

*She's trapped by her inevitable future.
He's haunted by the regrets of his past.*

*A
Not-
So
Distant
Love*

from the author of Heart in the Highlands

HEIDI KIMBALL

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Covenant Communications, Inc.

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To my kids—Kate, Emma, Sammi, and Luke

No matter where you go,

no matter what you do,

I'll always be your biggest cheerleader.

Praise for Heidi Kimball

A Not-So-Distant Love

A Not-So-Distant Love by Heidi Kimball is a historical romance novel set in 1830s America and Scotland. The book is written exquisitely. Readers will feel as if they are sharing the journals of each character, as the raw emotions of different scenes seem to lift off the page and directly into your heart. The plot and characters are well developed. The author did her research well as she describes the 1800s culture, food, Society's rules, different classes of people, livelihoods, mannerisms, hardships, and everyday life of the period. Part of the book is set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Being from the area (an hour away), I can attest to the accuracy of the historical information provided. I thoroughly enjoyed Kimball's novel. I could not put it down, as the anticipation of what would happen next got the better of me. I recommend it to any reader who enjoys historical romances."

—*Readers' Favorite* five-star review

"Absolutely stunning. *A Not-So-Distant Love* has everything I want in a historical romance: a vivid, memorable setting, lyrical prose, and a toe-curling romance that will break your heart and put it back together again. This is Heidi Kimball at her very best."

—Joanna Barker, author of *Otherwise Engaged*

"With impeccable research and sweeping prose, Heidi Kimball penned an evocative story guaranteed to enrapture. *A Not-So-Distant Love* presents a skillful blend of the untamed splendor of the Highlands with the vibrant energy of Pittsburgh, effecting a stunning portrait of romance, hope, and the beauty of redemption."

— Rachel Scott McDaniel, award-winning author of *The Starlet Spy*

Heart in the Highlands

“Get the tissues out because this one will have hearts twisting and turning from page to page!”

—*InD'tale Magazine*

“Readers will be hooked from the start of this tender love story of hope and forgiveness. Bringing together an independent, willful heroine and a flawed but loving hero, Kimball’s rich detail and relatable emotion will plant this story in readers’ hearts long after the last page.”

—Megan Walker, author of *Lakeshire Park*

“With gorgeous prose and heartfelt emotion, Kimball has woven hope, strength, and the power of forgiveness into her latest masterpiece. Kate and Callum are vivid characters whose poignant past will leave readers hungry to discover their happy ending. One of Kimball’s best works, it is sure to be a favorite of lovers of the Regency era, Scotland, and second chances.”

—Arlem Hawks, author of *Georgana’s Secret*

“As I’ve come to expect—delightfully and eagerly so—with every Heidi Kimball book, *Heart in the Highlands* captivated me from the opening pages! Callum (a Scottish hero—swoon!) and Kate took up immediate residence in my heart, both wonderfully layered and lovable but flawed enough to be relatable. I loved the themes of forgiveness and second chances woven throughout this story, as well as the atmospheric setting, and the romance was everything I hoped for. Definitely one for the keeper shelf!”

—Melissa Tagg, Christy Award-winning author of *Now and*

Then and Always

“Shimmering with romance and steeped in Scottish tradition, *Heart in the Highlands* transports you to Regency Scotland, where an arranged marriage unravels only to be stitched back together again with colorful, poignant threads. A story of hope and healing and happily ever afters!”

—Laura Frantz, Christy Award–winning author of *Tidewater Bride*

Acknowledgments

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“Where Thou art—that—is Home.”
—Emily Dickinson

Chapter One

Edinbane, Scotland

April 29, 1835

CHARLOTTE LAY BACK ON THE hill, letting the soft Highland breeze whisper across her face, the sun's rays pushing through the crisp air to slowly warm her. She inhaled, breathing in the sweet smell of gorse. In the next few weeks the bleating of young lambs calling for their mothers would cover these climbs. Charlotte smiled, closing her eyes. Nothing in the world could compare to spring in the Highlands.

Nothing.

But, for a moment, the world around her faded . . . the beauty, the scent, the sounds all growing blurry, unfocused. Charlotte's awareness narrowed to nothing more than the heavy thump of her own heart—the steady rhythm that had become a drumbeat these past few months. The feeling that had burrowed inside her, urging her forward, away, into something unfamiliar and elusive, with only the promise of an unknown *something*.

Since Grandfather's passing it had only gained urgency.

"Charlotte?" Iseabel's musical voice carried up the hill, interrupting Charlotte's worries. She sat up, bringing a hand to her brow and squinting against the sun as her young sister's figure came into focus. At nearly twelve, Iseabel was all elbows, knees, and feet.

Her arms were full of wildflowers—white, purple, pink, and yellow—in a bed of leaves and stems. "These are for ye." She stepped forward and laid them across Charlotte's lap.

Charlotte breathed in the lemony scent of sheep sorrel. "They're perfect. Thank you. I'll put them in a vase as soon as we are home." She glanced at the sun, gathered the flowers in her arms, and stood. "Much as I hate to say it, we should head back and dress for dinner."

"So soon?"

“Don’t sound so disappointed. Tavish will be joining us tonight.”

“He will?” Iseabel’s face brightened considerably.

Charlotte nodded. Their table had been sparse of late, with Grandmother and Aunt Olivia down in Edinburgh for a few weeks and Bram and Graeme gallivanting around the Continent. Tavish and his twin brothers had become like brothers to Charlotte and Iseabel in the years since Uncle Ian’s passing, as at home in Castleton Manor as in the small cottage where they’d been raised.

“Let’s run, then,” Iseabel said.

The suggestion caught Charlotte off guard. Her sister was obedient and reserved. Not spontaneous. Not rambunctious. In many ways, she was the very opposite of Charlotte, so anytime one of those characteristics even so much as peeked its head out from behind her sister’s stoic manners, Charlotte felt honor bound to encourage it.

“Let’s,” she agreed wholeheartedly and linked her arm with Iseabel’s.

Charlotte shot forward, jerking Iseabel along with her. Her sister’s shrieks of surprise soon became giggles as they flew down the hill together, passing lazy ewes and patches of thyme and budding heather.

At the back door of Castleton Manor they paused to catch their breaths. Charlotte had a stitch in her side, but it was well worth it. Iseabel’s eyes were sparkling.

Tavish appeared at the back door. “Harriet mentioned I might find the two of ye coming this way.”

“Tavish!” Iseabel waved shyly, an undeniable blush reddening her cheeks.

“Are we truly that late?” Charlotte asked.

“I arrived a little early.” His eyes met hers, probing. Was she ready?

She swallowed. Nodded.

Harriet chose that moment to come up behind Tavish, her wrinkled mouth turned down in that perpetual frown of hers. “No sense in coming back on time if you insist on dawdling out here once you’re home.”

Iseabel straightened at once, untying her bonnet and handing it to Harriet. “I’m off to dress for dinner.”

“I’ll be in the library until we’re summoned for dinner,” Tavish said, then mouthed, “Good luck” to Charlotte and backed away.

“Coward,” she mouthed back, left alone with the Englishwoman who had been a nursemaid, a governess, and in many ways, another grandmother to her. Easing out a ragged breath, she took stock of herself. Her dress was damp and wrinkled, her curly brown hair a tangled nest.

“You left your bonnet behind on purpose,” Harriet said with disapproval.

Charlotte affected an air of innocence. “*Not* on purpose. I’m forgetful.”

“You never forget when I’ve promised to make ginger biscuits.” Her eyes narrowed as she examined Charlotte’s face.

Charlotte smothered a grin. “Of course not. I’m only forgetful when I find it convenient.”

Harriet muttered under her breath and shooed her away. “Upstairs with you, or you’ll be late for dinner again.”

Charlotte did as she was told and all too soon found herself sitting in nervous anticipation at the dinner table. As planned, Tavish waited until the dishes were being cleared to make his announcement. He cleared his throat, his eyes darting toward Father. Charlotte’s pulse lurched. “Perhaps we could all meet in yer study for a few moments, Uncle?” Tavish asked.

Father nodded. “Of course.”

By some unwritten rule, Father’s study was the place they’d always gathered for conversations of importance. Usually, it was in celebration of some piece of happy news—the twins making it through an entire term at Oxford without being

suspended, a successful lambing season, Charlotte being granted the inheritance of the dukedom.

Tonight, however, there was a hint of tension in the air as they gathered in the study. With Bram and Graeme traveling abroad—still in Milan, according to their latest letter—the levity and banter of the group were sorely missing. Harriet settled herself in the corner with her knitting. Mother sat in the chair behind Father’s desk, and he stood behind her, one hand on her shoulder.

Iseabel took the seat next to Charlotte, her soft hand resting on Charlotte’s arm.

The room was unnaturally quiet.

Tavish stood by the door, alone. He pushed his glasses up his nose and sucked in a breath. “Uncle, Aunt.” He looked at each of them in turn. “Ye have been nothing but generous tae me, treating me—and my brothers—as yer own sons after our father died. I can never repay ye for the education ye provided me. Please believe me when I say I wouldn’t wish tae hurt ye. But I wanted tae let ye know, that after much consideration, I’ve decided tae pursue some opportunities in . . . America.”

An arctic breeze seemed to blast through the room.

“*America?*” Father echoed. His shoulders stiffened, tension lining his features.

“America,” Tavish confirmed with a nod. “Pittsburgh, tae be exact.” His eyes flicked over to meet Charlotte’s.

She eased out a breath, trying to calm the unnerving spiral of her insides. Iseabel’s hand tightened on her arm, a tangible reminder of her sister’s aversion to change.

The *tick, tick* of the ormolu clock sounded from out in the entryway. Charlotte prayed Father’s glance wouldn’t turn in her direction.

Mother clasped her hands together, calm as ever, and spoke in her cultured English accent. “How long have you been considering going?”

“Almost four months.” He thrust both hands deep into his

pockets and met their gazes. “This is not a conclusion I’ve come tae lightly.”

Father leaned forward. “But what about yer—”

“My mother has given her blessing,” Tavish interrupted. He must be more nervous than Charlotte had thought. He *never* interrupted. “I must go and at least explore the possibilities. It is time tae make my own way in the world.”

Tavish had confided his concerns to Charlotte more times than she could count, but her parents were taking in this revelation for the first time. Tavish was like a son to them, and she feared what his decision might cost them.

What *her* decision might cost them.

Father ran a hand through his hair, no less handsome for the fact that the brown was now scattered with strands of gray. “Yes, of course. But why not *here*? There are plenty of opportunities here. Or in Edinburgh, if ye must.”

Tavish turned, fully facing Father. “Opportunities open tae me only because ye are my uncle—a duke.” Father winced. “I hope ye will not think me ungrateful, Uncle, but I want tae find opportunities for myself. And I believe America is the place tae do it.”

Tavish walked toward the cavernous stone fireplace that dominated Father’s study, then turned to face all of them. “I am sure ye remember my good friend from Oxford, Liam Magann. He’s invited me tae come and stay with his family in Pittsburgh while we explore some investment opportunities in mining and iron.” He blew out a breath. “I leave come the beginning of June.”

Mother rose, stepping into place at Father’s side, as if she could sense a brewing storm. She looked at Charlotte. “I cannot imagine you don’t have a word to speak against this.”

Charlotte blinked, wide-eyed, heart in her throat.

Now was the moment to confess the truth or keep quiet. There was still the chance to deny the desire bubbling within her, choke back the words that would doubtless wound her parents, her father especially. *Stay*.

But she could not.

She let out a breath in a mad rush of air. “I want to go with Tavish. Not for good, of course. For five or six months, perhaps,” she said. From her earliest years, Charlotte’s accent had mirrored her mother’s, and she turned to the woman who had given birth to her, desperate for her approval. Without her support Charlotte could not hope to stem the tide of Father’s concerns.

“Ye too, Charlotte?” Father’s gray eyes fixed on hers, lanced through with betrayal. “With travel time back and forth, ye’d be gone nearly a year.” He said the word as if it gave him physical pain.

Iseabel released her hold on Charlotte’s arm. A cramp of worry formed in Charlotte’s stomach. Despite the many hours she’d spent on her knees, all she felt now was uncertainty.

“I’d not let Charlotte out of my sight,” Tavish said, coming to stand beside her. “She’d be well looked after. Ye need not fear on that account.”

The quiet click of the door signaled Iseabel’s retreat.

Mother laced her fingers through Father’s, turning to Tavish. “Tavish, much as we trust you, Charlotte cannot travel unchaperoned. She’s still an unattached young woman, and one—whether she wishes to acknowledge it or not—of affluence and import.”

“I am hardly young, Mother,” Charlotte found herself saying. “I’ll be twenty-three next week.”

“I assure ye,” Father chimed in, shaking his head, “twenty-three is not the pinnacle of wisdom ye think it tae be. I made some of the greatest mistakes of my life when I was but a few years older than ye.”

“But I am not allowed to make mistakes for myself, is that it?” Charlotte demanded. Tavish shot her a quelling look, but little good that would do with her blood warming. Though Charlotte was only a quarter Scottish, she had four full quarters of a Scots temper.

“Would ye have us stand by and say nary a word as we wave

ye off halfway across the world?” Father asked, his Scottish brogue becoming more pronounced.

The room had narrowed to the three of them—Charlotte, her father, and her mother. “Could you not at least ask me why I wish to go?” she pleaded. “Try to understand?”

Her father pinched the bridge of his nose.

Charlotte was on her feet, crossing to the desk where her father stood. “Did *you* not travel before you were married? You spent years abroad, doing business in Barbados, seeing the world, making a life for yourself. Can you not grant me even a taste of that same privilege?”

He shared a glance with Mother, and a look Charlotte couldn’t decipher passed over his face. “I . . .” He rubbed at the back of his neck. “’Tis not the same. Ye are . . .” He softened his voice before finishing. “My daughter.”

“And as your daughter, I am asking you. Please. Let me go.” She came around the desk. “I wish I could put into words the feeling inside me. I just . . . I want you to know, both of you, that I wouldn’t go if I didn’t absolutely feel I must.”

Mother stepped forward. She placed her hands on Charlotte’s shoulders, her blue eyes searching. “Tell me this is not about what happened with Lord Seymour.”

Charlotte’s throat twitched. She glanced down, unable to hold her mother’s gaze. “It isn’t. Not really.” She *needed* to go. It was true she needed more time and distance from that ill-fated Season in London, but more than that, she needed the fresh breath of air that travel would afford her. Needed a brief escape from her looming future and a title so heavy she wasn’t certain she had the strength to shoulder it.

Mother’s voice held a mild note of chiding. “You’ve not been back in the two Seasons since.”

Expecting this very question, Charlotte had practiced her response—a convincing answer filled with logic—but now her mind went frightfully blank, her eyes filling with unwanted tears.

Father rubbed his thumb down the center of his forehead.

“Say what ye will, but I think it is precisely that. Wounds ye’ve still not recovered from. And yet ye expect we’ll not object ye boarding a ship, crossing the Atlantic, and staying in some fledgling city where we can do nothing tae protect ye?” He exhaled, sitting down heavily in the chair by his desk.

Mother released Charlotte and turned to Father. “Charlotte has been restless ever since your father died, Callum. I’ve known something was coming. She needs . . . a change.”

“Ye think we should let her go?” Disbelief punctuated his words.

Let her. *Let her*. As if she were still a child, to be allowed—or disallowed—to do things. She, a twenty-two-year-old marchioness. Normally such words would rouse Charlotte to anger. And yet, as Father kneaded his hands together, knuckles leaching of color, she *felt* like a child again. She had never been able to bear his disapproval.

Suddenly she was kneeling before him on the rug, his large hands clasped in her smaller ones. “I’ve tried to ignore it, Father. To smother it. But this . . . itch . . . it won’t leave me. I’ve prayed about it for months now. I feel as though I am supposed to go.” Her pulse beat erratically.

“I understand yer wanting tae go, Charlotte. I do.” He sighed. “My hesitations have everything tae do with my love for ye and my selfish desire to keep ye near.” He swallowed, his gray eyes the color of the winter sea. “But perhaps it is my love for ye . . . that will allow me tae let ye go.” He squeezed her hands, his gaze shining with emotion.

Warmth pooled in Charlotte’s chest, a testament to the truth of his words.

“I could go with her. As chaperone.” Harriet’s words broke the silence, as unexpected as they were relieving. A piece of home Charlotte could take with her.

“Ye’d do that?” Father let go of Charlotte and turned to Harriet, a telling inflection in his voice.

Harriet got to her feet. “Without my Archie, I . . . I don’t want to wither away here as I wait to die. Besides, what is a

woman my age for if not to serve as a stuffy old chaperone?"

In two steps Father was across the room, his arms around Harriet. "Ye blessed woman. I cannae think of anyone else we could possibly trust our Charlotte with."

Tavish chuckled quietly.

"Stuff and nonsense," Harriet muttered, squirming away.

Charlotte rose from her knees, going straight into Father's open arms. The fresh piney scent of him nearly undid her.

He held her close, one hand cradling her head against his chest. "I do not want ye tae go. I'll make no secret of that. But if ye feel that ye must, then ye must." He pulled back briefly, his face stern. "And I'll escort the three of ye tae Aberdeen myself."

Charlotte swallowed against the emotion climbing her throat. She hadn't known how badly she'd needed her parents' support until now. Relief gusted through her, along with a rising tide of excitement. Over Father's shoulder she caught Tavish's gaze, and he gave the briefest nod—an acknowledgment that their plan was at last coming to fruition, that they were taking a step of faith neither could yet fully imagine, and that ready or not, an adventure awaited them both.

