



A SPIRITED
SPINSTERS
STORY

THE
LOST
BRIDE

ROBYN
CHALMERS

THE LOST BRIDE
A SPIRITED SPINSTERS NOVELLA



ROBYN CHALMERS

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CHAPTER 1



IN WHICH THE HARSH LIGHT OF DAY
DOESN'T CHANGE THE FACTS

The morning was frigid, the kind where no fire took the chill off the air and the only warm place to be was bed.

But the very polite knocking on the bedroom door would not stop, no matter how tightly Marcus Ambrose, Viscount Huntley, pulled the feather pillow over his head. He knew it was his brother Evander because the brute had been employing that rap since they were children.

“Go away.”

“Not until you tell me everything.”

Evander should, by rights, be enjoying his first day of marital bliss. Instead, he was tapping on the door in his usual relentless way. Courteous, but relentless, summed up his brother.

“Can't we do this later?”

“Later I will be on the road to the Bolthole. Now is the time. Come to the library.”

The Bolthole was a picturesque house their family owned, perched on the edge of Lake Windermere and the site of many happy summers. And now, apparently, honeymoons.

Marcus hauled himself out of bed with a groan. “I’ll be down soon.”

Wrotham House, with its huge rooms, would need an inferno to warm this morning. He shivered into his dressing gown, pushed his feet into his slippers, and hoped there would be coffee.

As he went down the stairs, a clock in the distance chimed six. They were awake far earlier than the kitchen staff would expect, but when he opened the door to the library, there was a tray waiting with coffee, crumpets, and a small pot of honey.

His brother looked up from the book in his lap. He wore travel gear, his top boots gleaming, but his cravat already crushed. “Ah, there you are.” As though he’d been waiting for hours.

“Don’t you have better places to be? Like, I don’t know, in bed with your new wife?” The sky outside the library window was still dark, but he could feel the chill coming off it. The day would be cold.

Evander smiled. “Too much to do. We are leaving on our honeymoon this morning. We’ve been sternly told to make our way to Windermere and leave the children behind.” He finished this with a smile. He hadn’t been so happy in years.

Of course, there was talk of the speed of the nuptials. That Evander had compromised Sarah and made the marriage necessary. This was especially scandalous since he was a vicar and should be far above such things.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

And Sarah was already good for him. His brother literally glowed with happiness.

“So, tell me about her.” Evander said.

He meant Marcus's wife. The one his brother had only just found out about. "You woke me up for this?"

The truth was, Marcus didn't know if she still wanted to be his wife, or if her father had already found a way around the law to nullify the marriage. It was hard to tell. The last thing Mr. Crawford had said was 'you will have the papers to void this marriage directly.'

Amusement touched Evander's expression. "You're more honest when you're half asleep."

Marcus pinched the bridge of his nose and willed himself to wake up. "Her name is Penelope. She is the eldest daughter of Jonathon Crawford. We eloped, and there was an uproar."

Evander's eyes widened as he picked up his crumplet. "Ah, now it makes sense. I thought you weren't quite yourself when you returned from Scotland. But *eloped*..."

He had spent the last part of spring and the entire summer in the community Crawford had created on the banks of the Clyde River. His father, the Earl of Wrotham, had not only wanted to invest in the cotton mills, but also to learn about the way Crawford was revolutionizing the textile industry by treating his workers with dignity and respect. Marcus had fallen in love with Scotland, with its majestic waterfalls and lush forests. But greater than all of that was Penny. Her laugh, her brightness, the way she teased him in a way people rarely teased the heir to an earldom.

"The news of Father's deterioration could not have come at a more delicate time, although Jonathan Crawford was about to chase me across the border, in any case. And Penny did not want to accompany me. So I left her behind." He paused and took a breath. "I should not have done that."

The intervening months had seen Father limping from one crisis to another until they went to London only a few weeks back to make sure his affairs were in order. There had been no time for a quick jaunt back up to Scotland, because there was no such thing as a quick jaunt to Scotland.

Every night since he'd lain awake, dreaming himself back to that summer. Only an idiot would lose a wife that wonderful. The selfish brute in him wished he'd just kidnapped her instead of leaving her behind. But how could he do that if it wasn't what she wanted?

Evander smirked, as though the sorry tale amused him greatly. "Yes, it is a common fallacy that the Scottish enjoy a good elopement."

"Especially not the puritanical kind like Mr. Crawford. I have offended him to the core of his being. I went from being someone he liked, to someone he'd like to scrape from the bottom of his shoe. He said we had sullied the sacred vows of marriage and disrespected his kin." He still squirmed when he thought of the strips Mr. Crawford had stripped off him.

"But why the rush?" His brother rolled his eyes. "Don't answer. We all know you never like to wait for anything."

It was true. Why wait for something when you didn't have to? "I thought we were being romantic and eager to start our lives together, but looking back, I think Penny knew how her family would react to her marrying an Englishman."

Evander frowned. "Or just the sort of man who would elope rather than doing things the proper way. You have deprived them of a proper celebration and the chance to meet her betrothed's family. If he's a deeply religious man, you will definitely have offended him."

He had realized that, but it might have been possible to work the situation to their favor if he hadn't had to rush back to England. "This from the man that married within weeks of meeting his wife-to-be. Forgive me if I don't think you are in a position to sermonize."

His brother had the grace to look chagrined. "When it comes to the Ambrose ability to divine a soul mate in the blink of an eye, it seems we both take after Father."

"Who married Mother within six weeks too, if I remember correctly." It was likely why his father hadn't judged him for the marriage, but simply told him to fetch his wife the moment Marcus told him about it a few days ago.

Evander steepled his fingers. "The problem is that when we get it wrong, the consequences are far-reaching, and in your case, dynasty-collapsing. Did you get it wrong?"

Marcus rolled his eyes. "That's going too far, Ev. You have a *fine* son to take my place. No dynasty will collapse on our watch."

"Not the same and you know it." He crossed one leg over the other. "So tell me. How does Viscount Huntley, heir to the Wrotham earldom and widely accepted Corinthian without peer, lose his wife?"

The door opened, and Sarah's head peeked around. "Ah, here you are! This is one conversation I don't want to miss." She went to the table, picked up a crumpet, and made her way to the armchair in the corner. "Carry on."

She was dressed in a simple white gown with a soft pink pelisse over the top for warmth. But it was her feet that drew his attention. She wore a fluffy pair of sheepskin slippers that were certainly not what she was going to travel in. She settled

herself in. "Tell us all. I cannot believe you flirted with me so outrageously just last week when you were a married man!"

Evander smiled indulgently at his wife, not in the least concerned with the previous flirting. "Was it a legal marriage?"

Annoyance flickered through him at what Evander suggested. "We married, there were witnesses. She is of age."

Sarah inspected the jam on her crumpet. "So why do you think you are not?"

"Mr. Crawford threatened to void the marriage." And his anger had been fear inspiring, to say the least. But then, a six-and-a-half foot Scotsman chasing you from the house and threatening to lock you up if you ever returned had that effect.

Evander's eyes narrowed. "Would he have grounds to do that?"

"It is possible. Our witnesses were my valet and her abigail, and I didn't have time to collect the paperwork. It was rather a rushed affair."

"Consummated?" Evander said it evenly, but a blush stole up his cheeks.

No, and he regretted that too. Maybe she would be with him if they had. Marcus looked at his brother without blinking. The stare that made men at Tattersall's back off whatever horse he was bidding on.

His brother shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Scottish law is quite stringent despite what we English think of border weddings."

"I do not want a wife who does not want me. And she has made it abundantly clear that in a choice between her family

and I, her family wins. It's easy for Father to say 'go find her', but there's every possibility I either won't win her over or won't want to. Ev, if I cannot nullify this marriage, I am happy to live my life single and issueless. Alexander will make a fitting earl. Better that than Penny coming to England and being miserable."

Evander tilted his head to one side. "I am trying to hit on the reason you married her if the thought you'd make each other miserable came so fast on its heels."

"Because Mr. Crawford raged, and Mrs. Crawford cried and swooned, and this was the first time Penny had disappointed her parents. The experience wounded her. I would have trudged through it in my usual bullish way, but she said we had made a mistake and that she needed to think. Then you wrote telling me Father's condition had deteriorated, and he was going to London to get his affairs in order, and here I am."

Evander cocked an eyebrow and stayed silent, waiting for him to elaborate.

Sarah smiled at him like he was the most amusing thing she'd seen in an age. "And here was me thinking you were an irreconcilable bachelor, and look at you."

Marcus scowled. "Look at me, *what*, precisely?"

"Hopelessly in love with your lost bride." Her expression suggested she took great relish in saying that.

"I'm not the hero of some lurid novel. She's not lost, she just decided not to come." He sighed, his heart still weighed down by the trauma of it all. "If you knew her, you'd see she's the most adventurous girl. So full of pluck and game for anything. But she just crumbled. Couldn't stop crying and was

so ashamed of what we'd done. Even said she'd undo it all in a trice if only she could. My heart broke seeing her thus. How could I hold her to it? Would you?"

His brother answered with his own question. "But she was the right person to marry, before that?"

Marcus thought of the summer they spent together and couldn't help but smile. "Very much so. Mr. Crawford didn't want to introduce me as Lord Huntley, so to her I was just plain Mr. Ambrose, which was perfect. Before I met her, I could see my life stretching out before me with a dutiful wife who married me for my wealth and title. My world would shrink and become more boring as time passed. Somehow I knew just by spending a few months with Penny that life would never be dull with her. With her, life would be an adventure."

"But?" Sarah went to the door when a maid came with a cup of coffee for her. She'd planned this well, his new sister.

"She was sure her father would soften." He shook his head, remembering the pit of shame in his stomach as Mr. Crawford had spent his anger on him. *Rightfully*. "He did *not* relent. He made her choose between her family and coming to England with me. Said any man who would lure her into a clandestine wedding was nothing more than a charlatan. The way he looked at me. Like I was a criminal."

Evander refilled his coffee from the pot. "Not the usual reaction parents have to you." Somehow, the mild way Evander was reacting to the drama was reassuring. His tone suggested none of this was unfixable and that Marcus could fix it.

Sarah looked confused. "At what point did you tell her you're Viscount Huntley, and not just plain Mr. Ambrose?"

She had a point. “Just before we eloped.” His heart sank. “You are right, that is not enough time to digest something so big.”

“Or decide if being a viscountess was something she wanted,” Sarah added, almost apologetically.

He’d never thought of his title being a reason not to marry him. But she might be right. “She did say she had to ‘think about things’.” He shrugged. “She took so long I decided that if she didn’t want to be married to me, that was her prerogative and deuced if I was going to chase her like a young pup.”

Evander nodded, as though highly satisfied. “After all these years of ladies chasing you down left and right and you dodging the matchmaking mammas like it was a new sport, *this* is where it ends.”

“Yes, yes, we all know how you feel about my inability to settle down. But I tried and guess what? She doesn’t want me. None of my letters have received a reply.” That still stung. The first few had pleaded, the fourth had begged, and the last had given up. Now he just wanted answers so he could move on with his life. Everyone made mistakes, and this was obviously his.

