basked in the light of newfound discovery, and now Alastair and Flora, having passed each day over the past months so near to one another, but now suddenly seeing the other with different eyes. Deirdre's words the night of Iain's birth echoed softly to Grace's thoughts.

You must tell it to himdinna wait too longthere is ne'er a certainty of tomorrow.

Alone on the outskirts of this scene, Grace suddenly wanted nothing more than to feel a part of the magic that had taken over the night. She wanted to dance on the arms of the man she loved, to thrill to his touch. It was as clear to her, as real as the Highland moon overhead, and Grace knew that the

time had come for her to share the truth of their child with Christian.

She started across the hall, heading for the estate office in hopes that she might yet find Christian there. As she made the turn for the corridor, she nearly collided with someone who was coming down the passageway in the opposite direction.

Grace halted, looking up at the figure who stood in her path.

And what she saw there literally took her breath away.

thirty-two

Curtsey while you're thinking what to say.

It saves time.

-Lewis Carroll

“You’re not leaving the celebration so soon, are you, my lady?”

Grace looked to where Christian stood silhouetted by the shadows of the corridor. They were just outside the great hall, away from the noise and the light of the gathering, away from the others.

“Christian, I was just coming to look for you. I wanted to—”

Her words caught in her throat when he stepped forward into the muted torchlight. No longer did he wear the carefully knotted neckcloth, the high pointed collar of the stylish English gentleman. Instead, he had donned a linen *sark*, the full sleeves of which were rolled loosely over his forearms, lace ties opened at his neck. In place of his tailored breeches and polished Hessians, he wore the kilt, one fashioned in the familiar chequered shades of the Skynegal tartan.

And he was smiling, a carefree, and utterly charming grin that curled his mouth and wrapped its warmth around her.

Grace blinked, but the image didn’t fade. She suddenly understood why Liza had been so transfixed by the sight of

Andrew MacAlister earlier that evening. Likewise now, she found she couldn't take her gaze from Christian.

“You...you are wearing the kilt.”

“I find I grow weary of being the only one in breeches.”

Grace simply stared at him more.

“Actually,” he went on, “I thought perhaps it was time to shed the image of the English lord and rightfully acknowledge my position as laird.”

From the moment Christian had arrived at Skynegal, Grace had held the secret hope that he might realize the virtues of the estate which, while not a financial bounty, had merits that could not be exceeded. She had hoped that he wouldn't turn a blind eye to the people and their plight, that he would realize their importance, and would come to embrace his place as their patriarch. Tonight, he had surpassed that hope, giving Grace the most precious gift she could have imagined. Before that moment, she would never have thought she could love him more than she already did.

She was wrong.

“Thank you, Christian.”

“I'll take that to mean that you approve.” He presented his arm to her, that strange and wonderful smile still curving his mouth, lighting his eyes. “Shall we proceed to the hall, my lady?”

As they came into the great hall, most everyone was still taken up with the dancing. Together they walked across the room, and Grace caught sight of Catriona standing with Robert near the hearth. The duke was garbed like Christian, in sark and kilt, but in a tartan of differing colors. It was the same tartan that made up Catriona's gown. They exchanged greetings with their friends while one of the women brought them cups of Deirdre's tasty gooseberry punch. Grace found herself wondering how the evening could be any more complete.

She wasn't left wondering long.

Deirdre appeared soon after in the entrance to the hall, accompanied by two newcomers.

It was Christian who noticed them first.

“Nell!”

He crossed the distance to his sister in three strides and took her against him in a whirling embrace. “Still tagging along after your big brother, eh?”

Eleanor grinned. “I just couldn’t resist the sight of you in a kilt.”

After greeting her brother, Eleanor turned to embrace Grace. “I was so relieved to know Christian found you. I missed my new sister.”

Grace had always regretted having left London without first bidding farewell to Eleanor, for she had been so kind to her after their marriage. Lady Frances stood beside Eleanor and greeted Grace with a gentle smile.

“Indeed, dear, you had us all so very worried.”

“I am sorry for leaving as I did. I...,” she faltered, “...it was just...”

Lady Frances took her hand, squeezed it reassuringly. “Let us not speak of that now, dear. You are here and we are all together again as a family. That is all that matters.”

“But how did you find your way to Skynegal?” Christian asked. “I had posted a letter sending for you, but that was only a few days ago. You couldn’t have received it so soon.”

“Actually, dear, we were brought here by—”

But Christian had already seen the answer to his question, with the arrival of a third newcomer to the great hall.

His grandfather, the duke.

“What is he doing here?”

Lady Frances answered, “Christian, it was your grandfather who asked us to accompany him, and you must know, he was very kind throughout our journey. He seems

sincere. Is it too much to hope that perhaps he has had a change of heart?"

Christian's smile had faded. "How could he, Mother, when he doesn't have one?"

Grace broke away from them and crossed the hall to where the duke still stood, lingering in the doorway. "Good evening to you, Your Grace." She curtsied before him. "What a nice surprise to see you."

The old man raised a cynical brow. "I rather doubt your husband shares your sentiment, my girl."

Grace refused to acknowledge his bitter words. Instead, she slipped her hand into his. "Come, Your Grace, please join in on the gathering."

The duke looked startled at the gesture, but didn't refuse as she led him further into the hall.

The others soon took notice of their arrival, and at the sight of their lord and lady together, wearing the Skynegal colors, had the people stopping in their dancing to give a cheer. As Grace watched on, Christian moved about the room, and greeted everyone he met by name. But she noticed that he purposely avoided approaching his grandfather.

"Let us give a cheer for the lord and lady of Skynegal," someone called and everyone hollered out "Aye!"

The piper then struck up a lively reel and the assembly dispersed, forming two large circles in the center of the room, ladies on the outside, men on the inside. As the dancers began to weave in and out of one another in time to the music, they pulled Christian and Grace along, laughing good-naturedly as Christian struggled to keep in step. Soon, most everyone in the hall was skipping and turning, hands clapping, feet stomping, laughing out loud as the music played on. Even the old duke seemed to enjoy the merrymaking as he stood chatting with Deirdre near the fire, his foot tapping to the music's beat.

Alastair hopped into the center of the circle of dancers, and surprised them all as he stepped and turned to the tune with an ease that belied his ample girth. He rejoined the circle, and

another took his place as a fiddler then joined the piper. Then came a drummer and the music was so spirited, the tempo so alive, even the fire burning in the hearth crackled as if joining in on the revelry.

Grace had turned about and was making to weave her way back through the line of dancers when she felt a sudden sharp pang across her abdomen that caused her to falter. Her immediate thought was of the child she carried, and she broke away from the chain of dancers, crossing the room to sit on a corner bench. The tightness that she had felt soon subsided, but Grace decided it best that she sit out on the vigorous dancing. A moment later, Christian was kneeling beside her, his face filled with concern.

“Grace, is something wrong?”

She smiled and took his hand. “No, just a little too much dancing, I suspect.” She looked at him. “Christian, there is something I must tell you. I—”

“My lady!” Liza rushed over from the dancing to join her. The maid pressed a hand against Grace’s temple. “I noticed you leave the dancing. Are you unwell? Is it the baby?”

Christian looked at the maid. “What did you say?”

“A baby?” Eleanor echoed, having somehow appeared beside her.

Suddenly, there was an outburst of excited chatter as news of the hint at Grace’s pregnancy spread rapidly around the room.

Grace looked to Christian. His expression had gone blank, and he was staring at her queerly.

“Grace, is it true? Are you with child?”

She could not truly sense if he was pleased by the news. He looked so stunned. She only knew that this was not at all how she had intended for him to learn of the coming of their child.

“Grace?” he repeated, waiting for his answer.

Tentatively, Grace nodded. “Yes, Christian. It seems you are to be a father.”

The entire assembly erupted all at once with cheers and hollers of congratulations. Everyone filled their cups, passing toasts around for the laird and his lady’s coming bairn.

Grace watched Christian closely as he accepted well-wishes from those around him. He shook their hands, nodded his thanks, but there was something clearly amiss. Everybody else was so taken up with their enthusiasm, only she seemed to notice that the expectant father was no longer smiling.

When the merriment had fully resumed, taking everyone’s attention back to the dancing, Christian turned without a word and started from the room. Grace noticed that he disappeared into the corridor that led toward the outer courtyard.

She glanced at Liza beside her then. The maid looked close to tears.

“I am so sorry, my lady. When I saw you waver in the line of dancers, I was so worried about you and the baby, I didn’t even think that you hadn’t yet told his lordship. Now I’ve gone and ruined it.”

“Nothing is ruined, Liza. Not at all.” Grace squeezed the maid’s hand and looked at Andrew who stood behind her. He took his cue, coming forward.

Grace stood. “But I must go and talk to Christian.”