* * *

A glowing lamp hung outside the stable doors. Inside, Charlotte was unsurprised to see Clyde, the stablemaster, near the front stalls. At this time of year, with several of the mares ready to foal, there was always someone on duty. "No foals yet tonight, though I did see a wee two-legged creature with braids come through the doors a few hours past." He winked and handed her his lantern. "Mind, ye didn't hear it from me."

Charlotte smiled her thanks as she trod the hard-packed dirt to the far stall, where their collie, Gypsy, and her litter had been tucked away. Iseabel sat there, back to the wall, three puppies nestled in her arms. Charlotte raised her lantern, casting light into the small space. "Found you," she said softly.

Iseabel didn't look up, even as Charlotte lowered beside her.

She continued to stroke the heads of the black-and-white pups, their small bodies tucked against her.

“Have you named them?” Charlotte asked, trying to extend an olive branch.

Iseabel nodded. “This is Burns. The one with the white on his nose is Keats. And the small one, a girl, is Austen.”

Charlotte laughed. “A litter of poets and writers of prose. How delightful.” Endearing, really. Charlotte ran two fingers over the head of the puppy closest to her. “Mind if I take Austen?”

Iseabel placed the puppy into Charlotte’s waiting hands. The pup nestled into the crook of her arm.

Neither of them said a word. Only the soft whines of the puppies and the occasional swish of a horse’s tail broke the silence.

Charlotte glanced at Iseabel, praying she’d be guided in what to say. “When I tried to hold one of the pups the other day, Gypsy growled at me.”

“She’s always protective for the first few days.” Iseabel reached for another collie that had finished its meal, tucking it in next to Burns and Keats. “She doesn’t like anyone touching them or taking them away. Now that they’re a week old, she’s a wee bit more mellow.”

“Perhaps,” Charlotte suggested, “she just needed some time to grow accustomed to the idea of her puppies not always being right beside her?”

One of the pups licked Iseabel’s hand with its tiny tongue. “I cannot bear it if ye leave, Charlotte. I cannot.” Giant tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over, trailing down her cheeks.

Her heartfelt words cracked Charlotte wide open. She pulled her sister close, wrapping one arm around her, bringing her head to rest on Iseabel’s. Was she making a mistake? Though quiet by nature, Iseabel had always been willing to confide to Charlotte. Charlotte had assumed their sisterly bond was strong enough to overcome anything—their eleven-year age

difference, their disparate personalities, and the distinctive directions their futures would take. But what if, in Charlotte's search for that missing *something*, she lost the *someone* she loved most in the world?

They snuggled together, each grieving the months they'd be apart and the changes the passing of time would undoubtedly bring. Iseabel finally stirred, lifting her head, looking up at Charlotte with tearstained cheeks. "I want ye tae go, if that's what ye want. I really do," she said bravely.

Charlotte poked her. "Just think. By the time I come back, you might be taller than I am."

Iseabel looked up at her. "Taller or not, promise ye *will* come back."

"I will. Of course I will." She knocked her head softly against her sister's. "After all, what is a future duchess without her duchy?"

The first vestiges of a real smile appeared on Iseabel's face. "I *am* glad tae think Tavish won't be alone." Her smile became a yawn.

"Come," Charlotte said. "The puppies need their rest and so do we." They tucked the puppies back in with Gypsy and walked past the other horse stalls.

"Can I sleep with ye tonight?" Iseabel asked.

"I insist on it." Charlotte squeezed Iseabel against her side. "Every night until I leave."

When they returned to the house, light glowed from beneath the door of Father's study. Charlotte had no doubt as to her parents' topic of discussion. "You go up and change," she whispered to Iseabel. "I need to speak with Mother and Father for a moment."

Iseabel nodded, turning silently toward the stairs.

Charlotte approached the door quietly. She lifted her hand to knock but paused as Father's voice filtered through the door.

"There's a weight on my chest, Katie." A pause. "After all I missed, ye ken . . ."

“I know.”

Charlotte put her ear to the door.

A heavy sigh from Father. “We should have told her.”

Charlotte’s pulse thumped, both from listening where she shouldn’t and from the regret that laced her father’s words.

“No,” came Mother’s vehement reply. “A child’s unwavering trust in a parent is a gift. I’m grateful she has it. I still think it was the best choice.”

“But don’t we owe her the truth?”

Mother’s voice lowered. “If you feel you must tell her, then do so. But know this: you are worthy of trust. Mine and hers.”

“I’ve made plenty of mistakes, as well ye know. And there’s the worry we’ve both shared—that she’s looking for something in a husband she’ll no’ find, nae matter how trustworthy the man. Now seems a prudent time tae tell her.”

Charlotte’s heart stuttered in her chest, the urge to barge in and demand to know what they were talking about almost too heavy to resist. Yet she remained frozen, unable to move.

“Remember, we must let her make her own way,” Mother said. “You, more than anyone, should understand her need for that.”

“Aye, but I’d rather her learn from my mistakes.”

“We’ve taught her well, Callum. We’ve given her our faith. Now we may need to have a bit of our own.”

After a long silence, Charlotte heard the scrape of the desk drawer opening. She retreated a few steps, made heavy footfalls, and then knocked.

Mother appeared almost instantly, her face wreathed in a warm smile. “We wondered when we’d see you.”

Father came up behind Mother, and Charlotte looked at the two of them through different eyes. What had they been talking about? Much as she wanted to know, she kept silent. If they wanted her to know, they would tell her in their own time.

From behind his back, Father held up a weathered-looking leatherbound book. “This is my journal from a few years before I married yer mother up until ye reached the age of four or so.” He placed it in her hands. “I’d like ye tae have it.”

The thought of having something so personal—Father’s innermost thoughts, the intimate details of his life—felt almost sacred. She held it against her chest. “Thank you,” she breathed.

“Save it for yer months away. A way tae keep us close.” He took Charlotte in his arms. He felt as solid and strong as ever, and within his embrace, the looming fear of secrets and the coming unknown faded. “For where yer treasure is, there will yer heart be also,” Father whispered against her hair. “I’ve a feeling my heart will be in Pittsburgh for as long as ye are there. ’Twill not be easy tae let ye go.”

“For me either, Papa,” she said, resurrecting the term she’d used for him as a young girl. She meant it too. Making such a momentous decision seemed almost easy in comparison with the thought of seeing it through.

Father pulled Mother into their embrace, and the three of them held each other. Within the warmth of their small cocoon, Charlotte memorized the smell and feel of them, trying to soak up their strength and faith to use as a shield as she stepped into the future. She took comfort in the certainty that no matter how far away she went, home would always be here.

But she couldn’t shake the feeling that change was on the horizon. That the Charlotte who would soon bid her home, her parents, and all she’d ever known goodbye would not be the same Charlotte who returned.

Chapter Two

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

August 5, 1835

ALEC GALLOWAY TURNED DOWN OLIVER Avenue, his throat tightening as he stepped into the shadowed cemetery that rested between First Presbyterian and the Trinity Cathedral. Despite the busyness of the Pittsburgh streets just a few paces away, there was a hallowed quiet here that suited his heavy mood.

The air was still, with not even a breeze to disrupt the reverence that seemed to pervade this refuge for those who had passed. Alec's path required careful maneuvering as he stepped over older gravestones marked by the passing of years—weatherworn and more often cracked and crooked than not. His footfalls became slower, weightier, as he approached the stone that marked Nellie's resting place. The newness of the marker only twisted at his heart, for it felt as though it had been a lifetime since she'd left him. It stood tall and stately, engraved simply, with only a small smattering of lichen that hinted at the three years that had passed since her death.

Nellie had always had a bit of an ethereal quality, and now she'd become hardly more than a specter in Alec's memory. He tried to recall the softness of her smile, the light in her sapphire eyes, but a certain haziness clouded those images. Likely because in those last months, there'd been little of either.

He knelt, setting his black leather medical bag beside him, and lowered his head. A passerby might have believed him to be communing with God, but he'd firmly shut the door on that relationship three years before. He was here now only as penance, to flay himself with the stripes of anguish and regret he deserved.

Hard as he tried to summon a few brief words—a tribute perhaps, or a confession of sorts—it was useless.

He had failed her.

Nothing he might say could change that.

A quarter of an hour passed. Five minutes before the bell towers would strike the noon hour, Alec rose and rubbed at his beard, smoothing his face of any traces of grief or regret, the only evidence of his stay in the cemetery the dampness on the knees of his trousers.

He picked up his bag and exited the graveyard, fillings his lungs with air, the pulse of the August heat descending on him fully. The streets were packed with carriages, wagons, and carts, all proof of a city in its growing years. Sweet smells from the bakery mixed with the refuse of the thoroughfare, and shopkeepers greeted potential customers above the din of the docks.

Alec strode forward, fingers clenched around the handle of his bag. He had a noon appointment, and he didn't intend to be late.

"Dr. Galloway! Just the person I was hoping to see," boomed a familiar voice. It belonged to the man Alec respected and loved most in the world and who, ironically, was also the one that on today, of all days, he most hoped to avoid.

Passersby stepped aside and whispers stirred as Martin Magann walked into Alec's line of sight. Some might have thought it was his well-trimmed silver beard or his gilded walking stick that garnered such attention, but Alec knew better. The man had a certain magnetism—partly born of his easy and affable manners, but the greater reason could be credited to his unrivaled benevolence.

Alec owed everything to the man's generosity, which was why he greeted Martin with at least an effort of cheer. "How are you faring, Martin?"

"Better than you, I presume." There was a note of concern in his voice. "Today, no doubt, is a hard day."

Hard. Yes. The anniversary of Nellie's death was always hard. Alec swallowed and nodded. "How can I be of service?"

Martin's brow furrowed. "Walk with me, will you?"

Alec's hand tightened on his bag, and he glanced up the

street, toward the row of elegant homes where Mrs. Easton lived. “I cannot be late for—”

Martin waved his cane dismissively. “We both know the only real malady from which Mrs. Easton suffers is loneliness. No matter what time you arrive, you’ll be waking her from a nap. She’ll care not a whit if you’re a quarter hour late.”

His old friend was right, of course. They fell into step together and turned down a smaller, shady street, the relentless tap of Martin’s cane marking their pace. Every rap chafed against the rigidity of the schedule that had become Alec’s lifeline these past years. The schedule kept him sane, kept his mind from wandering into the past.

“You’re not getting any younger, Alec,” Martin said, breaking the silence.

Alec glanced toward his friend with some wariness. “I’m well aware of my age.” He’d turned thirty-four this past spring. No great milestone.

“Considering your profession, I’d expect you to have a greater respect for how fleeting life can be. How each day matters.”

The words cut Alec, deep and quick. “Of course it matters.” At least, it had once.

Martin gave him a knowing look. “Not to you, it doesn’t. Your own life matters not at all to you. You do your work. You go through the motions. But you don’t allow yourself to feel anything. To grow attached to anyone.” His voice lowered. “And that is no life at all.”

Alec had long sensed Martin’s quiet disapproval of the shell he’d built around himself, but why give voice to it today? “I’ve made peace with my situation, my life.”

“No, son. You haven’t. You cannot be at peace when you’re at odds with God.”

Alec had never allowed even a shred of his Scots temper to rear its head in this man’s presence, but there was a first for everything. “My relationship with God is no business of yours,” he said, his voice brittle.

Martin sighed. “No, it isn’t. But I’m concerned for you, Alec. It is tactless of me to bring this up today, I know. But it seemed easier than broaching the real subject I’d hoped to speak with you about.”

Some of the tension left Alec’s shoulders, though he remained guarded. “Which is?” His fingers had grown numb from gripping his bag so tightly.

“I’m hosting a reception of sorts next week. I’d like you to be in attendance.”

“You know I don’t—”

“Do you see why I didn’t want to bring this up?” Martin smiled.

Alec swallowed back a retort, chastened. “Fair enough. I’ll hear you out, though I suspect you know what my answer will be.”

Martin tipped his head in agreement. “I’ll present the facts and leave the decision to you.”

Alec gave a short nod.

“Liam will arrive home early next week, bringing with him a friend from his school days at Oxford, along with his friend’s titled cousin—a countess or a duchess or some such.” He chuckled. “I never can keep those fancy British titles straight. We’re hosting a welcome reception in their honor.”

All the more reason for Alec *not* to go—it was sure to be a stuffy affair. And he had about as much interest in meeting some “titled cousin” as he had in extracting one of his own teeth. But he remained silent, allowing Martin to say his piece.

“You know the attention a woman of that sort will produce. Everyone is angling for an invitation. The very sort of people with whom I’ve been laying the groundwork for donations to your research. They’re all anxious to meet you. They want to hear, from your own mouth, where their money will be going, how it will be used. Like it or not, these kinds of people need to be flattered and made to feel important, or they’ll donate their money elsewhere. And I know you need it. Badly.”

Alec's chest knotted at the mere thought of being in a room full of strangers, mingling, making small talk—something he'd once done, even enjoyed.

But that was a lifetime ago.

Under Martin's expectant gaze, Alec still struggled to formulate a response. "I—" He what? Needed the money but couldn't do what was required to secure it? Or worse, he *could* do it but his own stubbornness would stop him from keeping one of the promises he'd made to himself after losing Nellie?

Martin gave Alec a sidelong glance. "It's only one night."

One night. One night of doing all he detested so he could continue the research to which he'd dedicated himself these past three years.

He blew out a breath, a weight settling upon his lungs. A weight that couldn't be explained by any sort of medical journal. "Very well," he said, defeat in his voice. "I'll come."

Chapter Three

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

August 12, 1835

ANY DESIRE TO MAINTAIN A sense of ladylike decorum had long since fled. Charlotte twisted her back, desperately trying to ease the twinge in her lower back brought on by five days of nonstop carriage travel.

“It’s not far now,” Liam Magann assured her.

Tavish’s eyes were glued to the window, watching the noisy, congested docks, drinking in the crowded waterways, where steamboats chugged out thick black smoke.

“Pittsburgh constructs almost forty percent of the nation’s steamboats,” Liam added, aiming a pointed glance at Tavish.

Charlotte had met Liam Magann several years before, when he’d come for a visit over the summer, but as they’d traveled together these past months, she’d come to see why Tavish had gotten caught up in his talk of opportunity. He was an easy conversationalist, lighthearted and entertaining, but he also had a way of instilling trust in a person—a rare combination for a man of twenty-two.

Out the window, Charlotte watched the waterways fade. As they moved from City Center to quieter streets and less-developed land, she eased out a slow breath.

Her expectations for America had been quite grand—she’d anticipated adventure, a whirlwind of novelty, and a frittering of attention, given her title and status. And so far, on all three counts, she’d been right.

What she hadn’t expected was that before they’d even reached their final destination, she would be utterly exhausted.

Perhaps when she’d visited Barbados with her family, her younger body had taken the rigors of travel better. Or perhaps the travel back then *had* taken a toll and she’d been too full of excitement to remember. Either way, Charlotte now felt down to her very bones the full weight of two months of sea travel, a

hasty exploration of Philadelphia's offerings, and the grueling, nearly week-long carriage ride from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh.

She couldn't imagine how Harriet must be feeling, though for now, Harriet's eyes were closed, her face slack.

It wasn't only the journey that lent itself to Charlotte's exhaustion. It was the effort of trying to gather her bearings as she woke in a new place every morning. It was the mix of accents, the slight differences in expectations and manners, and the range of smells—some altogether new and others a touch shy of familiar.

Thus far, for a country filled with so many of Britain's not-so-distant cousins, the United States had proven to be quite disorienting.

Liam motioned toward the carriage window. "Here now, Glen Haven is coming into view." Tavish and Charlotte leaned forward in tandem, and Charlotte was pleasantly surprised by the bucolic setting. Rolling hills stretched upward, acres of wooded land surrounding the estate.

She'd spent plenty of time in larger cities, especially London. But that had incited a certain feeling of confinement that had grown more pronounced over the years. Not only were the streets narrow and crowded, but every suitor she'd ever entertained there had made her feel as if she took up too much space.

She understood, of course. No man liked the prospect of a wife who was above him in title and authority, nor one who had opinions on political matters. But it was more than that—it was her wildly beating heart, her fierce loyalty, the untamed part of her that was still coming to terms with the title that would one day be hers.

Which was why she'd always preferred the limitless, carefree feeling of the Highlands, where there was room for all of her in the crystal-clear lochs, the wilds of the Cairngorms, the rolling hills covered with sheep and coos. And while these gentle hills looked nothing like the towering peaks back home, neither would they give her an oppressive sense of

confinement a long stay in a city like Philadelphia would undoubtedly have provoked.

A point in Pittsburgh's favor.

Magnificent oak trees lined the drive, their spacing offering brief glimpses of the river beyond. And then, at last, the elegant gray brick facade of what must be Liam's home came into view.

"Father just finished adding on to the main estate," Liam said, a note of pride in his voice. "There is wealth for the making here, Tavish." His mouth curved up a bit. "The British are entrenched in stations and titles." He winked at Charlotte. "But here, a man is what he makes of himself."

Tavish gave a brief nod, a smile entering his eyes, if not touching his lips. "Aye. America, home of the self-made man." His eyes returned to the window.