Evander shrugged. “If she didn’t want you, idiot, she wouldn’t have married you. You just need to make this right. Where is she now?”

He shrugged. “In Scotland. Probably running the nursery school at the mill as she often does.”

“And no marriage voiding confirmation has reached you yet?”

“No.” He closed his eyes. What a mess he’d made of things. “I need to sort this out. It’s time.”

Evander nodded. "It is indeed time. Don't let the fact that you're used to having everyone admire you stop you from fighting for her. Because you do love her, and you believed she was the right woman to be your viscountess. Trust your judgement. I do."

He *had* trusted his judgement and look where it had landed him. "I care not either way. I will not beg."

Evander shook his head, his expression rueful. "Incorrect. You're going to go back there, fall on your hands and knees, find out what the problem is, find out how you can fix it and then you're going to bring her back to us so we can have a proper wedding. One that I will preside over and then we'll all have an enormous party."

"I like your optimism. Did I mention her father said if I ever returned that he'd lock me up?"

"Whatever for?"

"Abduction."

Evander took a deep breath. "Ridiculous. Just don't be stubborn. I know you've always gotten everything you want without quibble, and this is probably the first time someone has said "no" to you or that they're upset and disappointed by your actions, but you definitely did the wrong thing here. If Father knew you'd eloped, he'd be horrified. Not the done thing."

He could always rely on Evander for no-nonsense counsel. They'd gone from brothers who spent their entire time fighting to Evander being the most indispensable person in Marcus's life.

Marcus nodded. "The last thing Father needs is the stress of knowing I've brought dishonor on our name. It always

seems to me that when something goes wrong, his health suffers. Old Montrose is forever telling him not to overextend himself and I can't help but feel he's right." His physicians had warned the family that any great shocks could mean the end. They all pretended not to tiptoe around him, but they all did.

"So we'll just gloss over your elopement and make a big to-do about the blessing I'll do for you when you return with your wife."

"Or a signed document releasing me."

"Certainly." His brother looked less than convinced. "Although, if it all falls through, what do you do with your London warehouse?"

Marcus was opening a warehouse that promoted only British textiles to the insatiable London crowd. It was close to completion. Most of the stock was on its way from the New Lanark mills and was the best response he could think of, after being so impressed with the mill operation. They had just purchased enough bolts of fabric to fill the warehouse. A huge order. He could only imagine what a sale like that would mean for the mill and the people there. Penny and her family. But he hadn't told Mr. Crawford or Penny of its existence. And perhaps never would.

Marcus shrugged. "I didn't do that to impress anyone. It's just a good idea. They don't need to know I'm behind it. I have my man of business doing all the correspondence."

"Good idea if your current persona non grata status continues. But if all goes well and you arrive at the Bolthole needing to be married again because the first ceremony has been voided, remember it is not my parish and you will need a license."

“Unlikely, dear brother.” The thought he would arrive in Scotland to find Penny had a change of heart and would return with him to England was nothing more than a dream.

“I am testament to the most unlikely things happening.” Evander shook his head as though he still couldn’t believe his luck.

“As am I,” Sarah agreed, and the two lovebirds shared a gaze that made Marcus feel vaguely jealous.

“Well, then, please send some of that luck my way.”

He was going to need it.

CHAPTER 2



IN WHICH SNEAKING AROUND IS
UNLADYLIKE BUT NECESSARY

It was almost midday, on the grand day of Hogmanay, the last day of the year 1811. Penny Crawford, daughter of the mill owner, walked back from the small store that also acted as post office.

Still no mail. Perhaps she should stop waiting.

Like any Hogmanay, it was bitterly cold, but the village of New Lanark was abuzz with excitement for the evening's festivities. The bonfire was being built in the clearing, candles were placed in every window and gifts of biscuits, whisky and lumps of coal to send good fortune to all. And it felt especially bountiful with the newest London order being filled and packed in wax covers for the long trip. Everyone smiled and nodded as she passed them, probably still happy with the special Christmas bonus Father had given them just the week before.

She climbed the steps of their house. Normally the Hogmanay spirit had her foot tapping eagerly for a reel or two. Today her mind was a long way away. South, to be precise, and the husband who ran from Scotland and from her at the first sign of trouble. She sighed and pushed open the door to the drawing room.

Mother looked up, the usual wrinkle of worry between her brows. She put her needlework down. "Good, you're back. Let's be off." Her response to Penny's sadness was always to be doing something. But before she could rise from her chair, Mary entered the room and handed her a note.

Mrs. Crawford took the note from the maid and frowned as she scanned it. She glanced at Penny, her hand falling to her lap. "You will not be coming with Katie and I to visit the new McKenzie baby. Miss Nicholls has taken ill at the nursery school and requests to be replaced. Now you must walk all the way back."

And she'd been hoping to spend the afternoon reading Nana's copy of 'Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile'. She sighed. *Never mind*. "Poor Miss Nicholls."

Mother was forever sending her to the nursery school, trying to keep her busy. It wasn't like she didn't love it. Indeed, since her lamentable elopement, the large attic rooms had been a haven for her broken heart. Nothing like thirty boisterous bairns to lighten one's life. "Very well. Please send my best wishes to Mrs. Mackenzie and don't forget the blanket I made."

"I will tell her I embroidered it," her sister Katie said with a mischievous grin. Since turning fourteen, she had become increasingly impudent. Penny liked it. "Except for the blue flowers. I'll say you did those, for they are quite misshapen."

"And they will catch you out immediately when Mrs. Mackenzie sees my name stitched on the border."

Mrs. Crawford studied them with an amused smile. "We will be back in time for the bonfire. It's to be lit at six and will go all night. So we'll have a quick dinner and go down." She

paused. “Joshua will be there, Penny. Mrs. Kirk said he called you ‘most handsome now’.”

Penny had known Joshua since she was eight years old when he had thought her anything but ‘handsome’. But she heard the warning in her mother’s placid remark. Father was pushing for her to accept the suitors who came to court her, and the pressure was mounting. Penny looked down at her hands, not wanting to make it an argument. “I wish Father would not encourage him. I am already wed.”

“Father assures me he has taken care of it,” Mother said, as though the pesky marriage had been dealt with. She always sided with Father, but her pained expression suggested it wasn’t easy. She didn’t like the situation any more than Penny did.

“Has he also taken care of my heart? I am not one to pledge my hand and then just consider it ‘taken care of’. So stand me next to Joshua Reynolds all you like at the bonfire. It will only increase everyone’s embarrassment when he offers for me and I decline.”

As angry as she was at Marcus and herself for her own reactions, it did not alter the fact that they were married. In her heart, her mind, and in the eyes of God. Such things were not to be taken lightly. At least not by her. To pretend otherwise would be a gross betrayal of her own heart. “I shall run away and join the nunnery if you persist with this line of action.”

There. Although, really, she couldn’t even make an elopement stick. How on earth would she manage a trip to a nunnery? Wherever would she find a nunnery anyway?

Mother bristled. Penny imagined there were actual flames sparking from her red hair. “You will do no such—”

The sound of horses and a carriage coming to a halt outside their home thankfully stopped the rest of the forthcoming lecture. All three of them looked toward the door, but Penny was the first to voice what they were no doubt all thinking. “Are we expecting someone?”

Her mother shook her head. “No. Although I had hoped your grandmother might visit.”

Penny’s maternal grandmother owned a lodge on the other side of the river and was known by all as the Countess, although her actual title was Lady Boncraven, Dowager Countess of Coraleigh.

Penny had been hoping Marcus might visit for months now, but he never came. Nevertheless, her stomach did a flip and the urge to run had her at the door. “I will go to Miss Nicholls now. No point wasting time when she is unwell. I’ll be stuck here for an age if you have to entertain a visitor.”

Before Mary had opened the front door, Penny had her cape on and was out the back.

She’d only gone a few steps when her dratted curiosity got the better of her. Instead of joining the path leading to the school, she circled back around to see who was arriving. The mill her father had built on the banks of the Clyde was a self-sustaining enterprise, but there were still visitors and deliveries all year long. From businessmen wanting to supply the mill, to politicians wanting to see the place her father named his ‘textile utopia’.

She was in time to see the visitor step from the carriage. He straightened to his full six feet, hat in hand and ran a hand through his dark brown hair. Her heart pounded when he rolled his shoulders in a way that was so familiar to her that her heart squeezed and sunk to her toes.

Marcus.

If she was closer, she would be able to see the face she dreamed of each night. The eyes that couldn't decide if they were green or brown. The mouth that loved to hitch into a crooked smile when she said something particularly naughty. Just Marcus. All of him.

No word, no warning. No reply to her letters. Just her husband on the doorstep.

She pulled her head back and flattened her body against the cold gray stone of the house. What to do? The world around her blurred, and the chirping of the birds in the bowers seemed very loud. Nothing made sense, and yet everything felt right now. He was back.

Father would speak to him, nothing surer. But would he do as promised and lock him up for having the temerity to return? *Surely not.* She snuck around to the other side of the house and ducked under the window to his study. There was a vent close to the ground that Katie used to eavesdrop on interesting conversations. Knowing Penny's luck, they would catch her the first time she tried it.

But how else was a young lady to find out what was truly being said?

She waited, her throat tight and her breath coming in short, shallow bursts. Soon enough, her father's booming voice drifted through the vent she crouched at. "Good morning, Lord Huntley. How can we be of assistance?"

Penny remembered the times when Father had called him Marcus and shared the secrets to the community he had created with him. Balmy summer nights when their family

took him on long walks along the riverbank. Before the elopement.

It was winter now.

“I have not heard from you regarding the state of my marriage to your daughter, sir.” His voice was wintry, too. As though ice had seeped into his heart and made him the stiff English lord he never wanted to be. Her heart squeezed at the thought.

“Why would you? There was no marriage.”

She could imagine Marcus blinking in the silence that ensued. He always did that whenever he couldn't speak his mind without being impolite. But there was a time and a place for his manners and this certainly was not it.

“There was most definitely a marriage. I was there.” *Tell him, Marcus.* Penny slid up the side of the wall and took a sidelong glance through the window into the room. The mirror above the fireplace gave her the image of Marcus flicking something off the cuff of his shirtsleeve.

“Do you have the certificate?” Her father leaned back in his chair, while Marcus still stood, not having been invited to sit.

“No.”

Father shrugged. “If your marriage is not registered with the sheriff or magistrate, and there is no paperwork from the marriage house you visited, you do not have yourself a viscountess any more than I have myself a fortune when I enter the lotteries. Legal formalities must be followed, ye ken?” Father had traveled to Glasgow many times in the wake of her elopement, but all he said was that he had ‘taken care of

the matter.’ It now seemed that meant burying the evidence. Anger soured her stomach.

“Ah, I see. I suppose that means you could not nullify the marriage and had to resort to more underhand tactics. How did Penny feel about that?”

“She agrees with whatever I feel is best. So you can tell your solicitor to stop investigating.”

She does not! Penny shook with outrage. Father had listened to her tears of regret on the first days after their elopement and then ignored everything after that. The much larger regret of making Marcus think she didn’t love him. Of not going to England with him.