As she started off in his same direction, she tried to assure herself that he was not displeased about their child, only that he was shocked, perhaps disappointed she had waited so long to tell him. All she would need do, she thought, was explain her reasons to him.

Grace found Christian standing out on the courtyard in the moonlight, one foot propped up against a rock, his hand at rest on his knee. His back was to her as he stared out in silent contemplation. If he heard her approach, he didn’t acknowledge it. Grace hesitated when she came beside him, searching for the words to say.

“Christian, I was hoping we might talk.”

She could see in the moonlight that his jaw was tightly clenched, the muscles working as he fought his emotions.

Finally, he said, “How long have you known?”

She hesitated. “I knew before you arrived at Skynegal.”

He looked at her. “It has been days since I came here, yet you said nothing to me. Why?”

If only she could make him understand the fear and uncertainty she had felt. “Christian, I am sorry I did not tell you before. I—”

“It doesn’t matter, Grace. It is too late.”

“Too late?” She reached for his arm. “Christian, I don’t understand...”

“Do you not see? He has finally won.”

Christian laughed, but it was a bitter sound that carried on the shifting wind. “No matter how I tried, he has still found a way to control me.”

Grace was only growing more confused. “Who, Christian? Who was won?”

“I think he means me, my girl.”

Christian turned to face the old duke, who had come out onto the courtyard behind them. All the pain he had endured over the past two decades, the shame he’d felt, the guilt that had kept him its prisoner so long, swelled through him.

He rounded on the duke. “You always knew, didn’t you, that you would conquer me? From the day I was born you hated me because I was more like him than like you. You vowed to make my life miserable, do you remember? And I handed you the very means for you to do it. Well, you have succeeded. Grace is with child. Now you have made my misery complete.”

Christian closed his eyes against his anguish. A moment passed, two. Then, from somewhere deep inside, an unfamiliar feeling gave rise, a strength that began to well up inside of him. He thought of how he had felt the past days since coming

to Skynegal, the sense of accomplishment he'd realized with the plans they were making. Christian gathered that strength, holding to it. He would no longer live as he had before, shackled by some foolish promise he had made as a child. He would never again allow that man to control him. Not for himself—and, certainly not for his future child.

Christian lifted his gaze to the duke. “No. You will not win. I don't care what our agreement was. Do what you will, but I promise you now, I will see you in hell before I will ever allow you to destroy my son's life the way you have destroyed mine.”

Unwilling to face his grandfather any longer, Christian turned away from the duke, looking to draw Grace into his arms, to allow her into the heart he had kept shut away from her for so long.

Only she was no longer there.

thirty-three

Face to face, the truth comes out.

-Thomas Fuller

Grace lay quietly in the darkness of her chamber, curled at the edge of the bed with only the moonlight to hold her. Her window was opened slightly and she could hear the sounds of the dancing in the great hall below. Laughter and merriment continued to flow. Once she heard someone call out, appealing for the laird and his lady to join them. When neither of them appeared, someone else suggested that they had perhaps retired abovestairs for a bit of merrymaking of their own. This had elicited a new round of toasts to the continuity of such a happy union, but it had only elicited tears from Grace that even now dampened her pillow.

She felt the brush, a sudden waft against her legs, and lifted her head when she realizing someone had just entered her room.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

It was Christian, his voice taut with discontent.

She watched as he came into the room, approaching her tentatively. “Grace, I need to explain.” His eyes were hooded in the moonlight. “There are things you know nothing about, about me, about my past—”

He sat on the bed beside her and fell silent, struggling with his words. Grace made to rise, to sit beside him, but he took her hand instead.

“Grace, do you know why I married you?” He answered before she could begin to frame a response. “I told you I had to, yes, because of an agreement that I made with my grandfather. But it was not for the reasons you may think.” He looked at her. “I married you because of a debt I owed to my grandfather, a debt that I made many years ago with the devil that he is.”

Christian paused, gathering his thoughts. “Do you know how my father died?”

“Mrs. Stone said something to me the night we were at Westover of an illness.”

Christian shook his head. “That is what my grandfather told everyone. A brilliant excuse, so no one would ever think to suspect the truth.” He took a deep breath. “Grace, my father did not die because of any illness. The truth is my father was killed defending the honor of my mother against the man he’d learned she had been having a clandestine liaison with. The man whose child she likely carried.”

Christian paused for a moment, allowing Grace to take in the words he had just spoken, words he thought he would never say.

Grace listened to him carefully, and the full meaning reached her a moment later. “Do you mean Eleanor?”

When he spoke again, his voice was heavy with emotion. “Yes.”

Christian stood and then knelt at the side of the bed so he could look at Grace closely. “To this day Eleanor does not know that we quite likely do not share the same father. After my father was killed, my grandfather threatened to banish my mother from the family, and banish her child with her. But I promised my grandfather I would do anything he asked of me if he would never reveal the truth.”

“But Eleanor is his granddaughter.”

“No, Grace, to his thinking, she was not conceived of my father. To him, Eleanor is simply the illegitimate daughter of my mother, who my grandfather never cared for because my

father had chosen her against his wishes. After my father died, my grandfather intended to leave my mother penniless, ostracized by society, Eleanor labeled a bastard.”

“And so you spared her that by agreeing to wed me?”

Christian sighed. “Grace, I was twelve years old when I made that bargain with my grandfather. Marrying whoever he chose for me was my grandfather’s first condition. In return, he would maintain appearances, would allow my mother and Eleanor the protection and financial support of the Westover name. But they were to live in London, in a residence separate from my grandfather. He would assume responsibility for my upbringing. When she came of age, he would provide Eleanor with a season and a dowry, see her future secured. No one would ever know that Eleanor might not have been conceived legitimately.”

Grace’s thoughts turned to Eleanor then, how willing she had been that first night at the Knighton ball to accept Grace as her sister. How tragic it would have been had she been punished by the duke for the circumstances of her birth. “But what of Eleanor’s true father? Wouldn’t he have known?”

Christian closed his eyes, his throat working with emotion against the words he prepared to say.

“One night after my father learned about my mother’s affair, my grandfather awoke me near dawn. I can still remember the light from his candle stinging my eyes as he shook me from my bed. He tossed me a pair of breeches, told me to come with him. He told me that he wanted me to learn to be a man. He said nothing of what was happening, and I knew enough of my grandfather’s temper to keep silent.”

Grace listened on in thoughtful silence.

“My father was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. I remember that he was dressed all in black. I will never forget his eyes, fixed with an emotion I only later recognized as insanity. We climbed into a carriage that already awaited on the drive. No one spoke. We stopped at a mist-covered moor. The sun was just starting to rise and I saw a horse there, with a

lone figure standing beside it. It was then I realized that my father was going to fight a duel.”

Christian went on. “I stood by as my grandfather and my father walked to meet the other man. A pistol box was presented and weapons chosen while my grandfather recited the rules of honour.” He scoffed. “*Honour*. There is nothing at all honourable about two men agreeing to kill one another. The weapons were primed and places were taken, ten paces measured out before each then turned to face the other. In a flash, a single shot fired out. I watched my father fall into the grass. I saw the other man lower his arm to his side beneath the cloud of smoke from his pistol. I still see it sometimes...”

Christian shook his head. “I ran for my father, crying out when I saw the blood seeping from his chest. His eyes were already fixed, and I heard the rasping sound of his last breath leaving his body.”

Grace reached for his hand, tears flooding her eyes now. “Oh, Christian, I am so sorry.”

He took a breath. “The other man came forward as if to make sure he had killed my father. I watched him nudge his body with the toe of his boot. I don’t know what happened. I lost all awareness of myself. I remember taking up my father’s gun. It was still cocked and primed, lying there in the grass. I stood. I pulled on the trigger. I discharged his shot, the shot he hadn’t taken. I heard a second shot fire out. I watched the man who had just killed my father fall to his knees. I looked, and saw my grandfather beside me then, smoke rising from the pistol he held. Together, we had committed murder.”

If Christian looked at Grace and expected to find revulsion for what he had just revealed to her, he was mistaken. Instead, tears of compassion were filling her eyes. She rose from the bed, stood before him while he still knelt before her. She placed the palm of her hand against his face. Christian closed his eyes, fighting his own emotions. He lowered his forehead against her, where even now his child grew.

He whispered against her. “No one ever knew the truth.” He looked at her. “My grandfather paid the local physician to

swear that my father had died of a sudden illness. He paid others to dispose of the other man's body, so that his family would never know what had become of him. They would only awaken to find him gone. No one ever knew the truth. No one, except for my grandfather. In order to prevent him from seeing through his threat to my mother and Eleanor, he made me give my life over to him. From that day, my one sole purpose was that of becoming the next Duke of Westover. Every decision about my life was made for me. And then he made me promise one thing more." Christian finished, "When a son was born, it would be his."