Liam sat forward. "There are my parents," he said, excitement edging his tone. "And our staff." An older man and woman stood smiling at the bottom of the stairs, an army of servants lined up behind them.

At the top of the drive, the carriage rolled to a stop. Harriet let out a deep sigh. "Here at last, I presume?"

Charlotte placed a gloved hand over Harriet's and squeezed. *Here at last.*

The carriage door opened, and Liam motioned for her to go ahead. "Ladies first."

Her stomach was aflutter, as if she was still aboard the ship they'd left at port in Philadelphia. For some reason, seeing Glen Haven—the house where she'd be staying for the next five months—made everything all too real. The future she'd dreamed about for so long was *here*. Now.

Had she made the right decision in coming?

Drawing an expectant breath, she took hold of the footman's proffered hand and alighted. Fear rose in her stomach, but she discreetly smoothed her dark-blue traveling dress and prayed her legs would hold steady as her companions alighted behind

her.

“Liam, my boy!” The older gentleman, his silvered hair and beard belying his youthful voice, enveloped his son in a tight embrace.

“Father.” Liam clapped him on the back.

“It is good to have you home again.” After several long seconds, Liam’s father stepped back and smiled broadly. “I believe some introductions are in order.”

A gray cat scampered down the front porch, darting between Liam’s legs and rubbing itself against the hem of Charlotte’s skirts. She chuckled and leaned down to pet the feline, its fur soft and full. Though this cat was fluffier and seemed to possess a friendlier personality, its gray coat very much reminded her of Cleo, the cat she’d had as a young girl. Silly as it was, it almost felt like a sign—that coming to Pittsburgh had been the right choice.

“Yes, do introduce your friends,” the woman Charlotte presumed was Liam’s mother said. She was a petite woman with dark hair and delicate features, looking quite a bit younger than her husband.

Liam made a grand show of it, offering a sweeping hand toward Charlotte. “Lady Rowand, my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Magann. Mother, Father, I present to you Charlotte Darrington, Marchioness of Rowand and future Duchess of Edinbane.”

A twinkle entered Mr. Magann’s eyes as he offered his hand. “Ah. Our British cousins are not so backward as I might have feared, if it is indeed true a woman can inherit her own title.”

Charlotte couldn’t help but smile as she placed her gloved hand in his. “Do not assuage your fears just yet, good sir. I’m afraid such circumstances in Scotland are the rare exception. And in England, no exceptions exist at all, save perhaps for our future Queen, Victoria.”

He bowed over her hand. “You are, no doubt then, an exceptional woman.”

Mrs. Magann shouldered her way forward, giving her

husband a light rap on the arm. “And you assured me you wouldn’t fawn.” She turned to Charlotte. “But, of course, we are both so pleased to have you here. Liam speaks so highly of you and your cousin—Mr. Stewart, if I’m not mistaken,” she said, welcoming Tavish into their small circle.

Removing his hands from his pockets, Tavish stepped forward, bringing Harriet with him. “Aye, Tavish Stewart. And this is Harriet, a dear family—”

“Servant is all,” Harriet interrupted, ignoring the social niceties.

Charlotte wasn’t well versed in American customs, but she had believed, perhaps naively, that Americans would be more accepting, rather than less, of the irregularity Harriet might present as part servant, part family member.

Harriet looked a little peaked, Charlotte noted with some concern. Perhaps the journey had been more taxing for her than she’d let on.

Tavish bowed, artfully smoothing over any awkwardness. “May we express our deep gratitude for yer generosity in allowing us tae visit.”

“Don’t express your gratitude just yet, young man,” Mr. Magann replied, the mischief in his eyes growing more pronounced. “I’m afraid we planned a welcome reception to be held here at Glen Haven in your honor. And, as luck would have it, with your slight delay . . .” Mr. Magann’s mouth curved down in apology. “I’m afraid you’ll think very ill of us when I tell you our planned soiree is tonight. All of Pittsburgh is anxious to meet you both.”

Charlotte’s stomach dipped, her courage wavering with an onslaught of fatigue. She’d expected to have a day or two to rest and prepare herself for such social events.

But the future approached with startling speed.

* * *

Harriet fastened the clasp of the jeweled tourmaline necklace that rested in the hollow of Charlotte’s throat. “You look pale,” Harriet said shortly. “And you’ve seen far too much sun these

past months to look pale.”

Charlotte examined herself carefully in the gilt-framed mirror. Harriet was right. Not only was she pale but purple shadows also rested beneath her eyes, even with the help of a little powder.

“Shall I ring for some sherry?” Harriet asked.

Charlotte couldn't deny that the prospect was tempting—she was beyond exhausted and could feel the start of a headache brewing in her left temple. But she'd never been the type to need fortification for her nerves. She smoothed a hand down her painted-silk gown. She'd faced London's most elegant ballrooms, introductions to Society's elite, and her own presentation to Queen Adelaide without the aid of spirits—she certainly wasn't going to allow a small town in Pennsylvania to make a ninny of her.

“I daresay you're more in need of sherry than I,” she said, her voice light. Harriet's complexion was wan, her eyes tired. “Why don't you stay upstairs and rest this evening? With Mr. and Mrs. Magann present, I certainly won't require a chaperone.” She suspected that now that they'd settled in with the Maganns, Harriet's duties as chaperone were mostly behind them.

“I came here for the sole purpose of looking after you. If you think a wee bit of tiredness will keep me in my room as you're presented to all of Pittsburgh, you're a cracked nut.” Harriet gave a brusque nod. “I'd best go make myself presentable. No doubt I'll be spending the night in some forgotten corner of the room, but I won't be looking shabby.” She lowered her voice as if afraid of being overheard. “We have a reputation to maintain among these *Americans*, after all.”

It was all Charlotte could do not to laugh aloud. There *was* something about “these Americans,” as Harriet called them, that put one on edge. Something that brought out an almost competitive spirit. A need to show them what they'd missed out on, as it were.

Ridiculous.

Still, Charlotte was grateful for her carefully curated wardrobe bursting with all of Europe's latest fashions—low-waisted, belted gowns, gigot sleeves, dropped shoulders, and wide necklines. She tugged at her midlength gloves and fingered her necklace one last time before making her way to the door.

Liam greeted her at the top of the stairs and sketched a bow. “Lady Rowand, you have, as always, exceeded my expectations. Our Pittsburgh ladies will look like plain, old hens compared to your bantam rooster.” He held out his arm for her to take.

She placed her hand in the crook of his arm. “Comparing a lady to a fowl—even a bantam rooster—does not bode well for the evening ahead,” she said with a laugh. “Now, where is Tavish?”

“Already downstairs, of course. Punctual to a fault.”

“My opposite in every way. If I weren't around to claim him as family, he'd no doubt disown me. Shall we?”

Once downstairs, Liam led her to an alcove that opened to a large receiving room, where the reception was to be held. Liam's parents stood waiting beside Tavish, servants bustled about with last-minute arrangements, and a small quartet in the far corner of the room tuned their instruments.

For a moment, Charlotte grew light-headed. She was an ocean away from London's ballrooms, so why did those painful memories linger, even here?

Seeking to distract herself, she took stock of her surroundings. The receiving room had been part of the Maganns' extensive addition, and every detail was exquisite, from the intricate molding on the walls to the elaborate doorknobs and freshly gleaming trim.

Her own home in Edinbane, built three-quarters of a century ago, was considered new by Britain's standards, but compared to this . . . She tilted her head back and breathed in, the scent of cured oak and fresh milk paint tiptoeing through her nose.

“Charlotte,” Tavish said in a low whisper. “'Tis time.”

The future was now. She had only to take a leap of faith. So she did just that, pulling out her fan and putting on a smile as the quartet struck its opening chord.

Chapter Four

ALEC HADN'T INTENDED TO BE late. But while his fingers had awkwardly attempted to fasten his stock, he'd remembered the last time he'd attended an event like this, more than three years ago . . . with Nellie on his arm.

He'd gone through the rest of the motions slowly, his posture stiff as he'd slid his shoulders into a carefully fitted tailcoat, his halfhearted attempt to bring order to his hair. Nellie, so drastically different from him, had always shined at these types of occasions. As a Philadelphia belle, she'd been born and bred for them. And with her on his arm, Alec had managed to get by, to even enjoy them.

The thought of walking in alone tonight was almost unbearable.

Still, he'd promised Martin. And there was his research to think of.

Those two thoughts bolstered him as he approached the well-lit doors welcoming other guests as late as he was. Reluctantly he handed over his top hat to a waiting footman, wishing he had something to hold. Leaving his black bag at home had rather felt like leaving one of his limbs.

Two women approached, surprise evident in their expressions. "Dr. Galloway?" one asked. "I certainly didn't expect to see you here! If I'd known you were willing, I'd have invited you to one of my balls ages ago."

Alec froze, unable to recall either of their names. The women edged closer, their wide skirts brushing against his leg. It required effort not to take a step back. Instead, he forced a smile and dipped his head in a weak bow. It seemed his ability to endure social niceties was as dusty as his evening wear.

The brunette woman leaned toward her companion. "This is just wonderful, isn't it, Mrs. Munch? To see the good doctor out and about again? What a pleasure."

Mrs. Munch, yes. The one with tight curls about her face. And the other was Mrs. Kelly. The two chattered on as he

trailed along, feeling nothing but relief when they didn't seem to expect him to answer.

Alec knew he'd made a mistake the moment he crossed the threshold of the glittering receiving room. Knew it when he heard the din of boisterous voices that nearly drowned out the soft harmonies of string instruments, smelled the cloying mixture of too many expensive perfumes and colognes. And he hadn't even been forced into immediate formal introductions, having come late enough to avoid such trappings.

He was half-tempted to turn around and make the walk down the hill, to the outskirts of town where his quaint home sat, well away from the noise and light and people that so often left him feeling suffocated.

Instead, he pulled at the stock banding his neck, that in this moment seemed more a noose than a statement in fashion, found a server offering various drinks, and helped himself to a long swallow of port.

Somewhat bolstered, he took a good look around. Though the room was vast, Martin had overseen its design to feature lower ceilings and smaller chandeliers to give the space a more intimate feel. Tonight, one side of the room boasted an impressive buffet with an assortment of sweet and savory dishes. The doors along the back balcony had been left open to cool the room, though on a summer night in Pittsburgh, the moisture that hung in the air made that all but impossible. Small clusters of chairs had been artfully arranged, allowing for cozy groups to form.

And there, standing beside the Maganns, was the woman this fuss was all about. Tall and regal-looking, she wore a dress that even Alec could see was cut from the latest fashions in Paris. The sky-blue silk nipped in to show off a slender waist, gathered in a way that flattered her curves, and rose to slope off milky shoulders. She surveyed the room, brows furrowed over cool eyes, as if everything and everyone in sight displeased her.

And then, raising a languid hand to cover her mouth, she

yawned.

Frustration shot through him. Could she not even pretend to hide her boredom after the painstaking efforts the Maganns had taken to welcome her? She likely thought herself above Pittsburgh society. Much as he wished to eschew an introduction, it would be beyond rude of him to avoid the Maganns' guest altogether. And he *was* anxious to see Liam again.

Alec threw back the last of his port and headed toward them. If he'd learned anything as a doctor, it was that it was best to get the worst over with.

Martin smiled as he approached, a bit of a gleam in his eye—as if he knew exactly how much Alec hated being here and was enjoying his discomfort.

“Martin, Alice.” Alec nodded warmly at his friends, their smiles lifting a little of the dread that had pulled at him since his arrival.

“I didn't believe Martin when he said you'd agreed to come,” Alice said, her brows raised. “Yet here you are. It is good to see you without your black bag in hand.”

Alec clenched his fingers against his palm. “I never plan to again, if I can help it,” he said, quite serious.

She only laughed. “Liam will be thrilled. He's kept an eye out for you all evening.”

Upon hearing his name, Liam turned. “Ah, Alec! The most popular man in Pittsburgh.”

“Only amongst the invalids,” Alec granted. “It is good to see you again, Liam. I half-feared Britain had swallowed you whole.”

Liam chuckled. “Not quite, though there is much to be learned from the British. The steelworks in Methyr are unparalleled. But it wasn't all work—I've convinced my father to purchase some property in northern Scotland. It's unlike any other place I've ever been, a true balm for the soul. And the people, well—” He angled toward the man standing at his right. “Allow me to introduce my good friend Mr. Tavish

Stewart. He's come to explore some investment opportunities with me."

Mr. Stewart could not have looked more different from the woman standing next to him had he tried. He had a narrow, bookish face, with a pair of glasses perched upon his nose. He kept his hands in his pockets, as if they were an accessory he wasn't quite sure what to do with.

Alec liked him at once.

"Tavish, may I introduce you to a close friend of our family, Dr. Alec Galloway."

Alec held out his hand, pulling back when Mr. Stewart gave a slight bow. Trying to minimize the man's discomfort, he quickly bowed as well, only to find Mr. Stewart had extended his hand. "Ye must excuse me," Mr. Stewart said in a deep Scottish brogue as they finally shook hands. "I'm still adjusting tae the American way."

The rich brogue swept Alec back to long evenings by the fire as a lad, his grandfather telling stories in his heavy Scots speech. "We Americans take a bit of getting used to," Alec said, almost tempted to smile.

"What little I've seen so far, I like very much," Mr. Stewart returned.

Liam drew Mr. Stewart's cousin into their small circle once she finished her conversation with another guest. "And finally, it is my pleasure to introduce Lady Charlotte Darrington, Marchioness of Rowand. Lady Rowand, this is—"

"Dr. Alec Galloway, I believe." She looked up at Alec, flashing him a disarming smile. Her wide gray eyes held a spark of interest. "Your name has been bandied about by every guest I've met this evening." Unlike her cousin's, her accent was decidedly English. "I understand we are fortunate to be the recipient of one of your rare appearances."

It was just the sort of thing Nellie might have said.

Alec faltered. Donations or not, tonight had been a mistake.

From somewhere long buried came the recollection of what

the moment required. Alec forced himself to take her extended hand and bow over it. “A pleasure, Lady Rowand. The journey from Scotland is a long one. I hope your travels have not been too wearying.”

“Not at all.” Her eyes glittered with amusement. “I imagine after a week abed I will be quite recovered.”

Given the kind of life she was accustomed to, she probably wasn't exaggerating. He gritted his teeth to avoid scowling. “Yes, I'm sure. Now, do excuse me, as I am certain there are a great many guests still waiting to meet you.”

She stiffened at his abrupt dismissal, her eyes narrowing. But her ruffled feathers were no concern of his. Alec turned, setting his sights on a group of gentlemen in the far corner. He was acquainted with at least three of them—all wealthy, all patients of his at one time or another.

If it was donors he wanted, he need look no further.

* * *

It was all Charlotte could do to keep a smile on her face as Dr. Galloway cut across the room. Her heart was beating erratically, her palms sweating in her gloves, memories of those days in London too close for comfort.

She attempted to calm herself, reminding herself it didn't matter. After all, what was one man's dislike in a sea of admirers?

If only Dr. Galloway hadn't been the one her gaze had been drawn to from the moment he'd entered the room. And no wonder. He was built more like a blacksmith than a doctor—nearly a head taller than every man present, with broad, muscled shoulders that looked more accustomed to striking an anvil than making house calls.

Despite his impeccable dress and good manners, there was something restless in him. By the time he'd crossed the room to make introductions, he'd already raked his hands through his hair three times, disheveling his dark-blond curls.

And then there was his voice. Deep and rolling with the trace—she didn't think she'd imagined it—of a softened

Scottish brogue. His name was Scottish, to be sure.

“Lady Rowand?”

Charlotte blinked at the sound of Mrs. Magann’s voice.

“Charlotte?” Tavish placed a hand on her arm, concern drawing down the corners of his mouth. “You look tired. Shall I fetch you a drink?”

“No, thank you, Tavish.” She summoned her good breeding and turned to Mrs. Magann. “Though, I am feeling a bit flushed. I need but a moment to myself.”

“We’re finished with introductions, dear,” Mrs. Magann said, her face kind. “Take your time.”

Charlotte nodded. Ignoring Tavish’s worried look, she made her way across the room to where Harriet sat in a corner by herself, her color high, her eyes drooping. Charlotte tapped her on the shoulder. “May I get you something to eat or drink?”

Harriet frowned at her. “You are not a mother hen, and I am not your chick. I don’t need you pecking at me all night.” She made a shooing motion. “Away with you.”

Charlotte laughed as she obeyed, her nerves settling. No matter her concerns for Harriet, there was no arguing with her. Taking a flute of champagne from one of the footmen, Charlotte positioned herself in the shadows of some potted plants on the far side of the room. A group of gentlemen sat in a small alcove to her left, content with their pipes and cigars, as happy to ignore her as she was them.

Her feet ached. Her head throbbed. She’d made all the polite conversation she could for one evening. How could she have forgotten how exhausting it was to have her title oohed and aahed over? For Americans, she was an anomaly. A novelty. As intriguing as any of the human oddities found in circus displays.

Tonight there’d been only one guest who hadn’t fawned.

Despite Dr. Galloway’s curt dismissal, she found herself skimming the room, looking for the man with the distinguished beard and guarded hazel eyes. Did they hold

regret? Sorrow? He'd excused himself before she'd reached a conclusion.

As if her thoughts had imagined him into being, she caught the low tones of his voice, with its subtle brogue, from somewhere behind her. He must have joined the group of gentlemen in the corner. She went still, straining to catch the thread of conversation.