But Marcus had a lawyer involved? It suggested he wanted a way out of their hasty marriage as much as Father. She blinked away the tears that were never far from the surface. She should have known when he did not reply to her letters. But there was always the chance Father had intercepted them. That hope seemed more and more faint.

This was why she had to listen at vents, because otherwise she would never know anything.

“My lawyer will be withdrawn when we decide is best, not you.” Marcus’s words were clipped and angry sounding.

Father’s gaze narrowed. “I can confirm that the registrar did not receive notification of the marriage, either. You can return to England safe in the knowledge you are still a bachelor.” Father stood waving Marcus away like he did to anyone who wasted his time.

But Marcus just stood here, his jaw clenched. “May I see Penny?”

Father huffed. “You may not see Miss Crawford now or ever. You are lucky I have not fulfilled my promise to lock you up if you ever returned. I only don’t because I know the communication on my side has been lacking. I understand you want to draw a line under this debacle as much as I. Consider it done.”

So she was to have no say in her future at all? The thought of not even seeing Marcus when he finally arrived made her fists curl in anger. How dare they?

Marcus stood in silence for a few long moments. “I have brought this gift for her.” He motioned behind him to a tea chest.

What ‘this gift’ was, she didn’t know, but Father barked out a laugh. “She has no need of gifts, but leave it here. We will find a use for it.”

It was an insult, but then Father had felt so very insulted when they eloped. It seemed he found it easier to believe Marcus was fully at fault rather than the truth, which was that Penny had all but forced Marcus into their clandestine marriage. Part of being female seemed to be the inability to do something wrong of one’s own accord and take the blame for it.

“If there *is* no marriage, I hope you will not mind having Miss Crawford sign a legal document attesting the same. I cannot have this incident coming back to haunt me.”

When he was married with a family of his own.

He was giving up. Again. She shook her head. Any hope he had come to Scotland to claim her as his bride fizzled like a guttering candle.

Meeting with him would only cause her anguish and make her relive those horrible weeks after he left all over again. She wouldn't do it to herself.

“Certainly. Have your man leave the documents here and I will have them signed.”

“I would prefer to witness the signing of the document, considering how easily they seem to go missing.”

Father's cheeks reddened, but considering the other documents *had* disappeared with his help, he couldn't deny the truth of what Marcus said. So she would see him. Even if it was briefly. “Our business is concluded then. I assume you are at the inn at Lanark?” There was a pause as Marcus nodded. “Good. I will send word for when you may return to sign the documents.”

Business? She felt her cheeks heat. Typical father to think he could shrink the most romantic summer of her life to a transaction.

And Marcus didn't even sound like the man she fell in love with anymore. He sounded like the proper English lord who was dealing with his land steward on some boring matter of sheep health when he would rather be at his club. *Oh Marcus, what happened?* She heard that he had received a message that his father was ill. So she had forgiven him for leaving when he did, even if the timing was tragic. But what had happened since?

Marcus bowed slightly and jammed his hat back on his head.

“By the way,” Father said. “If your family would like to withdraw the funds you made available for investment...”

There was another heavy silence. “Your people do not need to pay for my poor judgement. The investment remains sound. Thank you for your time.”

The investment!

Penny didn't wait for him to take his leave, but stomped down the path toward the building where the schoolroom was located. Men!

She barely glanced at the majestic site of the rows of cotton mill buildings and the housing for the workers that rose from the riverside. Normally she would take in the way the buildings nestled into the surrounding landscape, mesmerized by the smoke curling from the many chimneys, probably with her chest swelling with pride for their community. She reached the building, her heart racing and her breath creating plumes of steam into the frosty December morning.

It hadn't snowed yet this season, but the clouds had taken on that special fluffy and bright look they often did before the snow came. She half wished it *would* snow, so that Marcus would be forced to stay in their tiny village and she could make him remember what they meant to each other. That she was the one who made him laugh and lightened his load. That he was the one who understood her need to see the world, even if only through the eyes of a book. And then remind him he had just turned his back on all of that without even trying to see her.

She entered the building and started the long climb to the attic where the nursery school was, her thoughts in turmoil.

Father thought she was a child who did not need to be consulted.

Marcus thought she was a fragile creature who couldn't live with the outrage of her family. He never gave her the *chance* to show she was of sterner stuff before he left. That she regretted not siding with him from the beginning.

And nobody seemed to remember that the elopement had been Penny's idea entirely. Because she'd known what would happen if they got betrothed the usual way. Pandemonium. Of course she hadn't foreseen that Father would take the elopement as an unforgivable insult to the honor of the family.

She opened the door to the nursery to find thirty-two children with their chalk scratching on tiny slates and Miss Nicholls seated at her desk, her head in her hands.

"Miss Nicholls?"

She looked up, her eyes bleary and nose red and swollen. "Oh good. Can you stay until the break?"

"Of course I can." The children went home at midday and had dancing lessons in the afternoon, which they would not need her for. "Please go home and rest."

"I've left a slate with what I had planned for the rest of the morning. Chiefly spelling and arithmetic. But there is plenty to play with if that doesn't suit." Indeed, the room was filled with maps, books and whatever natural objects the children had brought in from outside. Their curiosity was the greatest teacher, as Father liked to say.

"Both subjects I am Scotland's best at," Penny replied, broadcasting this fact loudly for the children. They were all ages, from three to nine. They were taken care of during the day so that their parents could work knowing they were safe. At ten, most of them would begin working in the mill,

although education of some sort continued on well into adulthood.

The children laughed and Miss Nicholls slipped from the room. They heard her sneezing all the way down the stairs.

“Now, which of you wee bairns gave Miss Nicholls that terrible illness?”

“We all did!” A chorus reply came.

“Wonderful, wonderful. I am so happy to be here with you in this plague-ridden room but please forgive me if I keep my distance from you all.”

“We’re better now!” Ewan said, drawing a grubby sleeve across the bottom of his nose. “Almost.”

“Perhaps you all need a little story to start with, before we get too serious?”

There was a chorus of approval. Telling them one of her stories, or rather, her grandmother’s stories, might take her mind off what was happening back at home. “Right then. Do we want ‘Lady Boncraven climbs the leaning tower in Pisa’, or ‘Lady Boncraven gets kidnapped in Jamaica’?”

Nobody could agree because each story, based on the implausible facts from her grandmother’s childhood, had peril and adventure in equal measure, as they well knew from the many times they’d heard them both. So she told them both, weaving the magic of the world outside into their little bubble in New Lanark. There was no harm in dreaming of the world beyond or even just learning that it existed. She wished she could show them on a globe where Pisa was, where Jamaica was, but she had not saved up enough money to buy one as yet. She planned to bring Nana’s travel diaries in one day and plant little stars all over the globe where she had traveled in

her youth. Or maybe it would be better just to show these children all the places the textiles their parents made traveled. One shipment went all the way to New Holland!

After the stories, she looked down at the slate Miss Nicholls had left. “Now you are to continue on with your synonyms. My goodness, are you old enough to know what such a word means?” She looked around expectantly. Hands shot up around the room. She chose a little girl in the front row who was normally quiet. “Can you tell me, Mary?”

“It means finding words that are like. A synonym for bonny would be handsome.”

There was a knock on the door. Everyone turned their heads like they were pulled from the same invisible string.

“Did someone call my name?” Marcus stepped into the room, and she drank in the sight of her husband in a glance that lasted a few moments too long. He saw it and smiled slightly, tilting his head to one side.

The children stood. “Good morning Mr. Ambrose.” Their sing-song drawl of the greeting had a smile tugging at his mouth. They knew who he was. Indeed, he had often picked her up from this very room with a picnic basket in hand during their courtship.

Those days, while not long ago, felt long gone.

She pursed her mouth. “Goodness, children. It is Mr. Ambrose returned from the dead to wish us haud Hogmanay. How do you do, sir? It is a pleasure to see you again.”

Anyone with an ounce of intelligence would sense the dripping sarcasm, and Lord Huntley was nothing if not intelligent. His eyes narrowed though his expression gave little

away. “Yes, haud Hogmanay to you all. I have come to see how the children are faring.”

Liar.

“Children, tell Mr. Ambrose how much you are enjoying the improvements his family’s investment has made.”

Once more hands shot up around the room. She chose a little girl to her left.

“It doesn’t smell anywhere near as much!” Corinna said, nodding.

“And I try really hard not to miss the bowl now because it’s so much nicer,” Jemmy added, without anyone asking him.

“My mam says it’s the nicest water closet she’s ever seen!”

There was a murmur of agreement from the entire class. She looked up to see the expected confusion on his face. She grinned despite herself.

“There was a meeting to decide how best to spend your investment. And it was decided to invest all your lovely money into our...” she paused for effect “... water closets.” She turned back to the children, but not before seeing his eyes widen.

Certainly, the Earl of Wrotham’s money had mostly gone to the development of the new school building, but he didn’t need to know that.

“The water closets,” he said, his voice flat.

Their gaze met over the rows of desks. She would not let him see how having him in the room made her stomach lurch and her heart hurt. She lifted a brow. “Fitting, don’t you think?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Well, it depends on how you look at it. We are either the place you relieve yourself, or we are the reason things feel clean. I’ll take the latter interpretation.”

She lifted a shoulder in a motion her mother would say was insolent. “Of course. You are the master of interpreting a situation to best advantage whilst ignoring facts.”

His expression hardened. She didn’t care, but she also didn’t want him to leave. Not yet. She’d been waiting too long for him to arrive not to get some answers now. “I am, however, glad you are here. Who wants Mr. Ambrose to take them through their spelling while I take the front row?”

“If I do this, can I talk to you at the midday break?”

She inclined her head. “I am at your disposal.”

He nodded, and looked a little happier. But he was going to be anything *but* happy by the time she was finished with him.

CHAPTER 3



IN WHICH WINTER BECOMES HER

Marcus concentrated on the children until the bell in the church tower chimed the midday hour. It felt like waiting for his own bell to toll. But no matter what her father said, he had to apologize to Penny in person. He also had to tell her about the tea chest he had left back at her house, the present he'd bought for their reconciliation, that might now be nothing more than a parting gift.

And yet he refused to believe it was over until Penny told him herself—though if her flashing eyes and cutting sarcasm were anything to go by, she hated everything about him. It was better than her crying and being heartbroken. But it still stung.

Once she had loved everything about him. Once he had made her laugh until she made an unladylike snort that only made them both laugh harder.

For him, seeing her for the first time in weeks brought back every reason he'd fallen in love with her. Her gray eyes sparkled even as she teased him about the water closets. Her energy and enthusiasm was still a force that filled the room, and that errant blond curl still escaped her coiffure and called for him to reach out and put it back. *My wife*. There was no doubt his heart was convinced this enchanting creature was his to love. His brain wasn't so sure.

But her physical beauty was almost beside the point. She listened to the children like each one had something worthy to impart, as though each was about to say something wonderful, and indeed she could normally find something. She'd listened to everyone the same way, and gave to everyone the same way. The best part was that by watching her back in summer, he'd learned to do it too. It made him a better man. It also made it impossibly hard when she was gone to keep it up.