Grace wondered if she had misheard him. "His? What do you mean?"

Christian looked at her and his face was filled with shame. "Grace, my grandfather made me vow that I would give over to him my firstborn son. At twelve years of age, you'll say anything, anything to keep your family from being destroyed. The future seemed so far away. As I grew older, I thought I could prevent him this devil's bargain by never marrying. But then he found you. Still, I thought I could keep him from it by making sure ours was a marriage in name only. All I had to do, by the terms of our agreement, was share your bed that one time at Westover Hall. But that didn't mean I had to procreate a child, and I thought I could succeed in that, but my grandfather got the better of me. He had chosen well in you, because no matter how I tried, I could not resist you. Every time I was with you, I lost my resolve. I would hate myself afterward because I feared you would become pregnant. Do you understand now why I reacted the way I did at hearing that you carried our child? All I could think of was that my grandfather had won, that no matter how I had vowed to myself that I would not give him an heir, in the end, I had failed."

Grace touched her hand softly to Christian's hair. "But he will only win, Christian, if you allow him to. If *we* allow him to." She shook her head. "And we will not."

Christian stood. "I know that now, Grace. It took facing him tonight to come to that realization. As I stood on that

courtyard just now, even as I hated him, all I could think about was what I had done to keep you from reaching me. From the very moment when you came tumbling out of that wall and into my life, you changed everything I had known. I wanted to keep you from knowing the darkness of my world. I was so blinded by my hatred for my grandfather, that I could not see that by keeping you apart from me, I was only giving more life to that darkness. I should have welcomed you. I should have trusted you, but instead I hurt you. I blamed my grandfather for the misery I faced when instead, I should have realized that in forcing me to marry you, he had actually given me the greatest gift of all.” He reached, touched Grace softly on her cheek. “He gave me you.”

Grace looked up at Christian, standing before her now, her breath catching softly.

“Grace, you gave me your love when I gave you nothing in return, nothing other than my anger and pain. I will forever regret having not realized it sooner.”

She shook her head, and gently placed her fingers against his mouth. “Don’t speak of it.”

Christian kissed her fingertips. “I want to love you, Grace. I need to love you as I should have from the very beginning.”

Grace blinked away her tears. “Then love me, Christian. Love me now.”

Christian lifted Grace into his arms, and buried his face against her neck. He lowered her to the bed, her hair spilling about her shoulders, inviting his fingers to thread through the silken tresses.

Christian lowered his mouth to kiss Grace, taking her tenderly against him. He felt her arms go around his waist, her hands run down the length of him to his legs. He felt her slide her hands beneath the fabric of his kilt, trace upward over the backs of his thighs. A jolt rocked him at her touch and he moaned against her mouth.

He would not rush this. They had all night. This time, he would give Grace the gift of a woman’s pleasure.

And he did, loving her, fulfilling her, taking her along until she was gasping, “Oh, Christian, it is so...”

It was some time later, after the fire had dimmed and the night slowly began to give way to the dawn, that Christian gathered Grace into the circle of his arms. He set one hand against her, on her middle where their child lay, and brushed the soft tangle of her hair from her neck. He kissed her there softly, and whispered to her ear, “Grace, I love you.”

Clasping the fingers of her hand with his, Christian realized his first moment of contentment, as together they drifted off to a lover’s sleep.

thirty-four

*No eye to watch, no tongue to wound us,
All earth forgot, and all heaven around us.*

-Thomas Moore

The following days were like living a dream for Grace and Christian as they thrilled in the discovery of one another. Their waking hours were filled with the warmth and laughter of a Skynegal summer, their nights wrapped in each other's arms, sharing tender kisses and ardent lovemaking.

Robert and Catriona had departed to return to their Scottish estate, Rosmorigh, in the south, taking a number of the crofters with them. Robert had arranged for a sloop that would carry some of them south to Mallaig, others even farther past the islands of Mull and Jura, to a landing point where they could then travel by road into Glasgow. Still others would continue to the Borders and to England, to take up residence on the duke and duchess's estate, Devonbrook, in Lancashire.

Before they had gone, Christian and Robert had finished the proposal they planned to present at the next sitting of the House of Lords. Christian and Grace realized that presenting their plan would necessitate that Christian return to England. He had decided, however, to wait until after their child was born, since the Lords would not convene again until after the winter months.

Life went on at Skynegal. The mare Jo came into foal as expected, and Grace and Christian had watched on as a tiny

roan-colored colt stood for the first time on spindly legs, taking his uncertain steps amid a chorus of encouragement from the others looking on.

Every day at sunset, Grace and Christian would walk together along the shore of the loch with Dubhar ambling beside them, but Grace's most treasured time with her husband was late at night, after they had made love before the light of the fire. He would draw her close to him, wrapping his arms protectively around her increasing belly. They would talk sometimes into the early hours of morning, sharing their childhoods, their hopes for the future, a future they would share together.

This particular morning saw Grace seated in the estate office with Dubhar warming her toes beneath the desk. Christian sat across from her, checking the list of provisions for McFee and McGee who were to leave for Ullapool later that morning. Grace had just finished her morning cup of tea when she glanced up and saw Eleanor standing in the doorway.

"Oh, Eleanor, good morning," she said. "Won't you come in?"

Eleanor's expression, Grace noticed, was unusually troubled.

"I was hoping I might have a private word with my brother."

Grace glanced over to Christian, who she saw watched Eleanor closely, then stood to leave. "Of course. I was just going to finish going through the last of the trunks we found up in the garret."

Grace left the room, calling to Dubhar to join her before closing the door quietly behind her.



HIGH IN THE SOUTH TOWER, there was a particular chamber that looked out over the restless waters of the loch. Too small

for use as a bedchamber, Grace had begun employing the space to organize the heirlooms she'd discovered while foraging throughout various places in the castle. As the collection had grown, the chamber had become a gallery of sorts in tribute to her Scottish ancestry, spanning a chronology of Skynegal's long history.

Each personality had their own place, where their particular contribution was displayed, a makeshift visual biography for them all. There, near the door, was Hannah MacRath, a young bride who had come to Skynegal from the Lowlands back in the days of Queen Mary. Her petite figure was preserved in the small embroidered shoes she'd once worn, with cork wedges placed into the heels to give her added height. Amazingly, Hannah had brought eleven children to adulthood, and had herself lived to the age of ninety-and-three. Hannah's legacy to Skynegal was a small, leather bound herbal, and the numerous small glass bottles in which the ladies of Skynegal had kept dried flowers and tinctures for use as medicine.

Sir Roger MacRath, situated beneath the window, had been a fourteenth century poet, whose lyrical verses were scribbled upon everything from parchment to a smattering of the window panes. A portrait of Sir Roger's only child and daughter, Mhairi, hung nearby, her thoughtful expression framed by a linen caul. Mhairi was one of Skynegal's most noteworthy residents, for she had made it her life's work to preserve the legend of the "winged" castle and its foundation in the myth of the Celtic goddess, Cliodna. Some said it was Cliodna herself who had charged young Mhairi with the task, in a dream when she'd been only twelve years of age. Whatever it had been, for the eighteen years she had lived after having that dream, Mhairi had passed every night weaving a tapestry from the finest threads of gold and silver into an image of the castle, the goddess Cliodna poised above while her servant birds soared around the castle towers.

According to the legend, on the night Mhairi had fixed and knotted the last thread, completing the tapestry that had been her life's work, she had gone to her bed never to rise again. That same tapestry now hung in a place of honor beside her

portrait. It was alleged that as long as the tapestry remained at the castle, the people of Skynegal would stay under the protection of Cliodna and her mythical birds, against any threat of invasion, destitution, or plague. And indeed, thus far, the prediction had held true.

Grace had just set aside a small fashion doll that had once been her grandmother's, peering inside the trunk where she'd found it tucked away, to see what else was contained inside. She found a small book of sonnets with an embossed cover that lay near the bottom. Grace took it up, quickly reading the inscription written inside.

For Antonia Grace of Skynegal, you shall forever be the only lady of my heart. Your Devoted Knight, Eli 1768.

Grace drew up, reading the inscription again. Eli? But her grandfather's name had been William. And surely this was her grandmother's book for it had her name inscribed inside with a date that would put it near her sixteenth year.

As she leafed through the book's pages, Grace noticed something slip from inside the back cover. There were letters, addressed to her grandmother at Skynegal, several of them, tied together with a faded ribbon. Grace unfolded the first of them, dated April of the same year inscribed upon the book.

My love, I find myself counting the days until we might see each other again. I long for the slightest glance from your eyes, the softest touch of your hand. I am sending this book in the hopes that someday I might hear your sweet voice reading to me from it. I am lost without you... Your Adoring Knight, Eli.