"I've explained why I'm here tonight, and Martin can attest that it has nothing to do with that woman."

She frowned.

"Whether you are willing to make contributions or not," he went on, "I've nothing to add to your observations."

Her brow wrinkled in confusion. How terribly tempting it was to turn and get a glimpse of him!

"Come now, Doctor, we are happy to donate to your cause," another, whose voice carried an Irish lilt, replied. "All we ask in return is for your opinion of Lady Rowand. At least admit she's more polished than the ladies of Pittsburgh."

"More polished?" the doctor replied. A pause. "Perhaps."

It was that pause that immobilized her. She needed to move. Now. Before she heard the echoes of London all over again. Instead, Charlotte shifted sideways, catching the doctor's profile in her peripheral vision.

"Now, now. Speak freely. I sense a 'but,'" another man said. This brought on a round of chuckles.

"It's best to stay away from a woman like that is all." The doctor pulled out a pipe, his fingers tracing its stem. "She's an overindulged peeress. The very thing, I might remind you, we crossed an ocean to escape. Our fathers fought a war to break free of that kind of tyranny. At great cost and with much bloodshed, we sent thousands of redcoats back to Britain so we might live in peace." He tapped his pipe against his palm. "And that woman will no doubt disrupt it. Lady Rowand has come here for a few short months to amuse herself at our expense—nothing more."

“Hear, hear!” one man cried.

“You missed your calling, Dr. Galloway,” the man with the Irish lilt said. “If you’d lived during the Revolution, you’d have been giving rousing speeches, not removing musket balls!”

A burst of laughter followed.

Charlotte’s ears roared like a Highland wind. She was shaking. How *dare* he presume to know her in the blink of an introduction he himself had cut short! Discuss her over a round of drinks, as if she were nothing more than an overpriced business investment. Her eyes burned. Did everyone in this room see her that way? She blinked quickly, trying to banish her tears.

Her trembling fingers barely managed to set her champagne flute down on a nearby table without spilling. She was likely overreacting, but she couldn’t bring herself to care—she needed to go upstairs before she became a spectacle.

She exited the receiving room, heading toward what she thought was the entryway. But no, it was merely a room for ladies to refresh themselves in. She wandered through another corridor, disoriented, head pounding more than ever. Drunken laughter echoed through the cavernous corridor. If only she could find the main staircase.

Finally, she spotted a footman who pointed her down a lengthy passage. “Turn left down there and you can’t miss the staircase,” he said kindly.

A sudden urgency pushed her into quick, unladylike steps as she reached the end of the passage, where she turned and nearly ran headfirst into—

Dr. Galloway. His hand was on her elbow, his firm grip keeping her upright. “Lady Rowand? Is there something the matter?” he asked. His hazel eyes, so cold before, were now keen with worry.

She tugged her elbow away. “No, nothing at all.” Her insides felt hollow, but she was overcome with the sudden desire to make sure he knew she’d overheard his bitter

diatribe. “You’ll have to excuse me. I believe I’ve amused myself at your expense enough for one evening.”

And before he could respond, she crossed to the stairs, doing her best to ascend them with all the airs of an overindulged peeress.

Chapter Five

NOT FIVE HOURS AFTER HE'D quit the Maganns' sprawling home, Alec returned. This time, however, the call was not a social one. This time he carried his black bag and wore simple attire better suited to his profession.

The door swung open before he'd even reached the top stairs of the front terrace. Warm rain had saturated his coat on the way over, and he shrugged out of it, handing it to the waiting footman. He'd hardly begun to wipe his boots when Martin approached him, Mr. Stewart on his heels.

Not the spirited Lady Rowand, Alec observed with a hint of relief. But might Mr. Stewart's presence indicate she was the one who had fallen ill? He certainly hoped not. The less they saw of one another, the better.

Martin greeted him. "I'm sorry for the early hour, my friend."

Alec waved off his friend's concern. Martin wouldn't have sent for him unless it was serious. "Sickness rarely comes at a convenient hour. What seems to be the trouble?"

Mr. Stewart stepped forward, hair tousled and face drawn. "It's my cousin's chaperone. Harriet. She's seventy-two and has a worrisome fever. A bit alarming for a woman who's never been sick a day in her life. Well, that is, in my life." He pushed his glasses up his nose. "Forgive me. I'm being a blatherskite. It's just that . . . Harriet is like family tae us."

Alec nodded, acknowledging Mr. Stewart's concerns. He sensed the man's urgency, the worry he obviously felt over the woman. "Take me to her. In the meantime, I have a few questions I'd like to ask before I examine her."

Mr. Stewart led the way, taking the stairs two at a time, with Alec right behind, knowing Martin would follow as quickly as his arthritic knees allowed. "When did her symptoms first begin to manifest?" he asked.

"Fatigue over the last few days, though we thought it was due tae the rigors of travel," he replied. "She has a bad fever,

though I'm not certain when that started.”

At the top of the stairs they turned left, where a door to the right opened. Lady Rowand stepped into the hall, wearing a skewed dressing gown of pale green. Her mouth drew into a firm line the moment she caught sight of him. The ruthless indictment he'd given of her the night before had clearly not been forgotten.

Alec nearly flinched at the memory.

Whether she was a spoiled peeress or no, he'd behaved badly.

She crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes shadowed. Unlike last evening, when her hair had been neatly piled atop her head, now her voluminous brown curls made little pretense of being confined to her hasty braid. Seeing her undone like this, looking almost vulnerable, made something like self-reproach settle in Alec's stomach.

But now was not the time for an apology. He turned back to her cousin. “Any other symptoms I should be aware of?”

“I thought, as the doctor, you would be telling *us*,” Lady Rowand replied, cool and even. The derisive look on her face, apparent even in the hall's shadows, told him she'd like nothing more than to dismiss him and call for another of Pittsburgh's doctors.

Alec was half-tempted to tell Martin to do just that. His hand tightened on his bag. “As a standard practice, I gather as much information as I can *before* the examination,” he said tersely.

Mr. Stewart shot his cousin a sidelong glance. “With the fever, she's had chills and muscle aches,” he answered.

Martin appeared beside Alec as he considered that information. “How long, exactly, since you arrived in America?” Alec asked.

Mr. Stewart's brows pinched together.

“Eleven days,” Lady Rowand replied without missing a beat. “Six days in Philadelphia and then five days over the

turnpike to Pittsburgh.”

Alec nodded. “I’m inclined to think it’s the seasoning, but I can’t be certain until I’ve had a chance to examine her.”

Lady Rowand stepped into the light, her lips stiff with challenge. “The seasoning?”

Alec shifted his jaw as he thought how best to explain. “It’s a broad term referring to the period of adjustment people often go through when they first arrive in America.”

“So the sick woman with a burning fever in the room behind me is merely going through a ‘period of adjustment’?” Emotion coated Lady Rowand’s words, her voice unsteady. She looked worn out, those arresting gray eyes ringed with shadows.

How he wished the woman would take herself off to bed and allow him to do what he’d been trained to do. To his credit, he answered her calmly. “Everything here is different—our diet, our climate, our diseases. So yes, it is likely that Harriet, sick as she is, is adjusting to these many changes. The seasoning was more prevalent when the colonials first came over, but many still suffer, especially the very young and very old.”

He looked at Martin, then back at Mr. Stewart and Lady Rowand. “I’ll be blunt with you. Fatigue is a newcomer’s enemy. An evening of rest instead of an extravagant welcoming reception would have been wise.”

Martin sighed. “If I’d known, I’d not have—”

“You could not have known,” Alec interrupted, shaking his head. “Let me examine her, see what I can discover. I’ll do what I can to bring down her fever. In the meantime, a doctor’s word of warning for the two of you.” He faced Mr. Stewart and Lady Rowand directly, trying to ignore the guilt that had made itself at home in the center of his chest. “Having recently arrived, you are at risk as well. It is imperative you take precautions. You need plenty of sleep, beginning right now. Make sure you are also taking regular meals and getting some fresh air each day. You’re both young enough you’ll likely avoid the worst of it, but ’tis far better to take precautions than

deal with unnecessary repercussions.”

“I’ll see that your orders are followed, Alec.” Martin’s voice was firm. “This is not what we had in mind as a welcome. All further social engagements will be put off for the foreseeable future.”

Alec turned to Martin, waiting to be escorted to his patient. But it was Lady Rowand who spoke, gesturing toward the door behind her. “She’s in my room. When she came up to help me undress, she was unsteady on her feet. I insisted she lie down on my bed.”

Try as he might, Alec couldn’t imagine Lady Rowand playing nurse, tucking a servant into her own bed. He took a step toward the door and saw that Lady Rowand intended to follow him. “I assume you’ve another room where Lady Rowand can get some rest?” he asked Martin. He had no intention of performing his examination with her peering over his shoulder.

“Of course, of course,” Martin assured him. “There are a few empty rooms farther down the corridor.”

“I’d like to be present while Dr. Galloway examines her,” she protested.

The muscles in Alec’s shoulders tightened. “I prefer to be alone and uninterrupted while I do examinations.”

Martin took Lady Rowand’s elbow. “I promise you Harriet is in good hands with Dr. Galloway. As far as doctors go, he is the very best.”

She laid a hand on her throat, looking unconvinced. “She needs me. I could—”

“You heard what Alec said about you needing your rest, my dear.” Martin wielded his usual charm, gently reassuring her. “I cannot have another woman’s ill health on my conscience. When you wake, you’ll be the first to be apprised of any news.”

“Very well,” she conceded, her mouth pulling into a frown.

“Thank you for seeing to her, Alec,” Martin said.

“Yes, thank you,” Lady Rowand parroted as she turned to go, the hint of irony in her tone so subtle he doubted either of the other two detected it.

Martin guided her farther down the corridor. “Is there anything at all you require, my dear?”

Her murmured response was indecipherable.

Alec felt a decided relief once she was gone. Whether it was more because of the guilt she provoked in him or the brash challenge issued in every word she spoke, he wasn't sure.

“Thank you, again, Doctor,” Mr. Stewart said. “And I hope ye'll excuse my cousin for her pointedness. Harriet has been at Charlotte's side since the day she was born. She's merely concerned.”

“I understand,” he said, though he didn't. The thought of Lady Rowand having a care for someone usually thought of as so beneath her station disoriented Alec, like taking a sip of what one expected to be watered-down ale and getting the burn of whiskey. “And now, if you'll excuse me.”

Mr. Stewart pushed his glasses up his nose again. “Of course. Good night, Doctor. Or good morning, I suppose,” he said, a trace of humor in his voice.

Alec let himself into the room. As it was mid-August, there was no fire in the hearth, though several candles burned, keeping vigil beside the sick woman's bed.

Evidence of Lady Rowand's hasty arrival and subsequent public exhibition was everywhere. The room was much as he'd found the woman herself this morning—in a state of dishabille. Several open trunks, half unpacked, were pushed up against the far wall. A fan, hairpins, and the jeweled necklace she'd worn last night were scattered across the dressing table.

The room itself was all woman, from the lavender counterpane to the lace-trimmed curtains to the soft floral scent that lingered in the air. He'd been in hundreds of rooms before and attended many female patients, but never before could Alec remember feeling so out of place. He set down his black bag on a chair that had been positioned by the bed.

The figure beneath the coverlet was stout, her wrinkled face lined in discomfort. He put a hand to her forehead. Certainly feverish. Face flushed, she turned away from him in agitation. There was something about the dour pull of her lips that made him think if she awoke, she'd be a cantankerous patient. He reached for her wrist, settling his fingers there, and when she didn't pull away, he took out his pocket watch and checked her pulse.

He looked up as the doorknob turned, and a chambermaid slipped into the room. "Mr. Magann says I'm to fetch anything you need."

"Let's start with an inkwell, a pen, and some paper, if you please."

After a brief nod she was gone, leaving Alec to his examination. He gently pressed his thumb and forefinger to the lymph nodes just underneath the woman's jaw. The swelling was slight. Opening his bag to remove his stethoscope, he placed one end of the wooden tube against Harriet's chest, putting his ear to the other. He listened to her breathing, then her heart. A rapid heart rate, as he'd suspected.

At this time of year, the signs pointed to malaria, one of the diseases newcomers often fell prey to during the seasoning. Hopefully, her bout was brief, but at her age, it was difficult to speculate what course the disease might take.

Before he could return the stethoscope to his bag, the maid returned with the supplies he'd requested, leaving the door slightly ajar. "Here you are, Dr. Galloway."

He nodded his thanks and jotted down some instructions before turning to the maid. "First, someone will need to be sent to Vera Coslett for some boneset. I've written out what I need here, along with instructions for the cook on how long to steep it into tea. I'll also need several bottles of tonic water from the apothecary." He reached into his bag and found the vial he needed. "This is quinine powder. I've given exact instructions on how much to add to the tonic water. I'd like Harriet to have both the tea and the quinine when she wakes. Can I entrust you with all of this?"

She nodded. “We have a couple o’ lads from the stable who can fetch what you need very quickly. I’ll see that your every instruction is followed.”

“Very good. Thank you . . .” He paused, waiting for her to supply a name.

“Violet,” she said with a brief smile. “When should I tell Mr. Magann you’ll return?”

“I’ve a few other appointments this morning, but I should return around noon. In the meantime, is there someone who can stay with Harriet to be certain her condition doesn’t change?”

“I will.”

Alec startled at the sound of Lady Rowand’s voice. She stepped from the shadows near the wardrobe, a determined glint in her eye daring him to try to remove her.

* * *

Charlotte took immense satisfaction in the way Dr. Galloway’s head snapped up, his forehead lined in irritation. Good. The man acted as if he were a ship captain and all the world his crew. But she had no intention of following his commands. If that riled him, all the better.

Though she’d allowed Mr. Magann to lead her to a new bedchamber, she’d never had any intention of leaving Harriet in Dr. Galloway’s hands. Charlotte had been on the receiving end of Harriet’s care too many times to count, and now she would show her gratitude by returning the favor in kind. She’d waited until the corridor had cleared and snuck in when the maid had left to fetch the supplies the doctor required.

Even with the haze of fatigue washing over her, Charlotte had forced herself to stay awake, watching Dr. Galloway work while she stood in the shadows. Grudgingly, she’d been forced to admit that for a man with no social manners at all, his bedside manner was surprisingly good.

Now they stood on opposite sides of the room, locked in a staring contest. Charlotte raised her chin a little, hoping he’d be the first to look away. To her chagrin, he held her gaze from

across the room, unflinching as he extended his hand toward the maid, holding out the instructions he'd written. "That will suffice for now, Violet."

"Very good, Doctor." The maid took the folded paper and hurried out of the room, but not before flinging a curious glance in Charlotte's direction.

The doctor turned his back on Charlotte, buckling his black bag with brutal efficiency. "I thought I'd made myself clear, Lady Rowand. You need rest. Badly. There are plenty of people in this household who can oversee Harriet's care."

Charlotte's hackles rose, her worry for Harriet raising her voice. "We arrived only yesterday! They're all strangers to her."

Dr. Galloway turned back around, bag in hand, and crossed the room in several forceful strides. He halted inches from Charlotte, looming over her with his dratted height and the broad shoulders she'd admired just last night. "And what good are you to her if you fall prey to the same illness?" he demanded in a harsh whisper.

Charlotte's breath stuttered. All that intimidating brawn and formidable bulk, covered only by his shirtsleeves and waistcoat, was now a little too close for comfort. But if he thought to get his way using intimidation tactics, he'd best think again.

She leaned forward. "I'm sorry to shock you, Doctor, but I have no intention of letting you browbeat me into leaving Harriet's side—an instinct you might understand if you cared for anyone even half as much as I care for her."

Something flashed in his expression, gone too quickly for her to decipher.

She drew in a breath, then expelled it, fully intending to needle him until he acquiesced. "I am tired, yes. And I can see why a man of *your* age might exhibit some concern. But I am young and resilient, and a little fatigue will not be the end of me."

Those hazel eyes pierced hers, unrelenting. She stared back

at him with the same steel he shot through her with his unnerving glare, taking note of the fine lines around his eyes. Had they once been smile lines? If so, all traces of that man had evidently long since disappeared. Faint brackets around his mouth showed through his beard, and a heavy pulse beat in his neck, mirroring the thunder of her own.

“I hope, Lady Rowand,” the doctor said finally, “never to have you as a patient.”

“Not more, I assure you, than I hope never to be one.” She folded her arms over her chest, her anger fading, and with it an awareness of the impropriety of the moment. Their proximity. A closed door. Only a sick, sleeping woman as chaperone. This certainly hadn’t been what Harriet had envisioned when she’d agreed to the role. “I *am* going to stay with her, so I’d be obliged if you’d tell me what to do and what may be of concern.”

Dr. Galloway raked a hand through his hair, still slightly damp from the rain, and stepped back, leaning against the wardrobe as if exhaustion were finally getting the better of him. “Of most concern is her fever. Cool cloths on her head and neck will help until she can drink the boneset tea. I don’t believe it is likely, but if her fever seems to worsen, send for me immediately. Violet’s instructions include the appointments I have for today, so you’ll know where to find me.”

He paused, his gaze flicking over her face. “I’m inclined to believe, given the symptoms I’ve observed, that she’s beset with malaria. If you give her the quinine as I’ve prescribed, she should show vast improvement in the next two to three days. Perhaps even sooner.”

“Then, there’s no real danger?” she asked, anxiety punctuating her words.