Her father liked to think it was he who had shown Marcus a better way to run a mill, but it had been his daughter entirely. Taking him around each of the buildings, never prosing on about discipline or morals, but just about how to give the workers everything they needed to take care of their families, which led to them doing a better job. It was all very simple when she talked about it.

At the end of the lesson, the children filed out of the classroom, then stampeded down the stairs. The weak winter sun came through the attic windows, bathing them both in cool light.

She tilted her head to one side, considering him. "I suggest we leave the mill area. My father will be none too pleased to know you have sought me out."

"I believe 'not now, not ever' were his exact words." Saying it out loud was mortifying. Viscount Huntley was always a wanted commodity. Balls, card parties, picnics, the invitations flowed. But here at the mill, he was as unwanted as a flea on a dog.

He supposed she was lucky that the circumstances had come about in such a way that she could change her mind so easily. For so many, marriage was very much a finality. Should he be grateful, too? Could he have handled her being

miserable in England, on top of losing his father, as it looked like he was soon going to?

But mortification or not, it was time for him to apologize and fix things in any way he could.

She looked at him steadily, her eyes sad even as she gave him the crooked smile he so loved. “Where would you like to go?”

There was only one answer. “The falls? I can’t leave here without at least looking upon them once,” he said. *And you. I could not leave here without laying eyes on you one last time.*

She nodded. He followed her down the many staircases from the attic in silence. The wood of the treads was worn shiny with all the tiny steps going up and down them, and the air held a hint of smoke from a fireplace nearby.

They walked away from the main building towards the magnificent falls that fueled the mill and made the valley it sat in such a magical place. The river raced past them, babbling loudly as it encountered boulders, rocks and fallen branches. In summer, there were places you could cross to a rocky outcrop in the middle of it, but not now. Winter loaned the Clyde a power and speed he would not have thought possible a few short months ago.

They talked inanities. The likelihood of snow, the upcoming bonfire and her sister. She treated him as an acquaintance, somebody she had to entertain with funny anecdotes. None of it meant anything. Nothing except the faint tremor in her voice that betrayed her nerves.

She did not reach for his hand. Instead, she furtively looked over her shoulder, as if expecting her father at any moment. But they made their way without interruption up the

hill toward the lookout where they had spent many summer afternoons. The view was out to the gorge where three rivers converged into the most beautiful, cascading waterfalls in all of Scotland. Indeed, if the line of artists and poets visiting over the warmer months was any indication, it was also one of the most romantic. Little wonder they had fallen in love under its auspicious gaze.

Her arm was not linked through his. That was wrong. But every step was familiar and made him think of summer, as though the land itself was a living memory.

She moved ahead of him. Her hair was twisted into neat braids that ended in a low bun. The curl was still an escapee. All he could think was ‘dear curl’ like a pudding-head and try to fight the instinct to tuck it behind her ear. His hand raised of its own volition and he let it drop back. In fact, his thoughts were so insistently telling him she belonged with him, that she must come home with him, that when they arrived at the lookout, he barely registered the sound of the torrent of water before them. But if she did not feel the same way, it was all for naught.

He stood beside her and took in the icy glory. “Goodness. Winter becomes her.” The winter falls were starkly different from the summer. Gone were the leafy bowers extending over the water. Instead, those same branches had bright green moss along their lengths as if they were part of a fairy wonderland. The trees that grew around the valley, so lush in summer, were stark poles reaching toward the crisp blue sky. The falls themselves were fuller and faster and he could see stalactites had formed on the opposite bank underneath the overhang.

“We have had much rain recently.” Penny’s gaze was on the eagle that circled above the treetops, her hands clasped and

visible in front of her. She'd drawn her cloak—which was a serviceable gray, little different to what mill workers wore—away from her shoulders much earlier.

She finally turned to him. Her brows were furrowed and her mouth set in a thin line. “Why did you come, Lord Huntley? Was it to finalize our...”

She trailed off. Obviously, she didn't know what to call it, either.

“Marriage?” he said softly. “According to your father, we are not married. Never were.”

The moment felt fraught. His breath caught in his throat as he awaited her response.

“I remember it differently.” It was said in a whisper that barely made it over the sound of the falls.

He could see no anger in her gaze, only regret. The spark of hope flared a little brighter. “So you agree we *are* married? But perhaps you prefer to take your father's lead and pretend otherwise?” He paused, because the next question would pain him. “Was it me, or was it the thought of being countess before you are ready to be because my father is ill?” He looked out over the falls too, not wanting to see rejection in her expression.

“How could you think it was you or your poor father?” she said in surprise. “I reacted to my father's anger. He has never truly been angry with me before. I also thought he could calm down, but this has somehow ignited a sort of religious outrage in him. As though we did something sinful rather than misguided. I waited for you to come back, to write to me. I wrote to you. Again and again. You never replied.” Her voice trembled.

He picked up a rock and hurled it into the river, which went some way to relieving his frustration. "I did not receive any of your letters, as you apparently did not receive mine." He paused, but couldn't help asking, even if her answer had the power to shatter his hopes and his heart, "What was in them? What did they say?"

"That I did not care if my family hated our union. I wanted to come to England with you. If you would have me." Now it was her turn to look out over the falls rather than at him.

He viewed her profile, the smattering of freckles across her nose, even as his heart soared like the bird that circled high above. "And now? How do you feel now?"

She looked at him, the pain evident in her eyes. "I think you could have come sooner. That if your letters did not get answered you should have tried to contact Nana to see what was happening. Every day I thought of all the ways you could have tried."

But love had to go both ways. "And did you try? Could you not have put a letter in at Lanark or Glasgow to make sure it was delivered?"

She shook her head. "I...I was so sure you didn't want to be married to me any longer. It hurt too much to try, I think."

He could have said those very words himself, they rang so true in his heart. "Me too. If our love had been of longer standing we would have had more faith. I just thought it was all too good to be true."

"Yes. When all your dreams come true in the space of one season, it doesn't feel real. Especially when it is all gone so fast. Is your father gravely ill?" She met his gaze, her eyes questioning. He knew it would be the only thing she would

accept as a good reason not to get back on his horse and come back to her.

“My father wanted me with him as he got his affairs in order. His illness is progressing rapidly and we never know how he is going to be on any given day. So, yes, he is gravely ill.”

She drew in a sharp breath. “I am sorry for it.” She paused, her expression briefly conflicted. “Did you tell him about us?”

He took her hands in his and looked down to where his brown leather gloves met her gray mittens. They had white hearts and flowers embroidered on them. He fancied she had done that herself. “I told them I could not marry any of those debutantes Mother paraded before me because I was already married. I did not tell them we eloped or that your father sent me away. As I did not receive any word from you, I came here thinking you still wanted to be free of me.”

She closed her eyes and squeezed his hands. “You did? No. I do not want to be free of you. Quite the opposite.”

Quite the opposite. He lifted her hand and pressed his lips against the soft wool. Their gazes locked, and it felt like the first time their hearts had truly connected since he arrived. *Perhaps nothing had changed after all.* “Oh Penny, the time we’ve wasted.”

She rolled her eyes. “Only a few weeks, let’s not be overdramatic. But true, we have lost some valuable kissing time. You know I am not very good at it and need all the practice I can get.”

She took a step into him and then she was in his arms, her head nestled against his chest so that he could smell the lemon

soap she used on her hair. He kissed the top of her head, only causing her to tilt her head up.

He smiled lazily. “Well. Let’s fix that, shall we?”

CHAPTER 4



IN WHICH LORD HUNTLEY IS JUST ANOTHER
STUPIDLY STUBBORN MAN

The world fell away when their lips met. Nothing else mattered—not her cold toes, or the crisp wind—there was only Marcus, who had returned to her like all of her lost wishes. He did not regret their marriage, and was not looking to nullify it or pretend it never happened.

Father stopped their letters to each other. *Obviously*. She ignored the frisson of anger that ripped through her. It didn't matter. Marcus was here to make everything right. She pulled off her mitten and curled her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. It was shorter than it had been in summer, but it was still soft.

Marcus drew away and whispered, his breath warm against her ear. "Let's promise only to think the best of each other from now on."

She shuddered. "Yes, let's."

She pulled away to drink in the sight of him again. His skin had lost the bronze of those summer days, but it only made the golden flecks in his hazel eyes seem even brighter. She had missed him. "Just as handsome as always."

He smiled ruefully. "Only you would think so." He wasn't pretty like Evander. He pulled her close, and she wove her

arms under his greatcoat, reveling in the warmth of him, not wanting the moment to end.

“Come, let’s go to Nana’s. I cannot face my father.”

She tried to step away, but he held her fast and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. “We must face your father. While I am more than happy to travel to Windermere and have Evander marry us, I love you too much not to try one last time to reconcile.”

The very thought made her quake. “Pray do not! Father will have an apoplexy. He must have used his connections to make our ceremony disappear! Surely you can see there is no bargaining with him. This hateful fervor he has, it’s not just for you. He has started locking people up who imbibe too much. Two offences and he is terminating their employment.” His judgments were increasingly less forgiving.

Marcus grimaced. “Hmmm. That’s not promising. But I am honor bound to try.”

She pulled on his hand, trying to get him to see reason. “You’re not listening. He threatened to cut me off entirely if I went with you. Said I would never see Mother or Katie again.” She could hear the echoes of shock in her voice.

He frowned. “Don’t you see how sad that would be? I have seen marriages where the couple married against their family’s wishes and the problems it caused. Children who had never met their grandparents and animosity that lasted decades. I don’t want that for you. I don’t want that for us.”

“We can’t control how he reacts. I always knew he was proud, but not to the point of disowning his own kin because they did something he didn’t approve of.” She thought about that small jailhouse he had installed for the drunk mill

workers. If he was willing to punish them to keep them on a virtuous path, why should she be any different? “Let’s just leave and trust he’ll calm down eventually.”

He grimaced. “It’s easy to leave and hope that in the fullness of time he will come around. But I have seen people old and gray and nobody ever ‘came around’ and everyone’s hearts just became more and more stony as the years passed. That is a great deal to give up.”

He obviously had no idea how hard she had fallen in love with him. She cocked an eyebrow. “Are you suggesting you aren’t worth it?” The teasing part of her that had died when he left was coming back.

He smiled sadly. “I’m an English lord stealing a good Scottish girl away from her family. How could I be?”

She nodded. “Good point. I expect you to remember that always.” Then a thought hit her. “Is that why you left last time? Did you think yourself not worth my sacrifice?”

He looked into the distance, then drew his gaze back to hers. “I could not tolerate seeing you hurt because of me. And I thought you regretted it. But I only left because my father’s condition worsened. Nothing else could have made me go.”

She nodded with a sad smile and looked out over the falls. “I regret eloping. It was the easy way out. I thought if we presented them with a fait accompli they would have to accept it. Instead it was the opposite.” She squeezed his hand.

“I must apologize for being so upset. It’s not like I didn’t foresee him being angry. Just perhaps, not *that* angry.”

“This time we will convince your family we will not be separated and they must support us.” He pulled her into a hug.