The next letter, dated six months later, seemed to indicate that some sort of response had been sent from her grandmother. The script of this letter was decidedly more formal in tone.

I will not, it seems, be able to travel to the Highlands as planned. Family matters have developed which will require my presence in London. It is, unfortunately, beyond my control. Know that I am thinking of you and hoping you are well, my

love. I will count the days until I can see you again... Devoted, and Frustrated Knight, E.

The next letter Grace found was dated early the following year. The handwriting, while still that of the previous author, was now less elegant, more of a scrawl.

It is with the greatest regret and a heavy heart that I must inform you of my inability to continue our friendship. Circumstances have arisen that prevent my pursuing anything more than an acquaintanceship with you. My happiest days will always have been during our time together, for despite the duties I must assume, my heart will forever remain yours alone. Your Knight, Now and Always, E.

When she reached the final letter in the stack, Grace saw that it was not a letter at all, but a tattered page from a London newsheet. It was dated April of 1769. She scanned past the events of that year, noticing nothing of significance.

Until she reached the very bottom of the column, where an announcement had been printed.

It is hereby announced that on Saturday last, the 2nd day of April at St. Paul's, the heir to the Duke of Westover, Elias Wycliffe, Marquess Knighton, did wed Lady Lydia Fairchild, eldest daughter to the Marquess of Noakes.

Grace looked again at the inscription in the book and the name written there.

Eli.

Elias Wycliffe.

Through all the years Nonny had spoken of her 'one true knight,' Grace had always believed it to mean her grandfather. But it hadn't. It had been Christian's grandfather, the duke, all along.

So many things came clear to her then, the duke's lifelong bitterness, his reaction that first day in her uncle's study when he had been gazing at her grandmother's portrait. Clearly they had once been in love. Had they planned to marry? And had his family prevented it?

Grace rose to her feet, taking up the book of sonnets and the letters as she hurried off to find Christian. She wanted him to know the truth about his grandfather, so that perhaps he might find some way to better understand the man he had spent his whole life despising.

As she started down the tower steps, Grace nearly collided with someone climbing up in the opposite direction.

“Oh, goodness—Eleanor.”

Eleanor’s eyes were red from crying, her cheeks stained from her tears. The moment she saw Grace, she collapsed against her, sobbing into her shoulder.

“What is it, Eleanor? What has happened?”

It took her several moments to respond. “Oh, Grace, it is Christian. He has forbidden me to wed Lord Herrick. He absolutely refuses to listen to reason.”

Grace tried desperately to calm her, patting her gently on the shoulder as Eleanor leaned against her. “What do you mean? Has Lord Herrick asked for your hand?”

Eleanor nodded. “Before we left London, he indicated he had something of importance to discuss with me. I received a letter from him just this morning, formally proposing marriage. I took it to Christian, told him it is my wish to wed him, but Christian has refused to give his consent. And Mother has said she supports his decision. The worst of it is, Christian won’t tell me why. I know I have not known Lord Herrick all that long, just this season, but I can only think that were we to have more time together, my regard for him would only grow. Christian had promised me, Grace, he promised that I would be given my choice to marry freely. Why would he do this to me now when I have already made my choice? Why?”

Grace shook her head, clasping Eleanor’s hands in hers. She looked at her closely. “I don’t know why he would refuse this, but if you would like, I will see if I can talk to Christian.”

Eleanor sniffed into her handkerchief. “You would?”

Grace nodded. “I will go to him right now.”

A hopeful smile broke across Eleanor's teary face. "Thank you, Grace. Perhaps he will listen to you."

Grace squeezed Eleanor's hands reassuringly. "You go to your chamber now and take a moment to yourself. I will come to you there after I have spoken with Christian."

Lady Frances was just leaving the estate office as Grace approached the door. The dowager marchioness looked to have been crying as well, but she smiled weakly at Grace before continuing out of the room.

Inside, Christian sat alone.

Grace entered, closed the door behind her. He looked up at her, his expression stricken. Grace could see how it was troubling him to make Eleanor so unhappy. Surely, he must have a reason for his refusal. Perhaps this Lord Herrick was a blackguard, and Christian was simply trying to spare his sister the heartache. Whatever his reasons, Grace decided not to come to Christian about Eleanor immediately, but instead approached the matter from a different perspective.

"Christian, I found something up in the garret that I thought you might want to see."

She placed the book of sonnets, with the letters she had found, on the desk in front of him. She watched as he took them up, read them through, and waited, allowing him time to come to the same conclusion she had.

When he was finished, he looked at her. "Where did you find these?"

"They were in a trunk with some of my grandmother's things." She paused. "It is your grandfather's handwriting, on those letters, is it not?"

Christian nodded. His expression was conflicted, his lifelong opinions about his grandfather suddenly challenged.

"Perhaps now you can understand some of the reasons for his bitterness."

"Perhaps. But what I fail to understand is why, if he was made to marry someone other than your grandmother, who he

clearly loved, why would he then repeat that wrong by arranging a marriage for me?"

Grace came to stand beside his chair, resting her hand on his shoulder. "I wondered that same thing. But, perhaps, in his way, he was seeking to right the wrong he had done my grandmother in abandoning her, by bringing the two of us together."

"Perhaps." Christian was still staring at the letters, no doubt thinking about the man who had written them so long ago, so contradictory to the man he had known all his life.

Grace sat before Christian. "Christian, can I ask...why have you refused to consent to a marriage between Eleanor and Lord Herrick?"

Christian's expression immediately darkened. Grace, hesitantly, pressed on.

"I know you love your sister very much and would never do anything to hurt her. Is there something more, something about Lord Herrick you are not telling me? Is he a blackguard, perhaps? A ne'er-do-well?"

Christian sat forward in the chair, raking a hand over his forehead. He was clearly most troubled, even more so than Grace should have thought.

Finally, he looked at her. "Do you remember when I told you about my father's death?"

She nodded.

"I told you how my father had fought a duel against a man whom my mother had pursued a relationship with. Grace, the reason I cannot give my consent for Eleanor to wed Lord Herrick is because he is the son of the man who killed my father. He is the eldest and *legitimate* son of the man my mother had a liaison with."

It only took Grace a moment to realize the import of what he was saying. "Oh no...you mean, Lord Herrick might be Eleanor's half-brother?"

Christian nodded, closing his eyes. “So, now you see why she cannot possibly marry him. The worst part of it is, if she persists, I will have to tell her my reasons. I will have to tell Eleanor of her illegitimacy, of the circumstances surrounding her birth. For if I don’t tell her, she might decide to run off, to wed him without my consent. My mother already suspects as much, thus it was she who asked me to tell Eleanor the truth. There is no other choice. I will have to tell my sister that I killed the man who was quite possibly her true father.”

“No.”

Neither Grace nor Christian had heard his grandfather come into the room. “You did not kill anyone that night, Christian.”

The elder duke crossed the room to a chair, lowered himself into it and then lifted his gaze to regard his only grandson. “I should have told you the truth long ago. I don’t know why I didn’t. I was so distraught after losing Christopher. I wanted to punish your mother, I wanted you to blame her as I did. It has taken me twenty years to realize that it wasn’t her fault. Your father knew Frances didn’t truly love him, not as he did her, when he asked her to marry him. But her family was in financial straits. They needed her to marry well. How could they turn away a future duke? So Christopher convinced her that she would grow to love him; he thought he could love enough for both of them. But, in truth, he only smothered her with his jealousy, his obsession.”

Christian regarded his grandfather. “But what does that have to do with the fact that I shot Lord Herrick’s father?”

“Your shot went wide that morning, Christian. I saw it strike the tree behind him. It was my shot that killed Herrick. Not yours.”

“And you allowed me to live the past twenty years believing it had been me? That I was a murderer?” Christian’s eyes narrowed. “You are a bastard.”

The duke sat through Christian’s anger, taking the weight of his words completely upon himself. “I will not deny that, Christian. My biggest regret is that it took me twenty years to

tell you the truth. I don't expect that you would understand. I have spent my life an angry, a bitter man. Giving up Grace's grandmother was the biggest regret of my life. And then I lost Christopher, too, my only son. We had spent so many years fighting each other over his marriage to your mother, I never found the time to know him...until it was too late. *One can never know what it is to lose something precious until it is gone.*"

Christian looked at the duke, stunned. "It was you. You left that message on the doorstep. I thought it was Herrick, that he somehow knew that I, that *we* had killed his father. I even convinced myself he was only courting Eleanor in effort to exact some sort of revenge."

The duke shook his head. "No, that message had nothing to do with Herrick, or his father. I was trying to tell you, to warn you not to throw away the chance you had for happiness. I have made many mistakes in my life, Christian, and I am ashamed. I have been stubborn, proud, and arrogant. I am also a fool. But there is one thing I am not ashamed of, it is the one thing I did right, and that was bringing you and Grace together."

thirty-five

*What shall I do with all the days and hours
That must be counted ere I see thy face?*

-Frances Anne Kemble

By the time the next morning dawned, Eleanor was gone.