He shook his head. “At her age there is always some concern. But I feel confident she’ll make a full recovery.”

Relief pulsed through Charlotte, making her generous enough to admit what she’d known from the moment she’d stepped into the room and found Alec Galloway examining Harriet. Despite the unforgivable way he’d slighted her, the

man was an excellent doctor. He'd been thorough and methodical, his hands gentle as he'd examined Harriet. Charlotte would sooner try to summit the Cairngorms, however, than admit as much. His words from last night were still too fresh.

But where before there'd been only a dark cloud of animosity for Dr. Alec Galloway, now a small ray of gratitude shone through. "Thank you."

His mouth was hard. "I'd be remiss, Lady Rowand, if I did not reiterate my concerns over your own fatigue."

In an instant that small ray was blotted out. "Your concerns have been noted. And dismissed." Charlotte had the sudden outlandish desire to rumple his perfectly tied cravat.

"Then, I bid you good morn," he said curtly, with a stiff nod. He was at the door in two quick strides.

But she wasn't finished. "One last question, if I may."

He turned back, brows raised.

She changed tactics, loosing a half smile on him. "Last night, in your little *history lesson*, you mentioned a great deal of blood was shed so you colonists might be left in peace." She lowered her lashes in a lazy blink, then met his gaze directly. "How much of your victory, do you think, could be attributed to the seasoning of British soldiers who'd not before set foot in America?"

Surprise stole over his face for a brief moment before his mouth melted into a frown.

"I see," she said. And she didn't bother to hide the smugness in her expression as she turned her back on him and hurried to Harriet's side.

Chapter Six

CHARLOTTE HAD TRIED TO REPENT. Truly she had. She'd sat by Harriet's bedside these past hours, saying halfhearted prayers, trying to feel even an ounce of remorse for her rudeness toward Dr. Galloway. To no avail.

She'd also tried to forgive *him* for the hurtful things he'd said about her. That, so far, had also proved unmanageable. Dr. Galloway's snide judgments had touched a nerve. She'd believed herself long past her wounds from London, but she wasn't.

Not quite.

She sighed, fiddling with the silk collar of her dressing gown. As it turned out, feelings of goodwill toward the doctor were impossible, no matter how taken she was by his hazel eyes or broad shoulders.

To be fair, she didn't feel much goodwill toward anyone right now. Less than a day since their arrival in Pittsburgh and nothing had gone as planned, from her early retreat last night to Harriet's illness to a verbal duel with Dr. Galloway. And besides all that, the throbbing in Charlotte's head hadn't abated. She probably needed headache powders, but pride had prevented her from asking the doctor for them. She'd walk to the apothecary herself before admitting his concern had been warranted.

She tried to push the doctor from her thoughts, instead turning her attention to Harriet. When Harriet had awoken a few hours earlier, she'd complained that the light hurt her eyes, so Charlotte had quickly drawn the heather-colored drapes, even though the silent room now held a funereal pall.

Not exactly how she'd imagined spending her first full day of this new adventure.

It was unnerving, seeing Harriet so still. For as far back as Charlotte could remember, Harriet had always been in a perpetual state of motion, her hands busy, her tongue sharp. Now, silent and unmoving, her wrinkles were deep grooves

that betrayed her age.

Charlotte's hands twisted in the folds of her dressing gown. Truth be told, it wasn't so much this unfamiliar illness that alarmed her, but the realization that things that had always seemed so permanent—Harriet, her own parents—would not be around forever.

A desolate sort of ache had formed in her stomach during those dark days in London. She'd tried not to let her parents see it, not wanting to worry them, but loneliness had encroached. How could she put into words what it felt like to miss the possibility of what could be? Some future that felt as if it were slowly slipping away? A crystallizing fear that she might never find what her parents had with each other?

She was twenty-three now. Old enough to understand that the title that would one day be hers was more of a barrier than an enticement to potential husbands. What man wanted to marry a woman whose power and title eclipsed his own? Because Charlotte would one day be a duchess *suo jure*—in her own right—her future husband, at least in the eyes of the world, would be little more than an accessory on her arm.

Perhaps Father was right. Perhaps she had some idealized view of what love and a marriage should be. Perhaps her girlish sensibilities needed to give way to a more practical outlook. She glanced down at Harriet. She wouldn't be around forever. And what if, as things around Charlotte changed, she didn't have the one constant she'd always believed she would find?

She squared her shoulders and let out a breath. No wonder Iseabel detested change. It could make one quite maudlin.

Charlotte stood and walked to the oriole window, pulling back the curtain to get the glimpse of Glen Haven she'd been too preoccupied to take yesterday. A view of the river—the Allegheny, Liam had called it—formed a serene picture, its soft surface a reflection of the cloudless sky above. Beyond its shores were forested hills as far as the eye could see. She took in a breath, as if the view were air to her lungs.

The room was overly warm, the air heavy. Charlotte wasn't

sure she'd ever grow accustomed to the oppressive heat here.

She let the curtain drop back into place, glancing down at the trunk that rested beneath it. In the chaos of yesterday's arrival and welcoming reception, the trunk hadn't been fully unpacked. It held an assortment of odds and ends she'd thrown in at the last minute. But it was the corner of the leatherbound journal her father had given her before she left that caught her eye.

Aboard the ship, she'd tried more than once to delve in, but the rocking of the ocean had made reading a poor companion, so she'd given up and packed the journal away. Now, keeping vigil at Harriet's bedside, seemed as good a time as any to plumb its pages. She reached for it, the timeworn leather soft and supple. She unwrapped the leather strap that secured the cover and pulled it open. The first entry was dated April 3, 1809, which meant her father would have been twenty-three.

Exactly the age Charlotte was now.

Eagerly she dove in, reading his accounts of lambing, social events, the close relationship he'd shared with his uncle Blair, clashes with his father. He sounded remarkably young, full of strong opinions and unwavering ideals. A bit like herself, if she were honest. Not the mature man she knew her father to be now.

She was reading an anecdote about her father wagering Uncle Blair that he could herd sheep better than a collie when a slight rap sounded at the door. She closed the journal and looked up.

Tavish entered. "I *thought* ye might have disobeyed the doctor's orders, which is precisely why I've come to relieve ye."

Charlotte covered her mouth as she yawned. "An offer I will not refuse. I'm exhausted. Harriet drank some of the prescribed tea and took a dose of quinine when she woke a few hours ago. She's been more restful since."

He leaned against the doorframe. "And ye? Why did I sense such bristling when Dr. Galloway gave what seemed sound

orders?”

She had no intention of telling her cousin what she'd overheard the doctor say last night—Tavish was far too protective of her already. But it would have been nice if he'd taken an immediate disliking to the man. “Let us just say I don't put quite as much stock in him and his wisdom as Mr. Magann does.”

Tavish cocked his head. “Getting some rest after an extended journey seems nothing more than common sense.”

She sniffed. When he phrased it like that, Charlotte felt foolish for so obstinately ignoring the doctor's suggestions. “Which is why I really must beg your leave and get some sleep.” She got to her feet, her father's journal tucked under her arm.

Tavish just shook his head as she left the room, his low chuckle following her down the corridor.

Once ensconced in her temporary chamber, she climbed into bed, her eyes already at half-mast as she set her father's journal on the pillow beside her. Father had been right. Reading his words did make her family feel closer. And it had proved a perfect distraction from overthinking her interactions with the doctor.

What advice would Mother and Father give about the infuriating Dr. Galloway? She imagined what sort of setdown Father might give him, and her heart squeezed a little, missing him, as she tumbled into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

Fatigue weighted Alec as he dismounted from his horse that afternoon. He made sure Fargo had plenty of feed, uncinched the saddle, and closed the gate to the paddock before trudging up the hill to his small house. The telling tightness in his lungs made him quicken his pace. It had been too long since he'd had an afternoon to himself with nothing but his research.

“Alec!” Vera Coslett cut across the yard, surprisingly quick for a woman over eighty.

If it had been anyone else, Alec wouldn't have slowed. But

she was the closest thing to a grandmother he'd ever known, a constant fixture in his life for as long as he could remember. "Thank you for the boneset you sent to the Maganns," he said, trying to keep the impatience from his voice.

She caught up to him, her gnarled hands holding a basket filled with plants and roots. "I'm heading home to feed the goats and pigs and put supper on. I'll bring some up in a bit, if you'll be around."

He swallowed. "I'll be here. Come when it's ready." He felt guilty for wishing she'd delivered it when he'd been out.

She turned to go. "I'm taking payment in the form of gossip. I'll expect you to talk about last night."

How had Vera managed to find out so quickly about his attendance at the reception? He hadn't even told her he was going. "I'll see you in an hour or so," he said, evading commitment.

Once inside, he set down his black bag by the hand-tied rug that rested just inside the door and crossed to the Windsor chair facing the empty hearth, his mind agitated. He gripped the wooden back of the chair with both hands and leaned over, took in a measured breath, paused, and then slowly released the air in his lungs. He repeated the process several more times before he finally raised his head. It had been years since he'd had to employ such methods to compose himself. Nearly three years, in fact.

Which only confirmed the mistake he'd made in going to the reception last night.

Calm restored, Alec moved to the opposite side of the room, where his prized Chippendale desk, a gift from Martin when he'd received his MD, rested against the wall. As always, the space was pristine. Dusted and polished, nary a wayward scrap of paper or an ink blot marred its surface. Before seating himself, he retrieved a sheath of his latest interviews from the pigeonhole shelving he'd built to help him organize his research.

He spread the transcribed interviews over the smooth

wooden surface and raked a hand through his hair, emptying his mind of last night's disaster, this morning's unexpected encounter, and the subsequent calls he'd made.

This round of interviews had been taken from a small group of Philadelphia Quakers—patients of his good friend Dr. Wyatt. The two of them had attended the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine together in Philadelphia, where Dr. Wyatt had stayed on to start his practice.

Alec had returned home to his roots in the less-genteel Pittsburgh, a bride in tow.

Pushing thoughts of Nellie aside, he began arranging the papers by date of onset of the disease. The problem, as always, was that in asking questions three years after the epidemic, people's memories were hazy at best. Certainly, there were some who'd kept journals or diaries, the details recorded therein a great deal more trustworthy, but even those were slanted by the communal fear, the helpless feeling death had left in its wake.

All Alec could do was comb through such information and glean details of the puzzle that was cholera, hoping someday he'd collect enough pieces to make sense of it.

Age and gender of the deceased.

There was no decipherable pattern there. Male, thirty-three. Female, sixty-two. Female, nine. And on and on. Once it took hold, no one was immune to cholera's ghastly grip.

Address of the deceased.

The answers here proved to be somewhat helpful, a bit of consistency in a sea of contradictory responses. Each of the deceased had lived in a small hub near 4th St. and Arch St. in Philadelphia. There was much to be learned from that—Quakers, particularly in such an area, were generally people of education, middling wealth, and but a small circle of association.

What symptoms first made themselves manifest?

More variation in the responses. Thirst. Leg cramps. Looseness of the bowels. Sunken eyes. Blue-tinted skin. He

squeezed his eyes closed, tunneling his fingers through his hair, shutting out the all too vivid memories. With a shake of his head, he forced himself to move on to the next question.

At what time did the deceased usually retire to bed and wake in the morning?

Nellie had had a busy social schedule and often did not retire until the early hours of the morn, not waking until one or two in the afternoon.

Alec rubbed at his eyes, the short night beginning to take its toll. Tempting as it was to let himself rest, he knew better. His dreams were . . . not pleasant. Utter exhaustion was the key to a dreamless night. He repositioned the paper he'd been examining, making sure the corner of it was perfectly aligned with the corner of the desk, his mind wandering.

"I am tired, yes. And I can see why a man of your age might exhibit some concern. But I am young and resilient, and a little fatigue will not be the end of me."

Impossible woman. How old did she think he was? When he'd returned to the Maganns' a little before noon, he'd not seen her. He could only hope a bit of common sense had prevailed and she'd—Alec shook his head, cutting off any further thoughts of the troublesome Lady Rowand and read the question again.

At what time did the deceased usually retire to bed and wake in the morning?

Best skip to the next question for now.

Describe the deceased's activity in the week prior to diagnosis. Include locations visited, social interactions, diet, etc.

This was where Alec always spent most of his time. It was here, in these mundane details, he felt certain he'd find the key to the underlying cause of cholera. The disease was so new, brought over on transport ships, that all he could do was sift through the information, looking for commonalities, patterns, something that would reveal a clearer picture.

A multitude of theories abounded. Miasmatic vapors, a theory

he'd never subscribed to. Specific foods. Bad hygiene. Loose morals. At this point, Alec was certain of nothing.

No one was.

He pored over the longer responses that question evoked.

Isabelle was a hand at lacemaking and spent most of her days in the hot summer months in the shade of the oak tree in the garden, doing just that.

Paul owned an apothecary, and as the epidemic spread, he worked long hours trying to secure the supplies to keep necessities stocked—

Alec startled at the sound of a forceful knock, his knee bumping against the desk, several of his papers scattering. He cursed, disgruntled. That was the word that best described him today.

The knock sounded again. "I'm coming!" he muttered in irritation as the door swung open, a wide shaft of light piercing the room. Alec pushed back his chair. Had it even been an hour?

"'Tis only me." Vera's hip stopped the door from swinging shut, her arms encumbered with a heavy tray, patches of steam escaping its covered tureens. Alec hurried over and relieved her of her burden. The smells of roast chicken, fresh-made biscuits, and fried apples made his mouth water.

"You disremembered to eat again?" she asked, her wrinkles gathered in a frown.

Alec sidestepped the question, knowing she'd see through any lie. "I won't forget now." He set the tray on the table.

She gestured for him to go ahead. "Don't wait on my account. I've already had my fill. But as soon as you take a bite or two, I'll expect you to start talking."

The corner of his mouth tipped up, but only just. Vera probably knew more about the Maganns' reception than he did, and he'd been there. He retrieved the chair from his desk and sat down at the small table while Vera sat across from him and served him generous portions. "Tell me what you already

know,” he said, taking the heaping plate she handed him. “And I’ll see if I can tell you something you don’t.”

She grinned. “Where to start? The visiting marchioness has been lauded as beautiful, charming, and witty, though she disappeared rather early in the evening.” Vera had a talent for taking an hour’s worth of gossip and condensing it into a single sentence.

A vision of Lady Rowand ascending the stairs, her back straight, her slender neck erect, clouded his mind.

Beautiful? Yes.

Charming? Try stubborn and trifling.

But witty? He frowned, remembering her parting shot from this morning. He’d grudgingly give her witty.

Vera shot him a pointed, knowing look.

“And?” he asked, brows raised. No doubt there was more. He took a bite of fresh greens, but he was only putting off her inevitable barrage of questions.

“Her cousin is less charming but has been dubbed a trustworthy business partner for Liam Magann. And there are several families who are already planning additions to their own homes after seeing the completion of Glen Haven. How did I do?”

Alec considered as he spread butter over his biscuit. “Your information is sound,” he finally allowed, taking a large bite.

She reached across the table and pulled the tray back, as if she’d deny him the rest of his meal. “If you’re not hungry . . .”

He put a hand on the tray to stop its progress and swallowed. “I spent very little time with either of the Maganns’ guests.” Vera kept a firm grip on the tray. “I liked Tavish Stewart a great deal. He has a good head on his shoulders and an eagerness that will make him a valuable business partner. Liam has always had a good instinct for people.”

She released the tray, frowning. “You know very well I’m less interested in *him* than I am *her*. We’ve not had such a

noteworthy visitor since Washington came through to quell the Whiskey Rebellion.”

He nearly laughed. Trust Vera to remember an event that had taken place forty years prior as if it were yesterday. “You’re making much of nothing. She’s no more or less beautiful and charming than the next woman, with nothing more than a manmade title to set her apart.”

“Then, explain why *you* were the last one seen in her company. Some little commotion near the stairs.” Her eyebrow twitched. “I’ve a notion something is brewing.”

Silently he cursed the many people who came to Vera for herbal remedies, keeping her flush in gossip. “You’re wrong,” he said flatly, keeping his face impassive.

He allowed Vera liberties he allowed no one else. Or perhaps it was less that he allowed them and more that she just took them. Under her sharp scrutiny, Alec tried very hard not to think on the lightning that had shuddered through him when he’d taken hold of Lady Rowand’s elbow. A shallow reaction he couldn’t—wouldn’t—allow.

He ignored Vera’s keen gaze and took a few more bites of chicken, though he’d lost his appetite. “Thank you for the meal,” he said, putting down his fork, “despite the many strings attached to it. Now I must return to my work.”

“You work far too much.” Vera got to her feet, back bent as she reached for the tray.

Alec’s stomach tensed. “I’m a busy man, yes. But I enjoy my work.”

She made a sound of disapproval. “You don’t enjoy it. Not the way you used to.”

Normally, Alec would let her go on. He’d grown accustomed to people handing out unsolicited advice. Over the past three years he’d become an expert at discarding such advice without a second thought.

But the last twenty-four hours had drained him, left him on edge. He was in no mood for her thoughts. “Let it be, Vera.”

She shook her head. “I’ve let you be for too long. You’re lonely. You’re suffering. It isn’t a sin to be happy, Alec. To continue living. I’m as near a thing to family as you’ve got, and if I don’t say something, who will?”

Alec needed to get back to his research. His grip on the table tightened, his knuckles turning white as he braced himself for whatever she’d say next.