“I want to take you with me to England, but I also want us to be able to return here.” He pulled back and brought her hands up to his lips. “With our children if we are blessed with them.”

Her heart clenched at the thought of wee bairns with his soft wavy hair and hazel eyes and her adventurous streak. The images stole the words from her.

He misinterpreted it as doubt. “We have nothing to be afraid of and everything to gain.”

“You say that because you haven’t seen my father in a rage. He turns all that righteous indignation into an inferno. I don’t want to be under his roof when that happens. Let’s just elope again.”

He stilled, not liking what he was hearing. “Do you fear for your person?”

She shook her head. “No. He is the one who forbids teachers to strike the children, it is against his beliefs. But I am loath to face his disappointment again. He may not strike, but he rages like a bull. It makes my heart die a little to keep disappointing him.”

“I want their approval and their love. I want it all for our family. It looks like I am going to lose my father soon, I don’t want you to lose yours too. Not if we can help it.”

She turned to him, shaking her head. He sounded as confident as only an English lord who always got what he wanted could. He was about to come to grief over this, though. “Sometimes these things just do not work out, and we have to hold our heads high and move on knowing we have made the right decisions for ourselves.”

“Very well. If I talk to him and he still won’t listen, we leave post haste. But please let me try.”

“I will come with you to show him that we are united.” The thought made her quake, but she would do it.

“Or will it just make him even angrier to see you defiant? I would prefer to bear the brunt of it. Stay with your grandmother until I come fetch you.”

She frowned. “But this is my problem too.”

“Please, Penny. I understand what you’re saying but it’s me he has the problem with. I need to prove to him I can be good for you and for New Lanark.”

She heaved a sigh. “Very well. But when this doesn’t work, I want to hear rocks on my window tonight so I can throw a sheet ladder down to meet you. Are we clear?” She knew the cliched image would make him smile and was not disappointed when his crooked grin appeared. It made her knees a little weak.

“Crystal. But it will not come to that. I will make peace with your father.”

“I like your conviction.” She hooked her arm into his and drew him away from the falls. “Come. If you are going to try, there is no time like now. It is Hogmanay, as I know you are aware. But you’ve never spent it here in Scotland, have you? There is a slim chance that the spirit of the season will make Father relent. It wouldn’t be the first time forgiveness and a fresh start was granted on the cusp of a new year.”

CHAPTER 5



IN WHICH A KILT IS NOT DEEMED
NECESSARY EVEN IF OUR HERO HAS THE
LEGS FOR IT

Marcus liked the feel of Penny's arm looped around his as they walked up the path. It already felt like they were united and that nothing would stop them. He'd thought that before. But she said Hogmanay was a time for new beginnings, so maybe his hope was warranted. "Do I need a kilt?"

She inspected his legs and looked back up at him with a smile—one that suggested she was thrilled with his form. "Every man needs a kilt, but that is another conversation. What you need is to go to my father with Hogmanay in mind. If you are to have a sporting chance, go to the inn at Lanark and buy the most expensive whisky you can find. Give it to him, tell him that this is the time of year to forgive the old and make way for the new."

The path narrowed, so he motioned for Penny to precede him up the path. "Is this a celebration or an alcohol driven absolution?"

She stopped and wagged a finger at him. "Don't joke. Hogmanay is a powerful thing. Small is the man who does not get swept up in the spirit of it. If he forgives you, then you can beg him to court me properly."

Dead leaves crunched under his boots. "Or he will throw me out again for my impertinence."

She smiled, and suddenly all was right with the world. “Yes, I think he will. But this is your idea, remember?”

“I would prefer to remind him you are of age and that perhaps he should respect your decision.”

Penny laughed. “In that case, I will definitely see you at my window tonight for I’m sure he still sees me as a chubby babe who cannot feed myself much less make important decisions about her future.”

“Oh ye of little faith.”

“I have a lot of faith in what I know. And I know my father.” She regarded him with a smile. “But you do have a very winning way about you, Lord Huntley. When you apply yourself.”

“As do you, Lady Huntley.”

She blinked and widened her eyes. “I suppose I *am* Lady Huntley! How very grand.”

And he couldn’t wait to show her his beautiful estate, situated just a few miles from Seven Oaks with its own dairy and ice cave. “Just because they have conveniently lost the certificate doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Don’t go flirting with some other man at the bonfire tonight. You are mine.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “If you’re going to come over all Knight Errant, I had best prepare myself for my upcoming abduction.”

He laughed, suddenly light-hearted despite the problems that still lay before him. “You sound like you are looking forward to it. If I had known this, I would have taken you away by force last time!”

She threw him an astonished look. “Force? You just had to ask. And I may or may not have left my window open a crack every night since you left.”

He grimaced and closed his eyes against the sadness that welled inside. “I let you down.”

“Indeed, you did.” It was said as a statement of fact, as though she held no grudge, and yet he nevertheless felt the censure. It wasn’t the best start to a marriage, but he had every intention of making up for that now. The first step toward that intention was being the man she needed him to be, and confronting her father as an equal rather than a supplicant.

They walked the well-worn path from the falls to her grandmother’s lodge, which was on the same grounds as the falls themselves, and passed the small shelter with a thatched heather roof called the fog house.

Penny looked at him, an eyebrow raised in mischief. He knew why. The little hut had a table and benches inside entirely covered in beautiful green moss. ‘A place the fairies built for us’ she had said. Right before he’d kissed her for the first time. How could a first kiss blessed by fairies be a bad thing?

The earls of Boncraven had lived on this piece of land for generations and held the key to the gate that led to the falls. They also owned the lodge where tourists could buy tickets to the pleasure gardens that surrounded it. There were castle ruins at the top of the hill, but the more modern house where Penny’s grandmother lived was further away from the falls and the lines of tourists who visited it.

They arrived at Lady Boncraven’s lodge just as a servant lit candles in the window. There was a bower of evergreen

juniper draped over the lintel and a basket full of coal next to the door. Penny picked one up and gave it to him.

“Tradition,” she said. “Put it in the hearth.” She brushed her boots on the boot cleaner by the front door, and Marcus followed suit.

“As soon as possible before it ruins my coat,” he replied, brushing the soot off his hand. He had to admit to slight nerves, more even than he had with Mr. Crawford. Lady Boncraven was a force of nature and always taken with speaking her mind.

No matter how prickly it was.

The door swung open and Lady Boncraven’s butler, Roberts, smiled broadly, and took their coats. Penny handed him her bonnet at the same time. “Has the news of Lord Huntley’s arrival reached here?”

Roberts smiled at Marcus. “Indeed it has, Miss Crawford. The cat fair amongst the pigeons as far as I can tell. A wonderful surprise for the last day of the year. Shall I have a tea tray sent up for you?”

“Yes, please, and some scones, if there are any. I seem to have been walking all afternoon. With my *husband!*” she added, throwing a smile over her shoulder as she walked toward the drawing room.

The large fireplace in the main hall had been swept clean as though all the burdens of the past had been swept out with it. If only it could be that easy.

“In here?” he asked Penny.

She nodded. “Yes. You are the first one! Auspicious.”

He dropped the coal into the clean fireplace and straightened. But before they could make their way upstairs to the drawing room, he spotted the countess gliding down the sweeping staircase. Tall and willowy like her granddaughter, today she wore a dark green woolen dress that flowed behind her. Her silver hair was swept into a neat bun and her gray eyes sparkled. “Well, well. I was wondering when you would show your face. Goodness me, has a husband ever taken such shoddy care of his wife as this! All but abandoned her to that moralizing son-in-law of mine. I’ve never been so ashamed to have welcomed someone into my home.”

Penny bristled beside him. “Perhaps if I had not been thrown into vapors over a little parental disapproval Lord Huntley might have realized I wanted to stay married. What would you do if the person you had just married said they thought it may have been a mistake and that they needed time to ‘think on it’?”

Marcus looked between them, a smile tugging at his mouth. Penny and Lady Boncraven were so similar that sometimes they clashed like enemy clans. Penny had inherited her grandmother’s passion for the wider world, and the pair of them spent many hours pouring over the latest travel diaries that her grandmother ordered from publishers in Edinburgh and London. But when they disagreed, the sparks flew.

“I would say I didn’t have time for such behaviors and tell you to catch me up when you thought about it.” Lady Boncraven stopped on the stairs and gave Marcus a disapproving look. “What took you so long, Marcus? I’m sure she sent that letter to you two months ago.”

“An ailing father.” Marcus stepped forward and took the hand she held out, brushing a kiss just above her knuckles.

“That, and the letter never arrived.”

Her brows drew together. “Your father? He has recovered?” She searched his face. “Alas, no.”

Lady Boncraven always had a way of discerning what one was feeling. It would be disconcerting if her wise heart was not always in the right place.

“You are here now, and not a moment too soon. My son-in-law believes that he has buried your marriage.” She laughed to herself. “As though he could, especially from me.”

So it was true. Crawford had interfered. Marcus took a deep breath against the rising tide of anger. “Did you know this and do nothing to help Penny?”

Lady Boncraven raised her eyebrows, telling him to watch himself. “Or is the question whether Penny needed or wanted my help with a husband who rushed off without her? Was she better off without you? I will always do what is best for her, not you.” Head tilted to one side, she regarded them. “Once married you are married. For better or worse. What is it to be, my doves, better or worse?”

“Better,” Marcus said. “I’m off to confront Mr. Crawford.”

“And I have suggested this is a foolish plan,” Penny added.

A maid entered the hall carrying a tea tray. “Let us adjourn to the drawing room. And yes, it is indeed a foolish plan. You would be better to just stay here, and work out a solution in the fullness of time.”

“I’m afraid the fullness of time is not mine to command,” Marcus said. “With my father so ill, I need to be back in Seven Oaks. I cannot let him down. I will not.”

They entered the drawing room, two standing candelabras making the room bright in the winter afternoon. A fire blazed in the hearth and Lady Boncraven made her way to the plush armchair nearby.

“In that case, I suppose we must burn all our bridges on the way out of town.” That she said ‘we’ was both comforting and slightly alarming. The countess took no prisoners when she was on the warpath. “I only hope you have learned some gumption since you were last here. You don’t stand up to my son-in-law with your lily-livered English sensibilities. He’ll just run you down.” She picked up the teapot and poured two cups, not three. “If you’re to keep the daylight, you had better go. But speak to Roberts on your way out. He will want to give you a project update from his brother since you are here.”

Penny looked from him to her nana in confusion. But he knew what it was about. Roberts’ brother was manager of the storehouse at the mill. His manager had put in a large order and hopefully all was going well to fulfill it. He would happily bring news back to London. “I will.”

She held the teapot in mid-air, as if wondering why he was still in the room. He could take a hint.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll be off to find that bottle of whisky.”

Lady Boncraven put the teapot down. “You won’t find anything good in the village. Ask Roberts for that too with my blessing.” She paused, her expression thoughtful. “And take a horse. No need to walk all that way.”