She had slipped away some time during the night, going unnoticed by her maid or anyone else who had been in the great hall. She had taken a small bag with some of her things, and she had taken Christian's horse, leaving him with only the slower Highland ponies to go after her.

"Damnation! I should have suspected she would do this," Christian railed as he stalked about the stables, quickly saddling the largest of the ponies, a bright bay named Torquil who stood just under fifteen hands. "She has several hours lead on me. She could be halfway to Inverness by now. I will never catch her on this slow pony."

Torquil quirked his ears at the insult. Grace tried to give Christian hope. "These are the Highlands, Christian, not the grasslands of England. Torquil has a much surer foot than Eleanor's mount will have on this terrain, and you are more familiar with the area than she."

But Christian barely heard her. He slammed his fist against the stall post in frustration, causing the ponies to jerk up their heads and snort in alarm. "She was too quiet last night after I talked to her, after I told her everything, too accepting of the circumstances of her birth."

“You don’t think she would have gone to Lord Herrick, do you?”

Christian shook his head. “No. I destroyed any hope she had of him last night when I told her the truth about my father’s death. What have I done, Grace? I took away her identity. I blithely informed her she is not the person she has believed all her life. Why did I leave her alone last night? Why didn’t I have my mother stay with her?”

Grace touched him gently on the arm. “You could have no way of knowing she would run.”

“I should have realized it, Grace. I sat there and told my sister she is for all intents and purposes a bastard, and she didn’t so much as shed a tear. She just looked at me as if to say I was the one who was supposed to have protected her from it. I’ve utterly failed her.”

“No, Christian, you did not fail her. Because of you, Eleanor had a life and respectability that she would never have otherwise known. If not for you, she would have suffered the judgement of society, the stigma of something that for all anyone knows, may not even be true. You said it yourself. There is no way to know exactly who her father was.”

Christian stood a moment at the stable door, staring out at the hills in the distance. He turned to Grace, taking her into his arms. “I have to find her, Grace. If something happens to her, if any harm comes to her because of this, I will never forgive myself.”

Less than an hour later, Grace stood on the courtyard with Frances, Deirdre, Liza and the duke, watching as Christian hoisted himself into the saddle.

The duke came before him. “Whatever it takes, Christian, we will find her. We will spare no expense. I’ve already sent off a missive to Bow Street.”

He nodded. “I will be back as soon as I can. I have to hope she is headed toward Ullapool, else I have no idea where to look.”

Christian spurred Torquil around, and Grace could only watch as he headed off at a canter out of the castle courtyard.

How long would he be gone? A day? A week? Would he search the ends of the earth until he found her? Grace did not look away until Christian had vanished into the morning mist. She sighed; she already felt his absence.

Liza came to Grace then, and set an arm around her shoulder. “Don’t you fret a bit, my lady. The laird will be back with Lady Eleanor very soon. You’ll see. All will be well.”

Grace looked at her, this woman who was more friend than maid, and smiled with a flagging optimism. “I truly hope so, Liza.”

The sound of her name pulled Grace from her thoughts, and she turned to see the stable lad, Micheil, rushing across the courtyard toward her.

“What is it, Micheil?”

“Did you forget we were to go a’gatherin’ today? I’ve got the pony cart a’ready.”

In all the turmoil surrounding Eleanor’s disappearance that morning, Grace had forgotten that she had promised to take Micheil with her to the other side of the glen to gather some of the herbs and various other plants she had read about in Hannah MacRath’s herbal. He was just learning how to direct the ponies at the cart and was anxious to show her his skills. But perhaps it would offer a welcome diversion, and serve to keep her from worrying too much about Christian and Eleanor.

“Let me change and fetch my shawl. How about you run off to the kitchen and ask Deirdre for some food to bring along with us, and we shall go. We can make a picnic of it.”

A half hour later, Grace set the last of the supplies onto the pony cart before turning to speak to Deirdre behind her. Since they would likely be digging about on the forest floor, Grace had dressed more plainly than usual in gray serge skirts and a linen smock, her hair twisted up beneath a kerchief. She smiled in an effort to mollify Deirdre’s worried frown. Since learning of the child Grace carried, Deirdre had become more

protective of her, growing uneasy whenever she wandered out of sight.

“Do not fret yourself, Deirdre. I promise we will be back by supper. I have Liza and Micheil with me. The grove Hannah MacRath wrote about in her journal is less than two miles to the east. We could walk there. We will simply go and see if any of the plant life from Hannah’s garden still flourishes there.”

Micheil clambered up to the driver’s seat on the small pony cart while Grace and Liza, with Dubhar between them, settled onto the back with the supplies. A crack of the whip and a “Get on now,” and soon they were rolling out of the courtyard, onto the cart path that traversed the estate to the east.

The three chatted freely as they teetered along the rutted path. Grace enjoyed the serenity of the summer’s day, with the sun shining onto her face amidst the song of the crossbills flitting about the pines. As Micheil teased Liza about her romance with Andrew, Grace’s thoughts turned to Christian. She sent a silent kiss his way, imagining the touch of his lips in return while counting the hours until he would come back to her.

They had just come over a crest on the cart path when Micheil unexpectedly pulled the ponies to a halt.

“Micheil, what is it?”

Grace turned to look ahead of the cart at what had caused them to stop. A figure was racing toward them on the path, waving its arms frantically and calling out to them in Gaelic, “*Cuidich le! Cuidich le!—Help! Help!*”

The three climbed down to meet a young boy, perhaps ten years of age. As he neared, Grace could see that his face was nearly black from dirt and soot, his feet bare, and his body was naked except for a ragged shirt that only covered him from shoulder to knee. When he reached them, his eyes had a wild light to them, quite like a caged animal. He was babbling in Gaelic, shaking his head and swinging his arms.

Micheil spoke to him. “*Dè tha ceàrr?* What is the matter?”

The boy spoke too frantically for Grace to understand more than the random word. When she recognized that he’d said something about a “fire” and “soldiers,” and again, that word “*donas*,” she realized he was speaking of the evictions that were yet taking place on the Sunterglen estate.

Micheil quickly answered him, his tone reassuring. He pointed to Grace as he told the boy, “*Aingeal na Gàidhealthachd*—Angel of the Highlands.”

The boy’s eyes went wide. He fell against her, wrapping his arms around her skirts.

“He says the soldiers are marching on the part of the Sunterglen estate that borders Skynegal. There is an old widow, his *grannam*, who lives there alone. She cannot walk because her legs are too frail, and his family are away taking their cattle to the hills. He cannot move her on his own. He said he fears the soldiers will set the torch to her cottage with her still inside.”

Grace frowned. “Then we must go and help them.”

“But, my lady,” Liza broke in, “that is on Sunterglen land.”

“And what they are threatening is akin to murder, Liza. We cannot just stand by and allow them to harm, or even kill an innocent person because of an imaginary line drawn on some map.” She turned to Micheil. “Can you ask the boy to lead us while you drive?”

Micheil nodded. “Aye, milady, I will.”

The pony cart jostled over the glen as they headed for the cottage where the widow lived. By the time they reached the small croft, two soldiers were preparing to set their torches to the thatch on the roof. Another stood at the door, pounding upon it, hollering, “We’ve put the light to the thatch, woman. ‘Tis the last time I’ll tell ye. Ye’d best get yerself out from there now!”

Grace dropped down from the pony cart just as it rolled to a halt, and hastened for the cottage. The soldier at the door glanced at her, his lip curling. “What d’ye want ‘ere, *hizzie?*”

With her simple clothing, Grace realized he thought her another of the crofters. “You must stop what are you doing. There is a woman inside!”

He looked momentarily surprised by her English, but quickly discounted her behind a sneer of contempt. “I am the captain of this company, and we’ve come to clear this croft. She was issued a Writ of Removal, and has refused to vacate.”

He shoved a crumpled sheet of parchment at her. Grace took it, giving it a glance. “But it is written in English! These people speak only Gaelic. She won’t understand why you are here. She’s likely too frightened to open the door!”

“‘Tis what they get for bein’ uncivilized idlers like they are. That old Scots witch has lived long enough. Let ‘er burn.”

Grace gaped at the man in a moment of disbelief before she took up both her hands and shoved him, knocking him back on his feet. As his company of soldiers stood to watch and laugh, Grace flung the door to the cottage wide. Before she could scramble in to look for the widow, she felt herself being seized from behind, locked in the captain’s grip.

“Get you gone, you Scots bitch, afore I lock you in to burn along wit’ her.”