Her voice softened, and that somehow made it worse. “The Bible makes it clear that God frowns upon idleness. But I cannot think He smiles on men who work themselves into the ground to avoid the very thing for which they were intended. Marriage. Family.”

Every muscle in Alec’s body went rigid. “As you well know,” he said, his voice so low it was almost a growl, “I’ve no interest in either. Once was enough.” He pushed back his chair and got to his feet. “If marriage were really what your all-knowing God intended for me, He should have thought that through before He took Nellie.”

Anger fueling his steps, Alec crossed the room. He pulled back the front door with enough force that it slammed against the wall behind it, and stormed out, leaving the demands of his work behind.

The first fallen leaves of the season crunched beneath his boots. Despite the oppressive mid-August heat, the autumn months hovered just around the corner. Blood still pumping, he itched for an outlet. He tugged at his cravat and shrugged out of his jacket, laying it on one of the logs he’d felled the month before, then reached for his axe, embedded in a nearby tree stump.

No time like the present to begin the work on his winter woodpile.

Chapter Seven

PITTSBURGH, CHARLOTTE DECIDED AS SHE made her way down Penn Street on Liam's arm, was a miniature version of Edinburgh. A city in motion, an Auld Reekie in its own right, with the constant chug of black smoke unfurling itself into the sky, hovering like a smoky rain cloud. After just an hour of walking through town, Charlotte's petticoats were already lined with a fine layer of coal dust.

It was exhilarating to be out and about after a week of forced repose in the Maganns' home. Mr. Magann had taken Dr. Galloway's orders to an extreme, curtailing all social events and ensuring Charlotte and Tavish received plenty of rest. Resisting such measures had proved impossible, given his and his wife's unabashed kindness and concern for Harriet.

The Maganns walked beside Tavish, trailing behind Charlotte and Liam at a more subdued pace. Harriet, though mostly recovered, as Dr. Galloway had predicted, was still at home resting.

They approached a large pentagon-shaped landmark, which must have once been an impressive structure. "This was where Fort Pitt stood," Liam explained. "It's slowly been torn down and sold off piece by piece." He pointed at a plain-looking square brick building. "Though, the blockhouse still stands."

Charlotte picked her way over the uneven cobblestone street. "And Fort Pitt was initially built as a stronghold against . . . Indians?" She said the word with a hint of trepidation, a subject so beyond her sphere of knowledge it was hard to imagine.

"At first, yes. It was the site of several bloody battles." He gave her a knowing smile. "That's changed though. The Haudenosaunee and Lenape now come here only for trade. The frontier and its many dangers have been pushed farther west. Well, most of them, at least." He took her arm and guided her past the remains of Fort Pitt. "Let's walk up to the Point, where the rivers meet. We'll get you a glimpse of a steamboat or two."

Charlotte's eyes darted back and forth as she tried to take in every detail, her senses under constant assault. The smell of oakum and pitch, the grit of coal dust between her teeth, and the constant barrage of sound—anvils striking iron, the shrill whistles of steamboats, and the calls of porters and draymen. The entirety of it made up the constant hum of this growing city.

She turned and glanced back at Tavish, walking next to Mr. and Mrs. Magann. No doubt he was brimful of ideas, fueled by the energy that pulsed around them. He and Liam had all sorts of plans over the coming weeks—they would visit the glass works, Coal Hill, iron foundries, and the like. It felt as though Tavish were on the edge of something momentous and life-changing. And she was happy for him. But she also harbored a fear that as he pushed forward, taking steps toward his goals, she'd somehow be left behind.

She was still so uncertain of herself and her future and wondering what had brought her here.

Liam guided her onto the boardwalk. "It's not as attractive or refined as Philadelphia, but America's future is the industry here in Pittsburgh." They approached the Point, and Liam pointed out a large multistory steamboat pushing upriver, passengers waving from the railings. "The competition between rival steamboat captains is fierce. We'll have to make sure you see a steamboat race while you're here."

"A steamboat race?" Charlotte asked, thinking of the many steamboat accidents she'd read about in the papers back home. "Aren't they dangerous enough without adding an element of competition?"

Liam shrugged unapologetically, a half smile on his face. "We are set on pushing ourselves to achieve the very best. It's the American way."

Tavish and the Maganns finally caught up to them, and they all quieted, taking in the view. The dusty gray of the Allegheny and the bluish green of the Monongahela River joined, forming the churning, muddied water of the mighty Ohio.

“Well, what do you think?” Mr. Magann asked in that booming voice of his, eyes crinkled with enjoyment. His question was more than an inquiry about the view.

“There’s opportunity here, no doubt,” Tavish said, nodding. “I’m itching tae begin.”

“And you, Lady Rowand?”

Charlotte pursed her lips. Up close, the docks were crowded and dirty, stevedores and keelboats huddled along the muddy bank, jockeying for position. Though she’d visited far bigger cities in Britain, she’d always stayed in areas that were beautiful and benign, the polished parts meant for the upper class. Here, at the very tip of Pittsburgh, with the movement of cargo and passengers, the chaos of trade and commerce, it felt as if she were in the very heart of this living, breathing city.

“I like it,” she declared, and she meant it. Despite her general distaste for the busyness and noise—she was a Highlander at heart, after all—she couldn’t help but admire the rawness of it. All of Britain had a timeworn feeling, as if there’d never really been a beginning, but here there was a sense of possibility, of what could be and *would* be, with a little hard work.

Mrs. Magann waved her fan, trying to waft away the sheen of sweat beading on her upper lip. “If anyone has any interest in *my* opinion of the city, I find Pittsburgh far too hot in August.”

“Ah yes, we’d best be getting you out of the sun. The carriage is waiting back on Market Street,” her husband replied, patting her arm. “It would be winter here year round if my wife had her way,” he explained to Charlotte, chuckling.

“She’d adore the Highlands, then,” Charlotte returned with a laugh, following the couple as they turned back the way they’d come. The rolling haar and whistling Highland breezes seemed a faint memory in this oppressive heat.

“Perhaps she would,” Mr. Magann said. “Liam purchased some property near Glencoe, you know. We’ll have to visit next summer as we oversee the construction of our residence

there.”

“I’ve a few questions about the iron foundries for ye, Liam,” Tavish said from somewhere behind Charlotte, and she knew they would quickly be lost in a tedious discussion about the price of a pound of coal or some such thing.

Their group exchanged the boardwalk for the cobblestone street, avoiding the wagons and carts hurrying toward the wharf.

“Dr. Galloway!”

Charlotte raised her head at Mr. Magann’s unexpected call to find the doctor striding toward them, his face all business. He continued forward, not even slowing to greet them.

“Forgive me. There’s a man down at one of the docks whose leg was crushed while unloading cargo. I must go.”

Charlotte’s gaze followed him as he disappeared into the crowd, his tousled curls lifting in the soft breeze coming off the water.

Mr. Magann shook his head. “He’s a good man, that one. Willing to help anyone in need, whether or not they’ve the means to pay him.”

More likely he offered his services because he enjoyed ordering people about, but Charlotte kept that thought to herself. “That’s very kind of him,” she said. “I believe you said he’s a close friend of the family. Have you known him long?” Though Dr. Galloway was maddeningly overbearing, she couldn’t deny a certain curiosity about the man.

Martin smiled. “Ah yes. I was good friends with his father. I met Leith during the war. A stalwart man if ever I knew one. We had both joined Philadelphia’s militia.”

Charlotte’s tongue brushed over her lips as she remembered the pointed comment she’d made to Dr. Galloway about the Americans winning unfairly, and she felt a twinge of regret. How many times had Mother quoted Ecclesiastes 5:2 to her? “*Be not rash with thy mouth.*” She repented a little, silently vowing to recite that scripture before speaking another word to the man.

Mr. Magann smiled, warming to the topic of the militia. “That was 1780. We were both assigned to the First Battalion, Second Company. He was an excellent marksman—served as a lieutenant under me.”

“Oh now, don’t go into all that,” Mrs. Magann teased. “She’s from the losing side, you know.”

Charlotte cracked a smile. “A fact I’ve been reminded of more than once already.”

He shook his head. “I wasn’t bringing it up to boast, my dear,” he said loudly as a donkey cart clattered over the cobblestones. “Only explaining the roots of our friendship with the good doctor.” He turned back to Charlotte. “We went our separate ways after the war—I, a land surveyor, with an eye toward the West, and Leith, a blacksmith, stayed . . .”

Though Mr. Magann kept talking, Charlotte’s mind had frozen. A father who’d been a blacksmith. So *that* explained Dr. Galloway’s shoulders. She dragged her attention back to what Mr. Magann was saying.

“ . . . both awarded tracts of land west of the Allegheny. Good, bounteous farmland. But I was no farmer, and I saw potential in Fort Pitt. Which is why I sold my land and invested here.”

“It was an inspired move, it would seem. You’ve done very well for yourself,” Charlotte observed.

“All thanks to the bounteous Lord. And the support of a good woman.” He looked to his wife, who gifted him a smile.

“The very best,” she returned pertly. Charlotte had at first believed Mrs. Magann to be rather quiet. And she often was, but it had quickly become apparent that whenever she *did* speak, it was always with a fair amount of spunk.

Mr. Magann looked both ways before he guided the two of them across the street. “I’ll continue, if I’m not boring you.”

“Not at all. Please, go on.” Strange how on the walk here Charlotte had taken in every detail of bustling Pittsburgh, but now she was too engrossed in the story to notice her surroundings.

“Leith had lost a leg in the war, but he worked with his father and found ways to accommodate for his lack of a limb. His work consumed him, and he didn’t end up marrying until he was nearly forty. Sadly, his wife died in childbirth less than a year later, leaving him with a motherless boy and an aging father.

“I’ll never believe that my passing through Philadelphia shortly thereafter wasn’t divinely inspired. I stopped to visit my old friend and found him mourning his recently passed wife.” He swallowed. “After all we’d been through, both in the war and since, we both understood the pain of loss, and we grieved together. But beyond that, he was suffering from complications of amputation so many years before. He was unsure how to care for his son and was uncertain whether he could continue the demanding work of a blacksmith.”

“And you persuaded him to relocate here?” she guessed.

“Yes, though it didn’t take much convincing on my part. Pittsburgh was desperate for blacksmiths back then, and—”

“But what of his leg?” she interrupted. Curiosity had bubbled up in her like boiling water in a teakettle.

“He did well enough at first. He eventually chose to specialize in smaller implements, things he could make while sitting: nails, locks, hinges, and the like. And he was successful at first. But as Pittsburgh grew, people frequented smithies where the blacksmith could make all the tools they had need of. Leith struggled to provide for his father and son, refusing any offers of help.”

Charlotte’s middle tugged with worry.

“And, believe me, we did try,” Mrs. Magann interjected.

Mr. Magann gave his wife a soft smile before his attention returned to Charlotte. “As I’m sure you know, you Scots are a stubborn lot. Leith’s pride would not allow for our help.” Mr. Magann’s walking stick continued to echo off the cobblestones.

“So Dr. Galloway’s family *is* Scottish?” Charlotte asked. “I wondered.”

“Yes. Alec’s grandfather came over from Scotland, though that’s a story you’ll have to hear from him.”

Charlotte nodded politely. Inwardly she laughed at the thought of the two of them ever having a civil enough conversation to discuss his ancestry.

“Much was expected from Alec,” Mr. Magann went on, “even at a very young age as Leith scraped out a meager existence for the three of them. But Leith’s condition slowly worsened. He died from further complications of his amputation when Alec was only eleven.”

Charlotte hadn’t expected *that*. Her heart pressed painfully against her ribs as she imagined a young and orphaned Alec Galloway. Thinking of him at eleven, alone and fatherless, made him much more pitiable.

“His grandfather died just three years later, leaving him completely on his own. We would have taken him in if he’d let us, but Alec was determined to make his own way.” Mr. Magann sighed. “He has just as much of the Scots pride as his father did, you know.”

Living on his own at fourteen? Such a thought was beyond Charlotte. “But how did he manage medical school, his training?”

“Once orphaned, Alec apprenticed himself to a local blacksmith. By twenty-one he’d reached the status of journeyman and was talented at doing intricate iron work. He became quite sought-after for his sophisticated pieces. If he’d wanted to, he could have made a good living as a blacksmith, but he’d wanted to be a doctor ever since his father’s passing. Alec worked and saved for years, until he had the means of putting himself through school.”

A self-made man. Grudging admiration took root in Charlotte.

Mr. Magann nodded, as if he knew what she was thinking. “Once he began his schooling, he went at it doggedly. He made quite a name for himself at the University of Pennsylvania. After he graduated, he was invited to stay on

and teach, but he felt that his roots were here and chose to come back. We're lucky to have him."

"He's a very good doctor," Charlotte said, uttering words she never thought she'd say aloud.

Mrs. Magann peeked her head around her husband. "He is that. But, once, there was more to him than just doctoring. Since his wife died, he's thrown himself into it and given little thought to anything else."

Wife? Charlotte halted midstep. Dr. Galloway seemed so . . . *solitary*. She recalled the first time she'd caught sight of him, making his way through the congested reception room. Even then, surrounded by a crowd of people, he'd somehow managed to hold himself apart from everyone else.

A wife. Had her death broken him so thoroughly that he'd become callous and unfeeling? An unexpected pain scored Charlotte's heart—one she had no right to feel, for she was nothing to the doctor.

And he was nothing to her.

She looked up to find the Maganns waiting up ahead. "How very tragic," she said softly, taking a few quick steps to catch up to them. "I didn't know he'd been married."

The two of them fell back into step beside her. "Ah yes," Mr. Magann said. "It's been three years now. He blames himself. Wrongfully, of course. But despite all our efforts, he continues to keep us at arm's length."

Mrs. Magann chimed in, echoing Charlotte's thoughts from a moment ago. "He keeps *everyone* at arm's length."

Why, for Charlotte, did those words sound like a challenge?

"I do hope whoever he was rushing off to see isn't too badly injured," Mr. Magann said, looking back in the direction they'd seen the doctor go. Liam and Tavish still lagged, heavily engrossed in conversation.

"Yes, poor soul." Mrs. Magann gave her husband a saucy look. "But I also hope whoever he was rushing off to see won't make him late for dinner."

“Dinner?” Charlotte echoed.

“Why, yes,” Mrs. Magann answered. “Alec has a standing invitation for dinner every Thursday. I suppose we should have told you, but I didn’t think much of it since he’s like family to us. You don’t mind, I hope?”

What could she possibly say? That she’d rebuff the man they held in such high esteem?

Impossible. “Of course I don’t mind,” she said.

But that wasn’t true at all. Her mind was still whirring, wondering which version of Dr. Alec Galloway would make an appearance this evening—the man who’d thoroughly insulted her on her first night in Pittsburgh or the self-made man, struggling through the wounds of a tragic past.

Perhaps, tonight, Charlotte would find a way to reconcile the two.

Chapter Eight

TEMPTING AS IT WAS, ALEC couldn't, in good conscience, miss another dinner engagement with the Maganns. If he was absent for more than one or two in a row, there were always questions. Hints of concern. Better to endure a good meal and a few short hours of small talk than deal with a confrontation of that nature.

That didn't mean he regretted being late. He'd come home covered in blood and the grime of the wharf, probably smelling of it as well. After shedding his soiled clothing, he'd taken his time scrubbing himself clean, finished trimming his beard, and dressed, and by that time, dinner was already half over.

The late-August evening was a sultry one. The lazy heat that rested in the air made it hard to instill any urgency in Fargo. Instead, Alec settled for a trot, taking in the late-summer sunset's hues of peach and gold. By the time the Maganns' sweeping riverfront home finally came into view, some of the day's strain had melted away.

He was escorted into the dining room to find only Martin, Liam, and Mr. Stewart still within. "I was hoping you'd still come," Martin said, as the three of them got to their feet. "Shall I have your dinner brought in?"

Alec's place setting sat in its usual spot, untouched. "Yes, please. I dared not offend Alice by arriving both late *and* without an appetite." Truthfully, he couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten.

Martin chuckled. "Smart man." He stepped over to speak with one of the footmen, giving quiet instructions.

Alec took his seat. "Liam, Mr. Stewart." He nodded at each of them. "I take it you were out touring the city today?"

Liam grinned. "All the way to the Point and back."

Alec settled back into the cushion of the chair. It felt good to sit. He turned to Liam's friend. "'Twas a long day for you, then, Mr. Stewart."

“The day sped by, and tomorrow there is more tae come.” His angular face broke into a smile. “And call me Tavish, if ye will.”

He nodded. “Tavish, then. And you may call me Alec. So tell me, what do you think of our fine city?”

Tavish traced the stem of his wine glass. “Pittsburgh is all that Liam promised me. I’ve no doubt I came tae the right place.”

“And where do your interests lie?”

Tavish was difficult to read, his face much less expressive than his cousin’s. “I’ve studied the British railways extensively. As impressive as the steamboats on yer rivers are, they’ll soon be replaced by the coming of trains. It may take a few decades, but with the hard push west, there’ll nae doubt be a transcontinental railroad.”

Tavish’s answer only served to further Alec’s belief that the man would be a good partner for Liam. He was hungry for success, but unlike some others, it didn’t seem to make him shortsighted. His ability to visualize and plan for a far-distant future would make him invaluable.

Martin joined them at the table, and a footman followed, pouring a glass of madeira for each of them in turn. Soon after, Alec’s dinner was served, and he ate while the other three discussed more of Pittsburgh’s potential growth.