As he left the room, Lady Boncraven said, “Now I have organized everything! We’ll make a good Scots boy of him yet. And if he does win the day, I have a surprise. Something I should have told you sooner, but with things the way they

were, I wanted to see if Huntley was worthy of you. His little project took him a step in the right direction with me, I must say.” Her eyes sparkled and her head was tilted to one side. “Do you want to know about it? Ask me, please do. I didn’t want to make you sadder by talking about it around you.”

Penny nodded. “Very well. What project?”

Nana took a sip of tea then placed her cup and saucer back on the small table. “Marcus wanted to support the beautiful fabric we make here and is annoyed that so much of what is available in London still comes from the continent. The war is making that harder now so he came upon the idea of starting a warehouse in London with only materials sourced from around the Empire.”

“Oh.” That their fabric wasn’t more popular in London was something Marcus had wondered about on his visit. But he’d gone ahead and actually done something about it?

“Does Father know?” Penny had heard about the large order and how the mill had put on an extra early morning shift so that they could meet it on time. It had made everyone’s winter just that little bit brighter to know their hard work was being recognized.

Nana scoffed. “As though he would tell him and risk your father going into the boughs over it thinking he’s trying to curry favor. No. It is a separate business and Marcus has put his name on none of the paperwork from what I can gather. But Robert’s brother says the first order has almost cleared out everything he has and he’s had to make more waxed fabric to protect it on the journey down.”

The door to the drawing room opened and Mother stood on the threshold, her bonnet off and her hair a little wild. “Goodness, there you are!”

“Yes, here I am,” Penny replied evenly.

Nana shot her a warning glance, one Penny interpreted as meaning they should stop talking about the warehouse. *Interesting.*

“Father has sent people out looking for you when he heard you were walking toward the falls with Lord Huntley. Is it true, Penny? Did you see him?”

“My husband, you mean? Yes.” Penny clasped her hands in her lap, but looked at her mother steadily, willing her to take her side rather than Father’s.

“Now Lily, if you mean to keep them apart you’ll have a fight on your hands, as I’m sure you can see.” Nana spoke softly, but the undertone of steel was there. Not many crossed Lady Boncraven.

Mother shrugged. “I do not mean to keep them apart. I just hate the conflict. But,” she turned to where two footmen were struggling with a tea chest they put in the middle of the drawing room floor. “I brought along his present for you.”

Penny jumped from her seat. “Goodness, what is this?”

The footman slid his crowbar under the lid. “Would you like it opened, my lady?”

“Yes please, Lachlan,” Lady Boncraven said.

Mother raised her eyebrows and gave a tiny, ladylike shrug. “Your father told me to take it to the storeroom unopened. Unopened! As if I could resist that kind of temptation.”

“Unnatural man,” Nana said darkly.

“Goodness, Marcus never mentioned it!” Best for her *not* to let them know she had eavesdropped on the entire

conversation. Though to be fair, she had entirely forgotten about the present herself.

She walked over to the box. Lachlan prized the lid off to reveal a wealth of wood shavings packing the contents. She took a layer off the top. The bronze tip of something poked through.

Mother wrung her hands. "I'm not ready for a repeat of our summer experience."

"There will be no conflict this time, Ma. As I have told you all, this is the man I am married to, and I can't marry another. So I either stay a spinster here at the mills, or you let me go."

She pulled the present out by the bronze tip and drew in a shocked breath. It was a globe. A beautiful rendering of every country and sea of the world at her fingertips.

"Oh my," Nana said. "Nobody can say he doesn't understand you."

"No, he most surely does," Mother agreed.

Penny drew out some more wood shavings that revealed a layer of leather bound books. She took one out and read the spine. "A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794." She pulled out three more, all dealing with travel journals for different parts of the world.

His calling card poked out of one of the books. She picked it up and turned it over and read it aloud.

"For my dear Penny. To plan your trips with me, or take them from the comfort of your chair. The choice is yours."

She looked up. Mother was clutching her heart and Nana had tears in her eyes.

“He wants us to marry again but doesn’t want to leave here without making things right. He said he has seen parents never speak to their children again, and never even meet their grandchildren. As much as marrying me would make him the happiest of creatures, it would make us both sad at the same time and he didn’t want that.”

“Don’t be daft,” Nana said. “Nothing could make me disown you and especially not some upstart mill owner who thinks he’s the great almighty himself.” She turned to Mother. “No offense intended, my dear.”

“None taken.” Her mother turned to her. “I am sorry for everything that happened last time, but the intervening time has allowed me time to think. Certainly I wish you had never eloped, and I dearly wish I had been more useful to you after you did. But your father is never going to change his mind about this. However, as your grandmother has said, that means nothing to us. You will always have us and we will both, along with your sister, visit you in England and there will always be a place for you here to visit us.”

Tears sprang to Penny’s eyes. “Oh. I thought...”

Mother dusted off her skirts. “Thought we would just go along with whatever harebrained idea a man came up with on our account? No. You are my daughter and I will not lose you over the fact that you are to marry an English lord, of all things. It changes nothing between us. Heaven knows you’ve always had an adventurous spirit.”

Nana looked grim. “Probably would have killed her to stay here in New Lanark, tending the school.”

“Get out there into the world and see how it is.”

Nana nodded in agreement. “And report back,” Nana said. “We should like keepsakes from far away places.”

Penny wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. “Then you think we should elope again? There is no certificate. Marcus says his brother can marry us at Lake Windermere so we finally have some paperwork.”

Nana got to her feet. “I’ll be right back. But you’re sure, aren’t you? Amongst all these romantic gifts and this romantic talk, we haven’t asked you. Do you love him? And do you want to spend your life with him away from all you know? ‘Tis a big question and I’m sure you’ve had much time to contemplate it.”

“Oh yes. I have been so sad without him.”

“We know,” her mother said drily. “The walls aren’t so thick that I can’t hear you cry at night, my pet.”

How mortifying. “You must admit it has stopped of late.”

Mother scratched her head. “Yes, and that worried me too, for I saw your heart hardening. I knew you would never marry another.”

“And neither should I! Bigamy, mother, he wanted me to be a bigamist. It’s outrageous.”

“Well now, we’re not going to let that happen.” Mother glanced at Nana. “I would like to be at the second elopement. Do you think we can organize it?”

Nana stood with an enigmatic look on her face. “That won’t be necessary. I’ll be back directly.”

Penny shared an intrigued glance with her mother. “What *is* she up to?”

“Perhaps she has a vicar in a cupboard for just this type of scenario. I would not put it past her. Indeed, I blame her entirely for your wanderlust. She was the same when she was young.”

“I know, I have seen her scrapbooks.” Mother was right, Nana’s scrapbooks had inspired her love of travel and the world. It was so hard to be four and twenty and never gone any further in the world than Glasgow.

“I used to love those scrapbooks when I was a lass too. I wished that I could see the places she told stories about, of the lush forests of the Americas and the mountains in India.”

“Neither of us were lucky enough to have an explorer for a father as she had.”

The lady in question burst back into the room carrying a small scroll.

“What’s that then?” Mother said.

Nana unfurled it and laid it on the table, holding it open with her hands on the edges. Penny came closer and looked over her shoulder. “Our wedding certificate! Nana!”

She smiled the sly smile she was so well known for. “Now what sort of a grandmother would I be if I didn’t do everything I could to give my granddaughter choices? If you’d said you didn’t love him, this certificate would never have seen the light of day.” She handed the paper to Penny. “But that’s not the case, is it my duck?”

Penny took the paper and drew her nana into a tight hug. “You are the very best.”

“And now I do not get to see the wedding, again. Wonderful.” Mother rolled her eyes.

“I am sure we will have a marriage blessing in England. Will you come?”

Nana tapped her chin as she was wont to do whenever she thought hard. “I think we might go with Penny tonight.”

Mother lifted her eyebrows, then nodded. “Tonight might be the perfect night to make a getaway with the least possible fuss. But I must stay with your father. He will be suspicious if I am not there.”

“A good plan. Who would see Penny slip away amidst the festivities after dinner? Everyone will be at the bonfire.” Nana’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “And I shall come with you to lend you credence and make this seem slightly less objectionable. Then, your mother can see your marriage blessing in England in a few weeks time.” She rubbed her hands together. “I do like it when a good plan comes together.”

Then why did Penny feel a pit of doom in her stomach, as though they could plan all they wanted but Father was no fool and to underestimate him would be folly indeed.

CHAPTER 6



IN WHICH MR. CRAWFORD MAKES GOOD ON HIS THREATS

Marcus rode the sturdy horse into the village. By the time he arrived back at the Crawford family home, the sun was low in the sky.

The village was preparing for Hogmanay, with people dressed in their best clothes, visiting their neighbors. In the distance he could see a mountain of wood and bracken that would surely be a bonfire. As it moved toward twilight, candles were lit in the windows, creating a magical atmosphere. He would have to ask Penny what it meant, for there were too many of them for it not to mean something.

This would all work out. They would have Evander marry them at Lake Windermere and then there would be no quarreling about who was married and who was not. It looked like Evander's special license would be needed after all.

A maid directed him to wait in the hall until Mr. Crawford was ready to receive him. As the minutes stretched out, he warred with his nerves, begging them to calm. But instead he broke out in a cold sweat that joined the icy December breeze sweeping through the hall. He shivered. Finally, a quarter hour later, he was ushered into the office of his father-in-law. The maid bobbed a curtsy. "Would you like tea, Mr. Crawford?"

A curt shake of his head was enough to have her scurrying away.

Mr. Crawford stood, his eyes narrowed and wary. “Forgot your way home?”

“’Tis just one long road, hard to miss,” Marcus replied, holding out the bottle of whisky. “Please accept this small token as a peace offering. I’ve heard that Hogmanay is a time for fresh beginnings. I hope we can start again.”

His father-in-law looked at the whiskey and then at Marcus. “Some things, dear boy, cannot be rubbed away with a dram of whiskey, no matter the quality of the bottle.” He shook his head. “The best thing would be for you to leave. We have no quarrel now. It is over and both of our families can move on.”

Mr. Crawford did not offer him a seat, so Marcus had to be content to stand. “With respect, sir, I do not want to move on. Nor does Penny. We want to be together. We are married in the eyes of God and the law.”

Mr. Crawford’s expression darkened. “How dare you lecture me on the eyes of God when you did something that throws the proper sacred rites of marriage into the river? You have no respect for what we believe or how we live. Did you know I had you looked into after the elopement? I thought perhaps you both just got carried away and that perhaps all might be well. I would have brought Penny down to England myself.”

Marcus shuddered imagining his family’s reaction to a surprise bride on the doorstep when they’d done nothing but throw debutantes in front of him. “I’m not sure what you could have found.” A few gambling debts, a fisticuffs at Cambridge? All years ago.

“Gambling debts, curricule racing on public roads, drunken parties and being sent down from Cambridge!”

Marcus would have rolled his eyes except that Mr. Crawford was obviously in earnest. “I was barely of age. I would beg you not to go searching for ways I am not worthy of Penny and trust the man you knew over summer. We all do stupid things when we are young.” He probably shouldn’t mention that they were a great deal of fun.