Grace struggled against him, trying to free herself. Dubhar, seeing his mistress in distress, began barking furiously at the captain, lunging for his ankles. The flames had already spread across to the middle of the roof, sweeping over the vulnerable thatch as a column of black smoke burgeoned overhead.

Liza scurried up, calling to Micheil to go for her basket in the cart while she pulled at the captain’s arms. “See here, you bloody bastard, free her now! You’ve no right to hold her!”

Dubhar charged, and the captain kicked out at him with his boot, letting go one of Grace’s arms as he lashed outward at Liza. In that second, Grace balled both hands together before her and jerked her elbow back, striking the captain in his fleshy middle. She could hear the sound of his breath rushing from his lungs, and taking advantage of his confusion, yanked herself free from his hold. She turned just as the man was

gaining his feet, drew back her fist just like Liza had taught her, and planted her fist against his jaw in a facer that knocked him back in the dust.

One of the other soldiers charged toward her. He ground to a halt a moment later when Liza took the basket from Micheil's hands, and quickly removed a pistol from inside.

She cocked the hammer, pointed it.

Grace was stunned. "Liza! Where did you get that?"

"Deirdre pressed it upon me afore we left the castle today. I think she might have had a premonition that we could meet with trouble."

Liza trained the pistol's barrel on each of the soldiers. "None of ye move else ye'll know the wrath of the laird of Skynegal. 'Tis his lady you have just affronted!"

The soldier hesitated, weighing the threat of her words. He turned to his companion, "Hoy, Owen, I'm for leaving!"

Owen merely agreed on an "Aye," and the two of them turned, jogging off in the opposite direction.

The abandoned captain, having regained his breath, glared at Grace and Liza, then spat in the ground toward the growling Dubhar. "Our deed is done here anyway," he said, before heading in the same direction as the fleeing two.

The fire was blazing now, raining bits of burning thatch all around them as a strong wind suddenly blew across the glen. "Liza, come, help me to find the widow!"

Inside, the cottage was filled with a heavy curtain of smoke that immediately stung their eyes to tears. Grace coughed, ignoring the burning it brought to her throat, and quickly tugged the kerchief from her hair, placing it over her mouth and nose so that she might breathe more easily. She urged Liza to do the same, and together they searched, stumbling over furnishings inside the dark cottage.

"Micheil!" Grace called to the outside, "ask the boy where his grannam is! I cannot find her!"

The two boys darted into the cottage then, snaking through the smoke, flitting toward the back of the dwelling.

“Micheil, no!”

“‘Tis all right, milady. She is here!”

Grace and Liza shuffled their way toward where Micheil had called to them. In the shadowed corner, they found a box bed. Inside, lay the slight figure of a woman, clearly too weak to utter more than a struggling cry.

“Liza, help me to carry her outside!” Grace reached under the widow’s frail shoulders, speaking softly to her in her simple Gaelic, trying to assure her that they were there to help her. The widow moaned, and began to cough when they lifted her from the bed. Slowly, carefully, the four of them carried her from the cottage as burning chunks of thatch scattered around them.

They bore her across the cottage yard toward the pony cart where Micheil took up a blanket and spread it upon the ground for her to lie upon. Grace turned, and started back toward the cottage, hoping to save some of the widow’s belongings from the fire. But before she could reach the door, the roof collapsed inside the cottage and Grace was left to stand, unable to do anything more than watch as the flames roiled out of control, smoke billowing angrily across the horizon.

Grace turned from the burning cottage. “Let us get the widow and her grandson into the cart and leave before the soldiers return. We will bring them back with us to Skynegal.”

They quickly prepared a small pallet made of soft sedge grass and bracken, covering it with a blanket, for the widow to lie upon in the back of the cart.

“Come Liza, you must help me to lift her.”

But as Grace stooped to take the woman under her frail shoulders, she felt a sudden rush, liquid warmth, between her legs. Her belly tightened reflexively, and her focus began to blur as she stumbled back against the pony cart while the voices around her grew dim.

“My lady!”

“Has she fainted?”

“Oh my God, there is blood!”

“The bairn...”

Silence.

thirty-six

Lo! I am with you always where you are.

-Edmund Gosse

Flowers.

Grace sat in an open field, filled with flowers, asphodel and primrose in every imaginable hue, brilliant red, pale yellow and pink, colors more vivid than she could have ever imagined. The breeze was blowing in off the loch, whispering through the tall grass, the sun shining. Cliodna's birds in the tower were calling, soaring. Somewhere, everywhere, she heard laughter, children, the sounds of happiness. She stood and the hem of her tartan gown ruffled around her ankles. She laughed. Away, in the distance, she searched for Christian. He was to return to her today...

A shadow fell suddenly across the sun, blotting out its light from overhead. The wind quickened, pulling at the fragile blossoms around her feet, hissing snakelike through the grass. The laughter she heard no longer sounded childlike, but instead had turned wicked, ugly. She frowned at the unwelcome change, called to the sun to return, but it did not heed her. Instead, the wind blew harder and she turned at the sound of someone approaching behind her, smiling for she knew it was Christian. He had come for her, he would chase away the clouds, and she put her hand back behind her for him, reaching for him...

A terrible force struck her, throwing her forward. She fell into the flowers, but they were no longer primroses, instead

barbed thorns that bit into her hands. She struggled to regain her feet as a blackness came for her, billowing like smoky fingers, reaching out to take her. She could not lift her hands to push it away. She could only watch as the darkness drew nearer and nearer...

A glimmer then, that shone for but a moment's time in the terrible darkness. It sparked like a guardian star, a symbol of hope...but then the smoky fingers took hold of it, blotting it away. The laughter grew, echoing now, thundering above her, threatening her...

Suddenly, softly through the roar, she heard him. He was calling for her. It was her knight, and he had come back to save her, just as she had always known he would...

“Grace?”

Slowly, Grace's eyes flickered open.

She stared a moment, waiting for focus, trying to see where she was. The field and the flowers were no longer there. Gone was the laughter. Instead, she was in her chamber at Skynegal, lying on her bed. Daylight broke through the windows, casting tiny halos of light about the room. It was very quiet, peaceful, not even the sound of the birds outside. Odd, she thought fleetingly, why have Cliodna's birds gone silent?

“Grace, can you hear me?”

She turned her head, wincing when it felt weighted somehow. Christian was there, just as she had known in her dream, but he wasn't her brilliant shining knight. His eyes were shot through with red, shadowed underneath. His face was darkened with a beard, his hair mussed. He looked as if he hadn't slept.

Grace lifted her hand and touched it to his roughened cheek, smiling weakly to him. The dream, the darkness, none of it mattered. Christian was there with her now. Everything would be safe and good.

“You came back,” she whispered to him, wondering why her voice sounded so strange to her ears.

His brow furrowed and the muscle in his jaw worked as if he were fighting against some unknown emotion. He did not smile. Instead, his eyes were shadowed with torment.

“Christian, what is it? Has something happened? Did you find Eleanor?”

Christian shook his head and clasped her hand, bringing it to his lips, kissing her fingers as he closed his eyes. A single tear fell down his cheek. “She has not been found.”

“You are so troubled. But it is not Eleanor, is it? What is wrong?”

He looked at her, his fingers trembling around hers. “You do not remember?”

Grace thought for a moment. *Remember...*

A boy. A wagon bumping along a cart path. She imagined a fire, Liza shouting, a soldier’s wicked laughter.

“The widow,” she said softly. Tears stung at the back of her eyes.

“The soldiers responsible for the fire have been arrested and charged, under direct order of Lord and Lady Sunterglen. They have just returned from London and profess to have known nothing of the tactics their factor, Mr. Starke, had committed in the clearing of the crofts in their absence. I have their every assurance that those involved, including Mr. Starke, will be made an example of.”

She looked to Christian. “What of Micheil? Liza?”

“They are well. Liza was a bit shaken, but she was unharmed. The widow is convalescing and her family has arrived to be with her. Micheil is very worried about you.”

Grace sighed. She closed her eyes a moment, collecting her strength. She was so very tired. She looked to Christian again. An image then, falling to the ground, weakness. There had been a pain deep in her belly, and blood, very red, so much blood...

Grace felt her breath leave her as the mental images came clearer. Tears fell and her throat tightened convulsively against

the words she feared to ask, but could not ignore. “Christian... the baby?”

Christian bit down on his lip, his eyes filling as he squeezed her hand.

Grace swallowed. Why wasn't he answering her? Why wasn't he assuring her their child was well? “Christian, please...tell me the baby is unharmed.”

Christian stared into her eyes and slowly, silently shook his head. “You lost the child, Grace. There was nothing anyone could do.”

Oh, please, no...

Grace shook her head against his words, wailing against the pulling she felt in her chest that she knew had to be the rending of her heart. *No, please, no, not the baby...let him be wrong...*

“It cannot be... no... no...” she said repeatedly, refusing to believe it.