Alec had barely swallowed his last bite and set down his fork and knife when Martin got to his feet. “We’d best rejoin the ladies. They’ll wonder what’s keeping us.”

But by the way Lady Rowand and Alice had their heads bowed together, voices low, it seemed they’d wondered nothing of the sort. The two shared a small sofa, knees nearly touching, while the Maganns’ fat gray cat dozed on Lady Rowand’s lap. She stroked its back rather mindlessly, her full attention on Alice.

Tonight she wore a coral-colored dress with gold trim, its wide neck showing the slender curve of her porcelain shoulders. She had full, bow-shaped lips and large, uniquely

shaped gray eyes. Alec turned his attention away, trying very hard not to recall their predawn meeting in her bedroom and the way her loose, tumbling curls had taken his mind to places it had no business going.

Liam and Martin had already crossed the room to sit with the ladies, but Alec made no move to join them. Instinct told him to flee. There was something about Lady Rowand that managed to upset the carefully constructed wall he'd put between himself and the world. He was not prone to standing down from a challenge, but he needed a moment to brace himself for the niceties of drawing room conversation, especially if *she* was to be at the center of it.

Tavish leaned against the wall near him. "I've not had the opportunity tae thank ye for the excellent care ye gave Harriet."

Alec waved away his praise. "I did what any doctor worth his salt would do."

"We are still in yer debt. Charlotte feels the same, I ken."

Charlotte. So much softer-sounding than Lady Rowand. Still, Alec very much doubted she felt any gratitude toward him. He crossed his arms. "Is Harriet still beset with fatigue?"

Tavish shook his head, a rueful expression on his face. "If she is, she'll not admit it. She refuses tae stay in bed, though during the day, she keeps mostly tae a comfortable chair."

The doctor in Alec couldn't help but continue his line of questioning. "Has her appetite returned?"

Tavish nodded.

"You'll let me know if anything changes, I hope." Alec's fingers clenched, missing the feel of his black bag.

"Of course."

The two of them lapsed into silence. How soon until he could leave without offending Alice?

"Alec," she called, as if she'd read his thoughts and was determined to undermine his plans. "Come tell us about the accident down at the dock. Was it very severe?"

He let out an inward groan. People were always curious about his patients. They seemed to feel they were somehow entitled to hear stories of those he treated, exhibiting a sort of morbid fascination with the illnesses and accidents that befell others. Normally he found a way to deflect, sharing just enough to end such lines of inquiry without offending, but tonight he was too tired to find a tactful way to put off such questions. Resigned, he crossed the room and took a chair near the sofa.

“It was a mess of an afternoon, I’m afraid,” he said heavily. “The man suffered a compound fracture of the thigh bone.”

Alice’s face twisted in horror. “Oh, Alec, that’s terrible! Will he walk again?”

“He’ll be lucky if he doesn’t end up losing his leg,” Alec said with brutal honesty. “I reset the bone and stitched up the laceration, but if it becomes infected . . .”

Perhaps that was why tonight’s company felt like such a trial. The man’s injury had been to the same leg his father had lost. Despite his years of schooling, the feeling of helplessness Alec had known as an eleven-year-old boy had clung to him throughout the afternoon.

Lady Rowand’s mouth pulled into a frown, a tiny indent appearing in her chin. “How dreadful.”

“Not everyone, it seems, has a stomach for such talk,” Alec said. “I must apologize.”

Mrs. Magann put a hand on Lady Rowand’s knee. “Oh, I beg your pardon, Lady Rowand. The doctor indulges my curiosity, but I should know better.”

Lady Rowand gave her a tepid smile. “The apology is unnecessary, I assure you.” As if to punctuate her sincerity, she added, “And please, I *insist* you all call me Charlotte. If we are to be your guests for the next several months, the formality of my title will quickly wear itself out. Besides, I still think of Lady Rowand as my mother.”

“I admit the image ‘Lady Rowand’ conjures in my mind is of a silver-haired dowager with a sharp tongue,” Alice said

with a laugh. “Very well. In the intimacy of our small circle, at least, you shall be Charlotte.”

Martin leaned forward, eyes twinkling. “You’ve been here for only a few weeks, and already we have you throwing off your title. We may Americanize you yet.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you,” Lady Rowand returned good-naturedly. She turned to where Liam and Tavish sat, in the chairs beside Alec. “Now, the two of you must remind me of your schedule for tomorrow. I believe you have plans to abandon me.”

“Tomorrow our destination is Coal Hill,” Liam announced.

Alec’s thoughts flashed to images of broken men, their skin coal-blackened. Small children with bones too thin to mend right. Deep coughs. “The blessing and curse of Pittsburgh,” he said softly.

Lady Rowand gave him a peculiar look.

“I understand what ye mean by blessing,” Tavish said. “Coal is the lifeblood of the industry here. But ye’ll have tae explain what ye mean by curse.”

Martin’s countenance grew grim. “He’s a doctor, Tavish. He sees a far different side of the mining operation than most.”

Alec sighed. “Martin is right. The mine owners care little about the welfare of their workers and much about their profits. I’ve treated many a man whose injuries might have been avoided were there any safety regulations at all.” He avoided meeting Lady Rowand’s eyes, annoyed by the snap of attraction he felt toward her. “But then, it is not so very different in Britain, as you know.”

Lady Rowand shifted her gaze to Alec and straightened her back. “I must respectfully disagree, Dr. Galloway.” She always managed to say *doctor* with such derision. “Our Parliament is already under pressure to form a commission to assess the poor conditions in British mines. I expect it will not be long before *we* see sweeping changes.”

He straightened his own back, surprised at the swiftness of her returning assault. But he’d not let her British self-

righteousness go unanswered. “I would not be so certain, Lady Rowand. Having a commission to assess such conditions is a far cry from actual reform in which safety measures are enforced.”

Lady Rowand’s chest heaved a little, the strand of pearls around her neck catching the candlelight. Watching as the color on her cheeks heightened gave Alec a small sense of triumph. But just when he thought she might lose her temper, her cool composure slid back into place, and a delicate smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “Next you will try to convince me that we are as backward as you on the issue of slavery.”

Alec sat forward, tension pulsing through him. He could scarce believe her audacity. “I’ll not defend the backward Southern stance on the enslavement of human beings, nor our government’s unwillingness to endow Black men and women with the inherent freedoms we claim our nation was founded upon. But neither will I grant the very country who *first* delivered the cruel institution to our shores to claim a sense of moral superiority.” He drew in air, his pulse thrumming.

A furrow appeared between her brows. “Yet *we* have outlawed slavery in not only our own land, but in every one of our colonies—”

He cut her off. “*Especially* when the British outlaw slavery in name, only to support the very same system under a different guise, so long as it continues to line the pockets of British citizens.” His voice had risen, his breaths jagged and harsh.

Lady Rowand’s gray eyes were like a tempestuous sea. Her mouth opened, ready to fire off a response when Mrs. Magann held up a hand. “Martin,” she interjected, with a far-too-pleased smile on her face. “When were the United States and Britain last at war?”

Martin’s answering smile was almost as unbearable. “I cannot be certain of the date, my dear, but if memory serves, Congress ratified a peace treaty ending conflict sometime in 1815.”

She shot him a significant look. “I think it might be prudent

to warn our respective diplomats that hostilities are brewing once more.”

Silence. Alec’s breathing slowed.

Lady Rowand burst out laughing. “You shall have to forgive me. My British loyalties are far too easily offended. I’m sure the doctor’s innocuous comment did not deserve such an attack.” Her gaze lowered, but that telling glint remained in her eye, a warning that she thought he deserved much, much more.

Alec grew uncomfortable under Martin’s scrutiny and cursed the fact that even though he’d come tonight, there would still be questions.

Liam put his hands together, eager as always to charm his way through any awkwardness. “Well, for those of us who prefer amusement to warfare, we could try a new game I was taught by a Frenchman on the ship: *vieux garçon!*”

The small group quickly agreed, moving to the table in the corner of the room. Alec stayed seated.

Someone came up behind him and rested a hand on his shoulder. The light, feminine touch could only be Alice. He leaned forward, bracing his arms on his thighs. “It has been a tiring day, and as you can see, I am no favorite of your guest. I will see myself out.”

“Don’t go.” Alice’s voice was kind.

He held his breath until the air in his chest grew stale, then released it. “As always, I am grateful for your hospitality.”

She released his shoulder but made no move to leave. “How long do you intend to run from anyone or anything that makes you feel, Alec?”

Alec didn’t turn to look at her. Alice had known him since he was three years old, and he had no need to see the reproach in her eyes to know it was there. He swallowed, his voice low when he said, “I am doing the best I know how, Alice.”

“I think you are doing your best to atone for what happened to Nellie. You’re doing your best to heap blame on yourself for

something that was no one's fault. But that isn't how life works, Alec. You can continue to flay yourself, but some things cannot be undone, no matter how you wish it." She let out a tempered sigh, then added softly, "You needn't feel guilty for being alive."

The muscles in his shoulders tightened. He bit down hard, his back teeth grinding together.

"Am I wrong?" she asked.

The pain knifing through his chest said she was wrong. So very wrong. "Guilt is not some illness to be cured, Alice. And even if it were, I'd not take the medicine." He drew in a shaky breath. "I don't deserve to."

He got to his feet, feeling as though his bones were lined with lead as he turned and bowed, not fully meeting Alice's gaze. "Tell Martin and the others I bid them good night." The exhaustion—from today, from the weight of what he expected of himself, from this strange *something* with Lady Rowand—was all too much.

Chapter Nine

CHARLOTTE FELT A SHARP PANG of disappointment as she watched Dr. Galloway disappear through the door, though she couldn't have said why. As Liam dealt the cards and Mrs. Magann joined them, the easy conversation that had prevailed at dinner returned. Mr. Magann teased Tavish over the way he painstakingly arranged his cards. Mrs. Magann watched her son's every move, as if he might cheat if given half a chance.

"I haven't put a card up my sleeve since I was eleven, Charlotte, but as you can see, my mother still hasn't forgiven me."

"I've forgiven you, Liam." Mrs. Magann picked up her hand, smirking. "But it'll be a long while yet before I've forgotten."

Charlotte smiled at the easiness between mother and son. It should have been simple to lose herself in the game and ongoing banter. But all she could think about was the pained look on the doctor's face as he'd discussed his patient who might never walk again.

Having gotten the smallest glimpse of his complicated past, she'd hoped to make some headway in understanding what he held against her. But, once again, in the face of a little provocation, she'd lost control.

"Be not rash with thy mouth."

She'd likely have to gag herself with a handkerchief in order to achieve such results in the doctor's presence.

Mr. Magann ended up with the "vieux garçon" and immediately demanded another round, but Charlotte excused herself before the next hand was dealt.

She wandered the bank of windows against the far wall, looking out at the molten silver the river had become in the moonlight.

Liam's reflection joined hers in the window. "Mind if I join you?"

She turned. “Won’t you be missed?”

He shook his head. “I’ve been the spare cardplayer in our family for so long, my parents will happily exchange me for Tavish.”

For someone graced with classical features, a charming dimple, and dancing brown eyes, Liam’s self-deprecation constantly surprised Charlotte.

He grinned. “Besides, with me gone, one of them might have a chance at winning.”

“What was it like?” she asked. “Being an only child, I mean.”

Charlotte herself had been an only child for eleven years, until Iseabel had come along, but it had never really felt that way with her three cousins—who were more like brothers—constantly underfoot.

He shrugged. “I never knew any different. It was lonely at times, but I hardly noticed because my parents were so generous in the attention they gave me. Despite my father’s success, he always made me and my mother feel as if we were the most important things in his life.” His face grew pensive. “Since both of my parents came from humble backgrounds, extravagance isn’t in their nature, but I was certainly a little spoiled.”

He lowered his voice. “What I struggle with is the fear of disappointing them. Every hope or dream they have is pinned squarely on me. It isn’t purposeful. They wouldn’t want me to feel that way. But I’m their only hope of marrying well and having grandchildren. It is only through me that my father’s business legacy will live on. At times it feels a little heavy.”

Charlotte nodded. “I see what you mean.”

Liam tipped his head back, eyes on the stars. “And, truthfully, it can be hard to measure up to Alec.”

“Dr. Galloway?” She stared at him in surprise.

“Come now, you must have noticed how highly they regard him. In many ways he’s like another son to them.”

“Is your relationship with him brotherly, then?”

“It was. Once.” His lips thinned.

Uncertain how to address the pain embedded in those few words, Charlotte posed another question. “And your parents compare the two of you? I would not have suspected it of them.”

Liam pulled at his stock. “Not consciously, of course. But think of it this way. Alec has done everything on his own. In that light, his every accomplishment is a miracle, whereas I had both of my parents, an unparalleled education, and wealth. Every advantage. Any success on my part is seen as me doing exactly what is expected.”

She clasped her hands behind her. “Ah. Now I understand.”

“You can see what a very difficult life I’ve led,” he said. The twinkle in his eyes made him look just like his father.

“Almost as hard as mine, I’m sure.” She sighed dramatically. “Though, you haven’t had to lug around a stuffy title.”

“Ours is a pitiable lot.”

Charlotte couldn’t help but laugh. “I know you’re being facetious—we both have much to be grateful for, truly. But we do face our own difficulties. Having such advantages can make it feel almost impossible to be known for *who* you are instead of *what* you are or what you have.”

Liam’s face grew stoic. “Which is why I’m determined that whatever Tavish and I do, it will be without my father’s financial backing. I’ve already reached out to several other banks.”

Charlotte tried to imagine even *one* of the gentlemen she’d met in London’s ballrooms saying such a thing. Willingly separating themselves from their family’s title or wealth to make their own way. It was unheard of. There was something to be admired in this American spirit.

She offered him an encouraging smile. “I think you already make your parents prouder than you know.”

“Thank you, Charlotte. That means a great deal. And I need not tell you what a pleasure it is for us to have you here. My parents always wanted a houseful of children, so having you and Tavish here gives them a taste of that. If there is anything I can do to make your stay here more enjoyable, I hope you will not be shy in voicing it.” He raised his brows mischievously. “*Especially* if it involves dueling Alec for offending you. Though, I was curious to know what might have happened tonight had my mother not intervened.”

Charlotte barely suppressed a grimace. “One of us would have been knocked out cold, I’m sure.”

He laughed, leading her back over to the table as the game ended.

“Thank you all for a lovely evening,” she said, stifling a yawn. “I hope you will not think me very dull for retiring early.”

“Not at all,” Mrs. Magann said. “In fact, I think I shall join you. Leave the men to their talk of business.”

“Good night, ladies,” Mr. Magann said. Liam and Tavish both stood and voiced their good nights.

As they walked down the corridor, Mrs. Magann turned to look at Charlotte. “After your comments to Alec this evening, I couldn’t help but think you might enjoy working with me in a recently formed organization here in Pittsburgh.”

They reached the stairs and Charlotte lifted her skirts. “Oh?”

“The Education and Improvement Society for Women is chaired by Mrs. Borden, whom you met at our welcoming reception.”

Charlotte recalled the vague image of a large-boned woman. She was confused as to how her earlier comments made her a good candidate for a society focused on women’s improvement. “I admit I’ve been floundering. With Liam and Tavish now traipsing all over the city, I’m a bit at a loss for how to spend my time.”

When Charlotte had sought escape here, she hadn’t truly considered what her day-to-day life might look like. So far,

with nothing more than the Maganns' busy social calendar to fill her time, she'd begun to feel a bit empty. They reached the top of the stairs, and she stopped. "I'd love to hear more."

Mrs. Magann looked at her as a mother might, searching for signs of fatigue. "You aren't too tired? We can discuss this tomorrow, if you'd prefer."

"No, no. You have me intrigued now."

The woman made no attempt to hide her delight. "Let's go to my sitting room, then. I'll have Mrs. Bell bring up some tea."

Once they were settled, Mrs. Magann rang for tea, wasting no time returning to their previous subject. "As I mentioned, our organization is rather new. We are still trying to determine how to best focus our time and funds. But for now, one of our main concentrations is teaching girls and women to read."

Charlotte nodded. "An admirable endeavor."

Mrs. Magann leaned closer. "I thought, perhaps, with your views on injustice, you might be interested in becoming part of our efforts. We take young ladies and women of every background and color."

Mrs. Magann took Charlotte's silence as permission to continue. "Reading opens a world of opportunity, but there are other things we are doing. Many of these women have no skills at all. We are teaching them mending and sewing, how to serve tea, some basic deportment that could help them attain better employment."

Charlotte's excitement mounted as Mrs. Magann shared more details. Since the day she'd learned she would inherit the dukedom upon her father's death, Charlotte had tried to think of her title as a blessing. Being a duchess would afford her power and influence, both within the sphere of her duchy and beyond, and she was glad for that, but this opportunity felt like it had nothing to do with such designations. Something not for Lady Rowand, future Duchess of Edinbane, but for Charlotte.

The prospect was thrilling.

"Forgive me if I'm talking too much, my dear," Mrs.

Magann said, pouring them both a cup of tea from the tray that had been delivered. "'Tis just something I feel very deeply about."

"As you should." Charlotte stirred and then took a sip of bohea. "You have me so eager, I doubt I'll be able to sleep."