“True, true. Especially when one is of the English *noble* class.” He walked to the window and looked out. “So then, what do I make of the fact that you have secretly been ordering bolts of our finest fabrics for a new venture in London?”

Marcus folded his arms across his chest. “Nothing secret about it. My man of business has been working with your man of business these past months.”

“But did he ever say *you* were behind the warehouse in London? No. So now you are making *money* off our hard work.”

“I am *showcasing* your products and bringing them to a different market. And I am purchasing them at full price. I am *helping*.” To think he had thought telling Mr. Crawford about the warehouse development would help his cause. This man was determined to think badly of him. Penny was right.

“We don’t need your help. And I know what you’ll do. You’ll let us over invest to meet the shipments then another bright shiny thing will grab your attention and you’ll drop us like a hot coal.” His expression suggested he’d thought about this long and hard. “I would rather cancel the orders altogether than sell them to you.”

Marcus shook his head, not able to fathom someone who would put his own community's affluence at risk for a personal vendetta. "If I ever heard of a man cutting off his nose to spite his face, as my mother would say, you are doing it." Marcus took a deep breath. This was not going as planned, although it was definitely going as Penny had predicted it would.

Worse still, he suspected she would not leave with him tonight if she thought the community at the mill would suffer.

He took a step forward, his arm reaching out to the older man of its own volition. "I implore you to see reason. Penny and I are united in this—we are married and nothing you can say or do alters that. I want to bring our children here to visit. I want to forge a solid relationship with the Crawford family."

A ruddy flushed crept up Mr. Crawford's neck. "You'll not have her. I'll forge you a manacle if you think you're going to abduct her again," Mr. Crawford growled.

"Very well. But you'd better lock Penny up too, because I'm taking her with me."

Mr. Crawford's eyes widened. "You would never!"

"Watch me." Marcus turned to leave the room.

Mr. Crawford hollered. "Ian!"

The door opened again and the man who entered had the physique of a prizefighter. *And* he had a rope in one hand. "You must be Ian," Marcus said sardonically.

"Please escort this man to the jailhouse," Crawford snapped. "I gave you the chance to go quietly this morning. I can't have you loose overnight and causing mischief. There's enough mischief to handle over Hogmanay without you adding to it."

Marcus quirked an amused eyebrow. “If you’re going to incarcerate me, shouldn’t we speak to the magistrate? Otherwise this is unlawful imprisonment.”

Crawford laughed. “I will send a note to the magistrate immediately! But I’m not sure he will get here before morning. I am well within my rights to hold you overnight if I think you are intoxicated. And you must be, to think you are still married to Penny. Happy Hogmanay to you.”

He was dismissed with a flick of his wrist.

Marcus schooled his face into a bored and urbane expression. He would give Mr. Crawford nothing of his true feelings. The benefit of the doubt that he had so gladly given the man he would have proudly called father-in-law disintegrated. “So you cannot put your love for your daughter above your pride that she has married someone not of your choosing. She is not your servant, she has a will and a mind of her own. She has made her decision and that you cannot respect it says everything I need to know.”

“Get him out!” Crawford shouted.

Ian tried to grab him. Marcus stepped back and raised both hands. “No need, dear chap. I will go willingly if it means keeping your paws off my coat.” He brushed non-existent dust off his sleeves.

He put the bottle of whisky into the deep pockets of his greatcoat. “You won’t be needing this, I suppose.” He had promised Penny he would come to her window tonight and he very much intended to keep that promise. He might have landed himself in prison, but with free hands and a bottle of whiskey to bribe his guard, anything was possible, including escape. The thought should not create the frisson of excitement it did. But the magic of the last night of the year

and the thought of running away with Penny was more intoxicating than the whisky in his pocket.

Ian marched him out of the house and down the main road of the village. It was such a pretty place to be incarcerated. The three-story buildings that housed the mill workers nestled by the river and surrounded by the deep wooded gorge like a natural frame. The air was crisp with a hint of smoke from the chimneys, and the setting sun had turned the sky deep orange with purplish gray clouds. This was Penny's world. The only world she had known. Would she miss it? Would she grieve if she could never return? He would never give up trying to mend things, even if he had to use his children as some kind of bait. The Jonathan Crawford he saw now was not the man he had grown to like and respect over summer. In time, surely that man would return.

The jailhouse was more like a cottage, although the bars on the windows gave away its purpose. Ian pushed the door open to reveal a single room, divided down the middle by more bars. On the jailor side, there was an armchair pulled up by a small but hearty fire. On the detainee side, there was a trundle bed with a bedpan underneath it, a stool and a dresser with a pitcher of water and bowl. Spartan accommodation.

It mattered not. If he could manage it, he would soon be free of this little room and then he would collect his wife and flee to England as fast as his horses would carry him.

He pulled a stool up to the bars so he was closer to the heater. "This is a nice cozy spot. I'm glad I have some company, although I regret you missing the bonfire." He pulled the bottle of whisky from the deep pocket of his greatcoat. "Perhaps this will make up for it..."

The footman opened the door and Mary, their maid, entered the room, clutching her shawl tightly around her. “Oh, ma’am, I’m so sorry to come, but the master, he called Ian and they took him and all because he loves Miss Penny and that’s not a good reason to lock a good man up!” She finished on an outraged huff.

“Slow down, Mary. Are you saying the master has locked up Lord Huntley?”

But Penny knew. “Of course he has.” She’d known this was a bad idea. They could have been away free if he’d but listened to her.

“Did you not tell him there is no reasoning once your father decides on something?” Nana said.

Penny rolled her eyes. “I may have mentioned it.”

“And you also both know he will not release him until he is sure he has no designs to elope with her again. He’ll escort him all the way back to Kent if he has to.”

“You know what this means, ladies?” Nana asked with relish.

“I am scared to ask,” Mother replied faintly.

“We must attempt a jailbreak!” She stood and waved her arm around in victory. “Tonight! Under the cover of Hogmanay!”

“Why do I get the feeling you’ve been waiting a very long time to declare something like that?” Penny said dryly. “But I must agree. My husband must not stay incarcerated for a moment more than necessary.”

Mother looked to the window. “Darkness is falling. We are due at the bonfire. I don’t see how you can cry off when he’s bound to be suspicious.”

“No.” She knitted her hands into the folds of her skirts. “This won’t work.”

“Bah,” said Nana. “I am to be there too, but will feel quite faint a little way in and ask Penny to come home with me.” She dusted off her hands. “There, problem solved. You two give up well before time. I can see I’m going to have to run this caper myself. Seventy-eight years old and more gumption than you two put together.”

Penny raised an eyebrow. “I think you will find I can match you in the gumption stakes.”

Nana smiled broadly. “Then show me. Blaze a trail all the way to England. Make me proud.”

Mother’s eyes widened, “There now, we don’t want her creating a scandal we can’t live down.”

Nana rolled her eyes. “Life’s too short to worry about scandal and what other people think. Let her claim her handsome young husband and be off with him, scandal be damned.”

Penny smiled. So no doubt Nana was firmly on her side. “I look forward to making you proud and abducting my husband in my evening finery.”

“That’s my girl.” Nana liked to think the Boncraven line spread its adventurous spirit only down the female line. In fact, if she had her way, the title would only go down the female line. As it was, her disappointing son, Penny’s uncle, lived what she called ‘his very boring existence’ in Glasgow.

Penny turned to her grandmother. “Will you have someone fetch his carriage and bring it near to the bonfire to wait for us?”

Nana nodded. “Roberts will do it. Leave it to me.”

Mother turned to Penny. “Whenever I have heard her say that, it generally ends in an uproar.”

Nana lifted her chin. “We of the Boncraven do everything with style.”

CHAPTER 7



IN WHICH A SEPTUAGENARIAN SHOWS HER METTLE

It turned out that Ian was quite partial to good whisky. He'd drunk through a good amount of the bottle and was rocking gently in his chair. Now Marcus had to either convince him to free him, or somehow get hold of the large key he'd placed on the wooden stool next to his chair.

He stretched the bottle through the bars. "A refill, old friend?"

Over the course of the last three hours he heard all about Ian's wife, his four children, life in the village and the gout he suffered in his right toe whenever he imbibed and the fact that he expected to pay for this indulgence over the next few days.

"I dinna think I can say no," Ian said, his words slightly slurred. "But I shouldna 'cause I've been found drunk once already. Three times and you're out!"

Marcus sincerely hoped Ian's wife forgave him when he arrived home after his shift, although if Marcus had any say in it, the man would have to be driven home on the back of a gig.

"Ian, I should like to go back home to England. Could you let me out so I can get back to Lanark and pay my shot at the inn?"

Ian looked at him with disdain. “Yer kidding me? Not worth my job to let you go, drunk or not, I know that! Wife would kill me if the master didn’t get there first.” He laughed to himself, then hiccuped and burped.

Another half hour stretched out. The wooden chair turned his rear to ice and the small fire on Ian’s side of the room seemed pitiful against the cold emanating from the barred window behind him. The key sitting on the table glinted at him in the candlelight, a trophy waiting to be taken.

Ian closed his eyes, and his chin dropped to his chest. *That’s it, my man.* Marcus reached his hand through the bar toward the key, coming up a few inches short. *Now what?*

Ian’s glass dropped to the floor and jolted him awake as it shattered and the golden nectar spilled. He bent to pick up the pieces of glass, grumbling about spending Hogmanay baby minding.

“Except you don’t *have* to,” Marcus said. “I am more than happy to get my horse and carriage and be away from here as fast as I can. I have no wish to prolong my stay here.”

“I always thought you were a nice gent, but I heard you tried to abduct Miss Penny.” The darkling look he sent Marcus said everything Ian thought about would-be abductors.

Marcus shook his head. “There was no abduction. We are married. It’s hardly my fault he doesn’t approve of the match.”

In some respects it was, but there was no need to tell Ian that.

A hard light came into the man’s eyes. “You shouldn’t take a girl without her family’s permission.”

“She’s not a package. She is of age and married where she chose. People ought to respect that. Instead, here we are. The

ultimate disrespect for her choice would have to be locking up her husband, don't you think?"

Ian grimaced, perhaps seeing the right of his argument. Or perhaps he was just too foxed to form a coherent thought. "Huh. My Ginny's family didn't approve of me, either," he heaved a giant sigh. "Still don't."

Marcus murmured some sympathy. "Join my exclusive club. Move your chair closer and I'll give you the bottle and my glass. You can keep it, if you like."

Ian eyed the bottle, there was still much good whisky left. "Good whisky, that." Possibly the best whisky either of them had ever had. Lady Boncraven certainly stocked a good liquor cabinet. He held the bottle out and Ian shuffled his chair closer, pulling the small table with him, scraping it on the stone floor. The key slipped toward the edge, closer still to Marcus.

He took the bottle Marcus held out and inspected the label. "No wonder it's so good. Where did you score this?" He refilled his glass an inch and took a sip, leaning back with a satisfied smile.

"Lady Boncraven gave it to me to try and get your master to let me go with her granddaughter. Backfired a little." He laughed gently and Ian laughed with him.

"She's a good one, the countess. If she's giving you her whisky..."