Christian drew Grace to him, muffling her anguished sob against his shoulder as she confronted the terrible reality of his words. He held her there, tightly, taking her cries into himself, until finally his fragile resistance gave way and he lost himself to his own weeping.



CHRISTIAN STOOD JUST inside the doorway to the castle courtyard, watching where Grace sat alone amid the lengthening twilight shadows.

He frowned.

It had been three weeks since she had lost the baby, three weeks of watching her sit at that same spot, every day, staring off at nobody-knew-what, while the rest of the world went on around her.

She had grown markedly thin, barely eating enough to sustain her. She no longer saw to or even cared about the

happenings of the estate. She had abandoned all company, shunning everyone, keeping to her bedchamber by day, only emerging at this time of the night when everyone else was off eating their supper, preparing for bed.

It was that morning that Christian had come to the frightening conclusion that slowly, deliberately, Grace was killing herself. And he wasn't about to stand by and watch her do it.

Christian stepped out onto the courtyard, started toward her, watching for her to acknowledge his approach while knowing she would not. Only Dubhar, who wouldn't leave his mistress's side, lifted his head to watch him.

It was the same every night. He would come there, sit beside her. He would talk to her, tell her the events of the day, read to her the letters she had received, from Highlanders who had emigrated to America, from Catriona and Augusta, until the moon rose high in the evening sky. She never responded. She never gave the slightest indication that she had heard him. She just sat in that chair, staring off at the nothingness, willing herself to disappear.

But he wasn't going to stop trying.

"Good evening, Grace," he said as he lowered into a chair beside her.

She blinked, but it was all the response she gave him.

Christian removed a letter he had received earlier that day from his coat pocket. "I thought you might be interested to know we have received a letter from Eleanor."

He glanced at her.

Nothing.

"She begins by apologizing that she sold my horse, so that she would have some money. She wants me to know she does not fault me for telling her the truth. In fact, she thanks me for it. She writes only that we should not come looking for her, that she has gone to a place where we will never find her. She doesn't know when she is coming back, or if she ever will, only says time will tell..."

Christian made to hand Eleanor's letter to Grace as if to allow her to read it. She did not move to take it, but continued to stare vacantly forward. He quietly refolded the page, placing it in his coat pocket. "There is, of course, no address, so I cannot write to her in return."

When he next glanced at Grace, he was startled to see that she no longer stared out at the nothingness of the night. Instead, she was staring at him. Even though her eyes were still clouded, empty, it was a change.

"Grace?"

"Why do you do this?" Her voice was barbed, not at all her own. "Why do you come here, night after night, and tell me these things?"

He stared at her, uncertain how he should respond. "I guess I come to remind you that there is still a world around you, Grace, a world that you created, that keeps moving on from day to night again. I come because there is still life."

Grace stood without waiting for his response, started walking away from him. She crossed her arms over herself, dismissing him for the safety of her indifference and self-pity. He recognized this tactic well, a defense against having to face the troubling truth.

His inability to do anything for her, for Eleanor, overtook him. Christian stood and crossed the courtyard, taking Grace by the arm and turning her to face him.

"Let me go, Christian!"

"Grace, you are going to listen to me instead of blindly ignoring my existence. I have sat by and watched you destroy yourself over this as if you were the only one to have lost that child. But I lost a child, too, Grace. I feel the pain of it every day, every bit as terribly as you do. Sometimes, I feel it even worse because I have to live with the guilt that I feel, knowing if I had been here, with you, instead of running off to right the mistakes of my family's past, my child would yet be growing inside of you."

Christian paused a moment to rein in his emotions. He drew a ragged breath. When next he spoke, his voice was markedly calmer. “I am your husband, Grace. It is my duty to protect you, to protect our children. But I failed in that duty, just as I failed Eleanor. If you want to blame anyone for the pain you are suffering right now, if you want to blame anyone for taking our child away, then blame me. I did this, Grace. Not you. Take that guilt, that anger you have for yourself and direct it on me. Just stop torturing yourself!”

Grace simply stared through him, as if he hadn’t even spoken.

Defeated, Christian released her and turned, heading back for the castle. He was unable to endure the pain of her suffering any longer that day.

As he approached the door, he saw Deirdre watching him. He didn’t speak to her, just shot her a glance as he strode past.

“What you did was good,” she said, bringing him up short at the door. “You have brought her to thinking again.”

But Christian wasn’t so hopeful. “What good will it do, Deirdre?”

Deirdre smiled at him, taking his arm, and walked with him back inside the castle. “Wait and see, my lord. Just wait and see.”



TWO MORNINGS LATER, Grace sat at her bedchamber window, wondering why there wasn’t anyone on the courtyard below. At this hour, the estate was normally bustling with people seeing to the day’s tasks, yet not a single person appeared. Everywhere she looked—the stables, even the fields—all were deserted. Where had everyone gone?

She stood, walked across the room to the door, opening it just slightly to peer onto the corridor. It was Wednesday, wasn’t it? When they always would strip the bed linens for washing, take up the carpets for beating, yet neither Flora nor

Deirdre were anywhere in sight. Neither was Liza, she suddenly realized. She hadn't come with Grace's morning tea for breakfast.

And then she realized Dubhar wasn't with her in her chamber either.

A niggling uneasiness began to prick at her, and Grace slipped silently into the hallway, walking to the stairs. She listened a moment below. No muffled voices, no clatter from the kitchen. Just silence. She went halfway down the stairs and still she could hear nothing.

When she reached the bottom step, Grace looked on to the vast emptiness of the great hall and knew something must be terribly wrong. How could dozens of people suddenly vanish without her having noticed? It was almost as if she were walking in a dream.

As she headed down the stair for the service rooms, she thought she heard a sound, a faint keen that seemed to have come from the kitchen below. She looked to the doorway and heard the sound again. Concerned now, she started toward it, entering a room that was normally warm and welcoming and filled with the smells of baking, where a basket of oatcakes was always waiting on the center table, where a kettle for tea could always be found on the fire.

But there was no tea kettle, no fire in the hearth. Every dish and cup had been tucked away in its cupboard.

Another keen, and Grace turned to where the cradle stood at its place near the hearth. She felt a twinge seize her inside, in her chest, felt her knees weaken slightly. Cautiously, she approached, peering inside to where little Iain MacLean lay on his back, his tiny legs working as he stretched and kicked his growing limbs.

When he realized she was there, he stilled. He blinked, uncertain, then he let out a wail.

Grace glanced around the kitchen, wondering why he had been left unattended. "Deirdre?" she called, but she received

no response. What if he were hungry, she thought. What if he needed a changing?

Grace left the kitchen, walked out onto the courtyard, searching for someone, anyone to tell her what had happened. Inside the kitchen, Iain's cry grew louder.

"Deirdre!" she called out. "Seonag!"

No one came in response to her summons.

Behind her, Iain's cries increased all the more.

Her heartbeat quickened. "Is anyone there?" she called, shouting up to the castle towers. Again, no response. Her breathing hitched as she began to truly fear something terrible had happened.

Realizing that no one was coming, Grace quickly retraced her steps to the kitchen. Iain had worked himself into a spell of wailing, his tiny face now livid red. Grace knew a moment of panic—she hadn't the faintest idea what she should do. She had so little experience with babies. She quickly grew frightened.

"Deirdre, please?" Her voice pleaded. "Where are you? I need your help. Please!"

She leaned over the cradle, hoping to quiet the infant's cries. "*Shh*," she whispered, caressing his chest, trying to soothe him. "Everything will be all right, Iain. I'm sure your mam or Aunt Deirdre will be back very soon."

Please let them come back very soon.

But Iain only cried the louder, and soon he was hiccupping convulsively with his upset.

Grace did the only thing she could think of. She reached inside the cradle and gently took the infant up to her. The moment Iain felt the warmth of her, he quieted. Slowly, Grace began to rock him against her in the way she had seen Seonag do so many times.

By the time, Christian returned, Grace had come to realize exactly what he had done. In the weeks since losing their child, Grace had found herself unwilling to look on the face of

a child, any child, without feeling a hole in her heart. If she'd ever had to walk by Iain's cradle, she would purposely take another direction so as to avoid going near him. She'd purposely avoided the nursery that had been set up off the great hall, choosing instead to take the south stairs to her bedchamber.

And because of this, Christian had arranged for her to be left alone with Iain, knowing she would have to put aside her hopelessness in order to tend to him.

Grace wasn't angry at what he had done, and she told him as much when he came into the kitchen where she had just lay a now sleeping Iain into his cradle.

When she saw Christian, saw the anxiety on his face, she could only admonish herself for how she had discounted his own pain. "I am so sorry, Christian. I have been terrible to you and—"

"*Shh.*" He drew her into his arms. "I am just relieved to see that Deirdre's idea proved a sound one. She said it had taken much the same such occasion for her to come to terms with her own such loss. I worried you would resent me for having allowed this."

Grace shook her head, resting her forehead against his chest.

Christian felt a wave of emotion swell within him—gratitude, relief—and for the first time in nearly a month, he smiled down into the blue eyes of the woman he loved more than life, thanking the heavens, the saints, and even the goddess Cliodna for giving his wife back to him. Again.

epilogue

*I am haunted by numberless islands,
and many a Danaan shore,
where Time would surely forget us,
and Sorrow come near us no more.
Soon far from the rose and the lily,
and the fret of the flames would we be,
were we only white birds, my beloved,
buoyed out on the foam of the sea.*

-W. B. Yeats

Summer had given way to autumn, burnishing the Highlands in splashes of orange and gold. As was the custom, the festivities for the harvest day *céilidh* would begin at dusk, after the day's tasks had been seen to, and the animals fed and bedded down for the night.

Earlier that morning, on the bluff overlooking the loch, the sun had cast its dawning light on a ceremony that had joined Andrew and Liza, and Alastair and Flora, in marriage. For luck, the brides had carried bunches of white heather in their bridal bouquets, and when the vows had been exchanged, there was a rush by the young men in the company to be the first to receive their customary kiss from the newly wedded wives.

Afterward, as the people of Skynegal made their way back to the castle, they'd each placed a stone upon a cairn built to

commemorate the day. Christian and Grace, the laird and his lady, had placed the first two stones, followed after by the new couples, and then the others. When the last stone had been set by one of the children whom Christian had lifted up high to reach it, the cairn had stood nearly eight feet. The company had cheered *Nis! Nis! Nis!* while the morning sun struggled through the mist, and the birds of Clidna soared overhead, calling out their legendary song.

The mood of celebration had continued throughout the day. With the coming of twilight's shadows, rush torches had been lit about the courtyard while small *cruisgeans*, or crusie lamps, shone from the various tables that were set out with food and drink. The children had gathered in a small circle, sucking on sweet aniseed *gundy* sticks, eyes wide as they listened to McGee telling one of the many adventures of Robert Roy MacGregor, the Scottish hero, told to him by his father, who'd heard it from his father before him. The elder tenants watched on, reminiscing about their own carefree days of youth, while McFee and several of his contemporaries assembled at the opposite end of the courtyard, readying to play upon a motley orchestra of fiddles, pipes and drums.

The darker the night sky grew, the more spirited the gathering became. By the time the moon was high and full above them, everyone had eaten their fill, the ale and whisky were flowing freely, and a lively circle of dancers were hopping and turning about the courtyard to the hoots and whistles of those clapping their hands around them.

High upon the near tower, watching down on the merriment below, were the laird and his lady. It was a chill night and they were each dressed in their tartans. Christian stood with his arms wrapped around Grace, her head tucked snugly beneath his chin as they looked out together onto the scene below.

It was a day that had been filled with celebrations—and there was yet one more to be had—the news of the tiny life that lay nestled inside of her.

By Deirdre's calculations, their child would be making his appearance some time the following spring. And as Grace

looked down on this place and these people that she loved so much, encircled as she was by Christian's arms with the touch of a Skynegal breeze against her face, she could only think that Nonny had been right all along.

Perfect knights did certainly exist, dreams weren't given without the ability to come true—and a miracle is always but a belief away from happening.

“Christian...”

He nuzzled her hair. “Hmm?”

“I have something to tell you...”

author's note

During the course of my research, I will sometimes come across some tidbit from history that will draw my attention more than others. I will often pursue that same tidbit, until it eventually ends up becoming a part of one of my stories.

For *White Knight*, that tidbit was the Scottish Highland Clearances.

They began as early as the late-1700's and continued in some areas of the Highlands for nearly a century. Imagine that you are living on a small, barely-surviving farm. You have lived on this land all of your life, as had your father and his father before him. It is the only place you know. You do not own this land, yet you were raised with an innate love for it, a respect for the clan traditions of your ancestors and a pride in your heritage. You pledge allegiance to your chief, the great landowner, and for centuries your people have protected him and his kin in times of war and attack, oftentimes sacrificing their lives for him. This pride and love you feel isn't something recently come by; it is centuries in the making. It runs in your blood.

Despite what hardship may come to your tiny place in this remote ancient land—war, poverty, or disease—the thought to abandon your heritage never crosses your mind.

Now, imagine one bleak, rainy Highland day. You are a farmer, and thus you have already begun cultivating your small plot of leased land to grow the small crop of oat, barley, or potato that will sustain your family throughout the coming year. You have invested everything you have in it—your time,

your labor, your money. It is your life's calling, this farming, the work of both your heart and your soul.

Imagine, just as the crops have managed yet again to break their way through the unforgiving Highland soil, your laird's factor comes to pay you a visit. He hands you a document written in a language you do not understand, still he manages to breach the communication barrier enough to deliver the terrible news that your home and the land it sits upon will no longer be made available for you. Even before your precious crop can be harvested, you will be made to vacate with your family and possessions. If you are one of the more fortunate, you might be offered an alternate plot of land elsewhere on the estate, but it is likely a bare fraction of the size you occupied before. Your sole source of income is now terribly depleted.

When you mention this to the factor, he tells you that you should abandon your farming, this work of your heart, and become a fisherman on the coast instead, only you have never known this work and there is no one coming forward to teach you. You make do as best you can, until the day the factor comes again, bearing another unreadable document, ordering you off the land again, only this time there is no alternate plot. You are simply expected to leave, abandoning the gravesites of your family, your heritage, the land you so love, so that the laird may bring in a new tenant to replace you, the sheep that will bring him a tidier profit.

The instances of the Clearances I have illustrated in this story, the evictions, the burnings, are all based upon factual accounts from that time period. Some have argued that the evictions were carried out "for the good of the people being displaced," that the Highlanders were a "lazy, indolent people who were satisfied to live in poverty rather than seek new and improved ways of making a living." What these observations fail to appreciate is that it wasn't the impoverished state of living the Highlanders clung to. It was the land and their connection to it, a quality as much a part of their character as the mist is to the heathery Scottish hills, a characteristic that has made legend of personages the likes of William Wallace and Robert Roy MacGregor.

While my heroine, Grace, is a completely fictional character, some of her ideals were shared with other humanitarians of the time, those few who saw the immorality of the ‘Improvements’ and sought alternate ways of nourishing the Highland economy. Dowager Lady MacKenzie of Gairloch was indeed responsible for organizing relief efforts through the building of roads in Wester Ross after a potato famine struck the Highlands in the mid-1840’s. From all accounts, this great lady was a woman of character and vision. She taught herself Gaelic, as well as ensuring that her sons would learn the language from their Gaelic-speaking nursemaid. She saw that they were then tutored at home instead of sending them away to university, so they could better understand their people and thus manage their estates more successfully. Still other landowners provided housing and food for the displaced Highlanders, taking them onto their own estates as tenants, even if it meant sometimes bankrupting themselves in the process, all in the name of humanity.

Near the village of Helmsdale in the Scottish Highlands, there is a memorial statue, funded by locals and the descendants of those immigrants to Canada and the United States who were made to leave their homes during these dark times. Created by pop-artist and sculptor Gerald Laing, this evocative piece—called “The Exiles”—depicts a family having to leave their home, walking away whilst one member looks wistfully back. A twin statue to it also stands in Winnipeg, Canada, where many a Scottish exile landed. These two monuments, so beautiful and so stirring, serve as reminders to the world of this unnecessary human tragedy.

I hope you enjoyed reading Christian and Grace’s story. As many of my readers might already know, this is the third book of what I had originally planned as a trilogy.

However...

While I was finishing this story, there came a voice from the text that begged to be heard. The voice was that of Christian’s sister, Lady Eleanor Wycliffe. She will take us to the mysterious Western Isles of Scotland, a mythical setting peopled with eccentric characters, charming customs, and even

an ancient curse. I hope you will look for her story, *White Mist*, in the coming months.

As always, happy reading...

J.R.

about the author

Jaclyn Reding's award-winning, bestselling historical and contemporary romance novels have been translated into nearly a dozen languages. A National Readers' Choice Awards finalist, and Romance Writers of America RITA Award nominee, she is the proud, proud mom of two grown sons, and willing minion to an elderly cairn terrier and a tuxedo cat. Home is with her family in New England, in an antique farmhouse that she suspects is held together purely by old wallpaper and cobwebs. A lifelong equestrian, she spends her free time in the saddle, going over plotlines and character arcs with her confidant and toughest critic, a very opinionated retired racehorse named Brunello.

For more information, visit

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