Marcus would never know what he was about to say, because his jailer's eyes closed again and his chin lolled to his chest. This time, Marcus reached forward and gently relieved him of the glass, placing it on the stool.

He waited a long and agonizing minute to make sure Ian was properly asleep and then reached through and gingerly picked up the key. *Coming, Penny.*

Ian let out a wall-shaking snore and Marcus took advantage of the noise by pushing the key into the lock and gently nudging the cell door open. He smiled. It was never a dull ride with Penny. He started the day thinking she loathed him and wondering if he'd have a school book hurled at his head and ended the day more in love with her than ever.

He'd take her now, even against her family's wishes. If they didn't come around, it was their loss and they would just have to carry on surrounded by the love of the Ambrose family.

Surely it was enough.

He'd make sure their children learned about their Scots heritage on regular long holidays. Maybe he'd even buy a small castle on the edge of a loch one day. He closed his eyes, and those little ones were very easy to picture in his mind's eye.

He crept past Ian, whose chin was now resting on his chest, but as he reached the door, it swung open. He lifted his fists, ready to fight his way out if necessary.

Penny lifted her hands in surrender and squeaked. She wore a dark blue cape with a voluminous hood. Her eyes sparkled with mischief as she held out her hand and pulled him out the door. She spared a glance at the whisky bottle and crooked an amused eyebrow at him before they crept out of the room, closing the door as softly as they could.

The night was cold and clear; the stars shining like a scatter of diamonds in a dark velvet sky. It was as magical as

her hand in his as she dragged him toward the carriage. “We are jailbreaking you, and don’t you dare say you’re not coming! Mother and Nana are on our side and that’s all the family you’re getting.”

“You’ve been hard at work.” It was a very different Penny from the last time he’d taken flight from. Her hand was warm and so right in his and pulled her to a stop. “Wait. Your father says he is going to cancel all the orders from the warehouse because he doesn’t want any association with me.”

The color fled from her cheeks. “I beg your pardon? You mean he is going to take away the reason we’ve had the best Christmas in our history? All for his pride?” Her mouth flattened into a stubborn line. “I think not.”

She pulled him along by the arm. “Change of plans, Lord Huntley. You are about to experience your first bonfire. And I’m not talking about the pile of wood.”

He looked forward and could see the orange glow of the bonfire in the distance. Penny did not let up her pace, walking as fast as her boots would carry her, mumbling things like ‘defies comprehension’ and ‘dim-witted’ the entire way.

Every man, woman and child was at the Hogmanay bonfire, their breath coming out as steam as it hit the cold night air. They rubbed their gloved hands together, wrapped in shawls and coats. There were no clouds, just the shadows of the towering trees on the horizon and the warm orange glow of the bonfire. It was made of branches and bracken, planks of wood and who knew what else. Every other moment something inside it crackled or popped making the children squeal with delight. “Now where is he?” Penny scanned the crowd on the tips of her toes.

But Jonathan Crawford saw her first, or rather, saw Marcus. He strode across the side of the bonfire toward them, drawing Penny's attention.

She lifted her fist to him. "Fie on you! How dare you!"

He kept coming forward until he was just feet from them. "What? Lock him up? I said I would if he returned. I keep my promises."

"Locking him up doesn't make him any less my husband." There was a collective gasp from the crowd. Penny turned to them. "Yes, that's right. We eloped this past summer and Father has been trying his hardest to pretend it never happened. But that's not the issue. How dare you, how dare you even think of cancelling the London order just because he's behind the business buying it."

That got the crowd riled. There were shouts of 'not while I live and breathe' and 'I think not' shouted out.

Father glanced around, unperturbed. "You'll all do as I say, and if I say that buying off the likes of Lord High and Mighty over here isn't for us, then it isn't for us."

Marcus stepped forward. "Whereas *I* say that the entire empire should know how good your fabric is and I have the contacts to show them. I also have the daughter of the mill owner to make sure your best interests are always at the heart of our operations."

"Here, here." Voices in the crowd shouted their support.

Penny looked around at all the faces that must be so dear to her. "And you know I will take care of you whether I am here or in England. You are my family, all of you."

Mr. Roberts, brother of Lady Boncraven's butler, stepped forward and bowed. "Mr. Crawford, with respect. I know I

speak for everyone when I say that the recent orders from London mean we are all looking forward to the new year. Please think carefully before you throw away such providence. I'm sure the board of directors would agree."

Marcus expected another mighty 'hear hear' from the crowd but all that could be heard was the crackling and roar of the fire. The people were silent, waiting for Mr. Crawford to answer. Their somber faces were reflected in the firelight, sharing glances among themselves, nobody wanting to say anything that might put their livelihood at risk.

A tiny girlish voice piped up. "Let Miss Penny go with Mr. Ambrose. She's sweet on him."

Everyone laughed and Mr. Crawford glared at Penny. "You have made your point, thank you Mr. Roberts. The orders will go ahead. But when it comes to my family, those are my decisions to make alone. Penny, you will return to your mother's side and Lord Huntley..." He closed his eyes and rocked back a little on his heels. Perhaps the crowd thought he was going to capitulate, but Marcus knew better. "Lord Huntley, just leave. I have nothing more to say." He motioned for Penny to leave his side.

"No, Father, while I will always love you, my place is by my husband's side now."

He took a step toward them. "You leave me no choice." He looked to his manager. "Mr. Roberts, escort Lord Huntley back to lock up."

But Roberts looked away like he hadn't heard.

"McKenzie, step up," Mr. Crawford bellowed. It was not the kind of command an employee ignored, but nobody

stepped forward, so Marcus had no idea who McKenzie was at all.

“Very well, I’ll do it myself. Never let it be said Jonathan Crawford doesn’t like getting his hands dirty.” Suddenly six foot and one hundred and fifty pounds of Scotsman was bearing down on them, looking far too sober and angry for New Year’s Eve.

“Shall we run?” Marcus murmured to Penny.

“Wait a moment,” she said, watching the crowd as it swarmed in front of Mr. Crawford with jubilant singing, blocking his way. “I love these people.”

Mrs. Crawford stepped in front of her husband. She pulled herself up to her full height and hands on her hips stared her husband down. “Mr. Crawford, this is *well* above enough. If you let our Penny leave here under this cloud, you’ll lose more than a daughter tonight. Stand down.”

Mr. Crawford looked at his wife and then over her shoulder at the two of them and seemed to sag before their very eyes. Time stretched out and the crowd was whisper quiet.

“You don’t think I’m right, Lily, my love?”

Mrs. Crawford shook her head. “Entirely wrong headed. This is an excellent match for our Penny if you will but look past the way it began. Nobody is disrespecting you or us. They just love each other. I seem to remember you being just as in love, once upon a time.”

He nodded, looking at his boots. “I am ever in love with you. If you tell me I’m wrong, then I’m wrong.” Finally he raised his head. “Be off with you then.” He paused, because the gathered crowd had broken into cheers. When they finally

settled down, he said, “Happy Hogmanay and my begrudging blessing on you both.”

Marcus stepped forward, his hand outstretched to shake his father-in-law. “I’ll take it, begrudging or not.”

But Mr. Crawford shook his head. “Too soon, Huntley. Go before I change my mind.”

“Thank you, Papa,” Penny said and Marcus could see the tears welling in her eyes.

Marcus took her hand. “Let’s go while we can, shall we?”

Penny took off toward the carriage, which was waiting for them on the road, beyond the bonfire.

“All the way to England.” The look she threw him was enough to ignite a fire inside to keep them both warm for a week. He imagined a very enjoyable carriage ride until he spotted a passenger in the carriage.

Lady Boncraven, waving them in.

Her gaze followed his. “Nana is coming with us. To lend us respectability.”

“Because we have none.”

“Well, very little, as you well know.” It sounded as though she were perfectly fine with this. “Eloping again. I hope we make it this time!”

The footman swung the door open, revealing the Countess of Boncraven still in her evening wear. “Get in, Huntley. We don’t have all night. Did my ears deceive me or did my Lily just stand up to her husband and clear the way for you?”

“She did, indeed,” Penny said.

“I have never been more proud of her,” the countess said, nodding her approval. “I’m still coming though. It won’t do for you to land in the middle of a new household without kin to support you.”

He handed Penny into the carriage where she sat next to her nana, then hopped in himself, with his back to the horses. “The two of you scheming together puts the fear of God into my heart. Tell me, devilish ladies. What is the plan?”

How lovely it was to put his fate into their hands.

They both smiled mischievous grins, with only a few decades of difference between them. “I have everything packed for us already. We travel to Lanark to pick up your belongings.”

“And pay my shot at the inn,” he added, nodding.

“Then onward to...” They looked at one another. “In all honesty, we hadn’t thought that far. England? Is that too vague?” Penny shrugged.

“As long as this trip ends with me in Bond Street shopping, I don’t care!” The Countess declared.

Marcus smiled. “It is a clear night, but the moon is on the wane and it is probably not a good idea for us to travel too far. Should we perhaps stay at Lady Boncraven’s tonight and make a very early start tomorrow? I’m sure the roads will be quite clear on New Year’s Day and we will make good time to Lake Windermere.”

“What’s in Windermere?” Penny asked, her eyes bright. “I love visiting new places.”

“Oh I know. I intend to take you to a new place each month until you are tired of traveling. Lake Windermere has a dear little house where Evander can marry us again. My father

believes we are already married, so we will have a simple celebration when we arrive in Seven Oaks. Assuming I can procure a license for us. We will travel for almost a week.”

The Countess groaned. “My poor bones. Although this is a lovely sprung carriage.” She patted the blue velvet seat. “Lake Windermere sounds very romantic, but you don’t need that license. They’re hard to come by if you don’t have a bishop handy.”

Marcus frowned. “What do you mean?”

Penny smiled at her grandmother. “Nana has the wedding certificate. She went on a hunt when she thought Father was trying to bury the marriage. But she didn’t tell me because she thought you may not come back. It’s in my bag.”

Marcus picked up the countess’s hand and brushed a kiss on her glove. “Madam, you are a gem beyond measure.”

“Anything to put a spoke in the wheel of that son-in-law of mine. Imagine not thinking this was a good match! Horrifying.” She shuddered.

Penny met his eyes across the carriage. He held out his hand, and she placed hers in it. “It is a good match.”

Marcus lifted her hand to kiss it. “The very best.”

THE END

Thank you for reading this novella!

I hope you enjoyed it. The setting of New Lanark is real. There is a beautiful World Heritage site on the banks of the Clyde that I had a great deal of fun researching. One day I hope I get to visit it.

All characters however, are entirely fictional.

I would love for you to join my newsletter where I talk about upcoming releases and what I'm reading at the moment.

<https://robynchalmers.com/newsletter/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Robyn Chalmers is an emerging author of sweet regency romance.

She lives in a country town in southern Australia with her family and a white fluffy dog. She reads a lot, walks a lot and gets caught on Instagram too much.

When not reading, you can find her writing her favorite kind of novel – Regency romance.

She loves hearing from readers and you can find her on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, but her favorite thing is writing letters. You can sign up for her newsletter at robynchalmers.com.