"Oh, to be young again. Nothing keeps me from a good night's sleep anymore." Mrs. Magann yawned through a smile. "But I am gratified to hear of your enthusiasm for our efforts. You can join me for our next meeting on Tuesday—the ladies will be thrilled to have you."

Impulsively, Charlotte reached out and hugged the woman. "Thank you for making me feel so welcome," she said. "My time here has been infinitely better because of the kindnesses you and Mr. Magann have shown me." She released the woman and sat back, but Mrs. Magann took her hand.

"I'll admit I worried a little, when I learned you were coming, that I'd have to pretend to be something I wasn't in order to impress you. But you aren't what I expected at all, and the feeling is certainly mutual, my dear. I'm so glad you've come." She squeezed Charlotte's hand. "And please, call me Alice."

Charlotte walked to her room, feeling unexpectedly content. When she entered, she found Harriet was waiting up for her. "You should be in bed," Charlotte scolded.

"I've been worthless for too long. Time for me to start earning my keep. Turn around," Harriet ordered.

Charlotte smiled and did as she was instructed, relieved to hear some of Harriet's bossiness creeping back in.

Harriet untied the sash from Charlotte's waist and started in on the long row of buttons down the back of her dress. "Did the doctor end up coming?"

The smile on Charlotte's face melted away. "He did."

"I suppose I should have come down to offer him my thanks."

She turned and met Harriet's gaze in the mirror. "I'm sure

Tavish gave him enough thanks for the both of us.”

Harriet helped Charlotte into her nightgown and began unpinning her hair. In the silence, she was annoyed to find that her thoughts continually wandered back to the doctor, instead of the women’s society Charlotte had been so excited about only minutes before.

But how could she not ruminate over tonight’s heated debate and the fire Dr. Galloway had incited in her with his pointed barbs? He certainly had no qualms about making his opinions known.

Then it struck her.

She’d never, not once during her two and a half Seasons in London, had a political discussion with any man. If ever she’d broached the topic, her thoughts were quickly dismissed and the subject changed. Such matters were deemed improper for a respectable young woman, even a young woman who would one day inherit a duchy.

Earlier tonight Charlotte had been caught up in the fierce defense of her homeland, angry at Dr. Galloway for maligning Great Britain. But now? Now all she could feel was startled. He hadn’t dismissed her out of hand. He’d respected her views enough to argue with her.

Despite their disagreements, there’d been room enough for both Charlotte and her opinions. It was . . . telling.

It made her wonder what Dr. Galloway was like with just the Maganns. Did he make pleasant conversation or mostly keep quiet? She doubted he insulted Britain at every turn like he did when she was present.

That thought lodged in her brain, and once there, it wouldn’t be quieted. From their very first meeting, he’d seemed to form an unfavorable opinion of her. She tried to remember what she might have said or done that warranted such prejudice. The night of the reception was a blur, and now, over a week later, she couldn’t remember even a single thing she’d said that might have offended him. Tavish certainly would have told her if she’d displayed any impropriety.

Long after Harriet had extinguished the candle, Charlotte lay in bed unable to sleep. What was it about her, exactly, that seemed to so offend the doctor's sensibilities?

If there was one thing Charlotte knew about herself, it was that she wouldn't be satisfied until she learned the answer to that question.

Chapter Ten

CHARLOTTE'S STOMACH CHURNED WITH NERVES as she followed Mrs. Magann down Perry Street. When she had agreed to take on the role of teaching a young woman to read, it had sounded novel and exciting. Now that the reality was before her, however, uncertainty crept in. Charlotte had no training. What if she failed miserably? What if the young woman she'd been assigned gave up on learning to read and write because Charlotte was an inept teacher?

The meeting she'd attended with Mrs. Magann at Mrs. Borden's home on Tuesday had been exciting, and she'd enjoyed the camaraderie with the other members, who had accepted her wholeheartedly. But beyond that, it was gratifying to see the wave of momentum these women were creating in their community.

"Right this way," Mrs. Magann said, leading Charlotte toward what appeared to be a vacant storefront nestled between a millinery on one side and a draper on the other. She couldn't imagine that this prosperous part of town was one commonly frequented by the women they were trying to help. Mrs. Magann opened the door and allowed Charlotte to go in first.

The space was larger than it looked from the outside, only about ten feet wide, but long, stretching back from the entry almost thirty feet. Near the front window sat a circle of about ten women, some Black, some White, a mix of young and old, heads bent over their sewing. Mrs. Borden, with her robust figure and large coiffure, walked around the circle, praising and correcting in turn as the ladies practiced small and even stitches.

She stepped out of the group and came to greet them. "Lady Rowand, Mrs. Magann, do come in." She turned to Charlotte, hardly taking a breath. "We are busy at work with our stitches, as you can see, but let me take you upstairs and introduce you to your pupil. Mrs. Davis?" She tapped an older Black woman in the circle on the shoulder. "Will you manage things while I'm gone? Mrs. Magann, I've a small group waiting over in

that corner for you to instruct them on the steps to a tea service.”

While Mrs. Magann joined her students, Charlotte followed Mrs. Borden up the back stairs. By the time they’d reached the top, they were both out of breath, and Charlotte took the brief reprieve to look around.

Like its downstairs counterpart, the room was long and narrow, but each end had a large window, allowing in plenty of natural light. On one wall hung a small clock, beside it an embroidered sampler from Proverbs 4 verse 11 that read, “*I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths.*” A small table had been placed by each window, each with several wooden chairs positioned around it. A young woman sat in one of the chairs at the far window, her back to the two of them as she looked down over the street.

“Let me introduce you to Clara,” Mrs. Borden said, her breath still labored from their ascent up the stairs.

“Come, Clara, and allow me to introduce you to your new teacher, all the way from Scotland.”

The young woman turned, the light catching the thick, blonde braid that trailed her back and landed at her waist, where a worn apron was neatly tied. She approached somewhat shyly, hands behind her back.

“Lady Rowand, this is Clara. Clara is thirteen and works doing laundry for the tavern over on Grant Street. She has only an hour for her lesson, so there’s not a minute to waste. Clara, this is Lady Rowand. I’ll leave the two of you to further acquaint yourselves.”

Charlotte’s knees went weak. Was *that* to be all the instruction she was given?

“Oh, I suppose I should explain a bit more,” Mrs. Borden chirped, as if she’d read Charlotte’s mind.

Relief surged through Charlotte.

Mrs. Borden waved her hand toward the table, where a small stack of books rested. “We’ve a few books—most are children’s primers. You’ll find a stack of paper just there. Oh,

and a pen and an inkwell. If there are other things you require, I will try to procure them. I think that is all, so unless you have any questions, I will return to my duties downstairs.”

Charlotte stood there, bewildered. She’d assumed she would at least be monitored or given some sort of lesson structure. As it was, she felt vastly unprepared. Yet what could she do but nod and try to look more confident than she felt?

“No? Very good.” Mrs. Borden hustled to the stairs and disappeared, leaving Charlotte and her pupil utterly alone in the large space.

“Shall we take a seat by the window?” Charlotte asked, her mind still racing.

Clara nodded and they each pulled out a chair and took a seat. The young woman looked at her hopefully. Charlotte’s throat grew dry.

Her rose-colored damask dress brushed Clara’s threadbare apron, and Charlotte felt the contrast keenly. It seemed as though a wide, almost insurmountable chasm existed between the two of them. Ironic how comfortable and confident Charlotte felt in Britain’s most elite circles, yet here, she couldn’t seem to formulate a single word.

How she wished she could remember learning to read. Feeling a bit desperate, she picked up one of the children’s primers and opened it. “See these?” Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. She pointed. “These are letters. The alphabet is made up of twenty-six letters, and each one makes its own specific sound. Actually, some make more than one sound. Especially the vowels.” Charlotte was fully rambling now but couldn’t seem to stop. “You put letters together to make words. And you put words together to make sentences.”

She raised her eyes, meeting Clara’s blank stare. Not two minutes into the lesson and already her pupil’s interest was waning. Charlotte’s throat grew thick, and tears threatened. Why had she ever agreed to this? “I apologize, Clara. I’ve never taught anyone to read before.” She let out a strangled laugh. “Truthfully, I’ve never taught anyone *anything*. Unless teaching my sister how to sneak extra ginger biscuits from the

kitchen counts.”

Clara stared at Charlotte for a moment. “And I’ve never learned how to read.” She gave a hesitant smile. “So we’re well yoked.”

The kindness in Clara’s tone loosened some of the pressure in Charlotte’s chest. The lesson her mother had tried to instill during their visits to the poor and needy echoed in her mind. “*Forget yourself, Charlotte. Focus on the person you are trying to help.*” She eased out a breath and looked at Clara. Really looked at her.

She sat with her hands in her lap, wringing her fingers together. The poor girl was probably nervous. Her hands were chafed and calloused. No doubt she worked long hours. But what else did Charlotte know about her? Nothing.

That was a place to start.

“Perhaps we could begin again.” Charlotte extended her hand. Tentatively, Clara took it. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Clara.”

Clara blinked, wide-eyed. “And you, ma’am.”

“Call me Charlotte, please. In case I haven’t made it obvious enough, I’m a bit nervous.” A little laugh escaped. “Perhaps we could spend a little time becoming acquainted before we begin.”

Clara nodded, so Charlotte started by describing the Highlands, told a little about her family, and then briefly recounted her journey to America. “The other thing you should know about me is that I love animals. All kinds. Cows, sheep, dogs, cats. Any four-legged creature.”

“Even stubborn old donkeys?” Clara asked.

“Donkeys might be a stretch,” Charlotte admitted. “Now, what about you?”

Clara, as it turned out, was the oldest of six with five younger brothers. “I envy you a sister,” she said. “I’d trade in all five of my brothers for a sister.” But the way she talked about them, Charlotte knew it wasn’t true. Clara’s father had

died in a mining accident almost two years before, so Clara did laundry at the tavern to bring in extra income for the family.

“Tell me something you enjoy,” Charlotte prodded.
“Something you love.”

Clara’s forehead wrinkled as she thought. “I love telling stories. It’s how I put my brothers to bed every night.”

Charlotte felt the weight of that. Of how much it would mean to a young woman who loved stories to be able to read. Resolve grew in her. Perhaps she hadn’t been trained to teach, and perhaps she wasn’t a natural, but she could work at this. She would give this endeavor her best because that was what Clara deserved.

After thinking for a moment, Charlotte reached for one of the papers on the table and dipped the pen into the ink. In large, neat letters she wrote out *C-L-A-R-A*. “There are twenty-six letters, as I said, but for today, we’ll focus on just four. This is your name.”

Clara’s eyes traced over each of the letters. “There are five letters in my name, but one of them is repeated.”

“That’s right. The *A*. *A* is the first letter of the alphabet. It makes the sound *ah*. A bit like the bleating of the sheep, *bah*, but without the *buh* sound.”

They repeated the sound together. “But there isn’t an *ah* sound in my name,” Clara observed. Nothing escaped her notice. She was certainly going to keep Charlotte on her toes.

“You’re right. *A* can make a few different sounds. *Ah* is merely the most common, so we learn it first.”

Her explanations of *C*, *L*, and *R* went a little more smoothly, but the deeper into the lesson they went, the more Charlotte’s insecurities grew. Being a proficient reader did not make her a qualified teacher. She knew many things, but that didn’t mean she could explain them.

Once they’d gone through the letters of Clara’s name, Charlotte gave her the pen so she could practice writing her name. The pen scratched badly, blotting out ink. “I’m sorry.

I'm making a muck of it," Clara said.

"No, no," Charlotte rushed to assure her, her face burning with shame. She'd taken so much for granted. Having learned to use a pen and inkwell when she was seven, Charlotte had never even considered that it was a skill not everyone was fortunate enough to learn. Which begged the question—how many other privileges had she, in her blessed circumstances, failed to acknowledge?

"Next week I'll bring a slate and some chalk," she promised.

The clock chimed the hour. Clara set down the pen, her fingers dark with ink. "It's three o'clock. I must get back to the tavern."

"Of course," Charlotte said, a deep sense of humility settling over her. "When do we meet again?"

Clara helped stack the papers. "Tuesday next."

Charlotte nodded, doing the math in her head. Today was August 27. Next Tuesday was the first of September. That gave her five days to prepare, and she'd need every minute. She handed Clara the paper with her name on it. "Here, you take it. Practice making the letters of your name this week. You can trace them with your finger or even write the letters in the dirt with a stick."

Clara nodded. "I will. Thank you, Miss Charlotte."

"No, thank *you*," she said and meant it. "For being patient with me."

Clara shot her a quick smile. "Until next week."

When she'd gone, Charlotte slumped back down in the chair, so mentally exhausted, she couldn't manage ladylike posture. She tried not to let self-doubt creep in, but how could she not? Not only had she bumbled her way through her first lesson, but Charlotte's thoughtlessness had made Clara feel ignorant. She wouldn't blame Clara if she never came back.

Still, some wrenching determination had Charlotte already thinking about next week's lesson. Today she'd been unprepared and disorganized. She'd have to come up with a

more methodical way of going through the alphabet. And procuring a slate and some chalk was a necessity.

Hopefully, with time, forethought, and a bit more consciousness, she could become at least a passable teacher. She consoled herself with the thought that if she failed horridly, at least she'd be doing it on a different continent than the one she called home.

Chapter Eleven

ALEC STOOD ON THE FRONT stoop of the one-room cabin, debating whether to knock or return at a more reasonable hour. While on his way home from a night call, he'd noticed he wasn't far from another patient he'd planned to see today. But at six in the morning, it was difficult to know whether he'd be welcome. Fatigue finally won out, and he knocked on the weatherworn door, spurred on by the thought of not having to trek back into the city. "Lucas? Lucas Hudson?"

A moment later came a groggy reply. "C'min."

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dark one-room cabin. The single small window was covered in oilskin, allowing little light into the small space. Alec left the front door open and picked his way across the room.

The place hadn't been overly tidy the first few times he'd visited, but it was infinitely worse now. He kept his face impassive as he was assaulted by the smell of urine, bacon grease, and Lucas's unwashed body. He'd learned long ago to hide the natural revulsion that fought to surface in moments like these. This man didn't need his judgment; he needed medical care.

A small overturned stool lay near the fire, and Alec picked it up and set it near the bed. "How is your pain, Lucas?" He took a seat and set his black bag down beside him.

Lucas swallowed. "Tolerable."

From the tightness in his expression, Alec doubted that. "Have you been able to sleep at all?"

Dark circles ringed his eyes. "Some."

Alec tried to recall whether he'd ever heard Lucas speak more than one or two words in a row. Reaching over, he opened his bag and removed a small set of scissors. "I'd like to have another look at your leg to make sure the splints are holding the bone in place and check for signs of infection. May I?"

Lucas grunted. “I’m in no position to stop you.”

With precision, Alec cut away the eighteen-tailed bandage. He took care not to bump the leg, the setting bones still fragile and easily displaced. Lucas hissed but made not a word of complaint.

Alec exhaled slowly in relief. The bone still appeared straight. “You are to be commended. You’ve taken great care not to move your leg.”

Lucas nodded. “I want it to heal right. I *need* it to heal right.”

Alec stood and bent over the laceration, pulling back the pledget of lint to reveal the plaster the gash had required. He frowned. Unlike at his last visit, today the skin was swollen, inflamed an angry red.

“Has the pain worsened?” he asked sharply.

“Yes,” Lucas replied through gritted teeth.

Alec was irritable—a combination of not having much time for his research and the little sleep he’d gotten the past few nights. Two night calls, one to deliver twins and another to treat a toddler who’d fallen into the hearth, had left him exhausted. But Lucas didn’t deserve his ire.

He placed a hand on Lucas’s forehead. A slight fever. “You should have sent for me sooner,” he said more gently, studying the wound.

Most doctors believed bloodletting to be the best course of action in cases of inflammation. But watching his own father waste away as leeches were continually applied to his inflamed stump had made Alec wary of such methods. Vera, too, believed bloodletting was nonsensical. And while she had no formal medical training, she was an excellent herbalist with an extensive physic garden, who treated all manner of ailments. He trusted her instincts implicitly.

“The skin around the wound is inflamed. Without care, such inflammation can spread. I’ll apply something to help clean and cool the area and have Vera bring a poultice that will draw the inflammation out.”

Lucas gave him a wary look. “I can’t pay you right now, Doctor.”

Alec removed a vial containing rectified spirit of wine and mixed it with some water. “Let’s not worry about that for now.” He poured the mixture over a piece of fine linen and dabbed it against the inflamed wound, packing it lightly. Alec glanced at Lucas’s face, noting his gaunt cheeks. “You’ve lost weight, Lucas,” he said, wrapping the leg in a fresh bandage. The muscles in Lucas’s leg had already begun to atrophy and would only deteriorate further over the next weeks. Good nourishment was crucial.

“I haven’t had much of an appetite.”

Alec didn’t look up, trying to keep his tone casual. “Who’s been looking in on you?”

Lucas’s jaw shifted, as if disinclined to answer. “A neighbor here and there. But no one has time to play nursemaid. I’ve already been too much of a bother.”

Once he’d finished with the bandages, Alec wrote down a few quick notes for himself and jotted out some instructions for Vera. She was a godsend in cases like these.

“Expect Vera later this afternoon,” he told Lucas on his way out.

Lucas nodded, but Alec could tell how much it hurt the man’s pride to have to rely on others to care for him. He was accustomed to providing for himself. Still, until his leg had fully healed, he needed help. Alec stopped by a neighbor’s house and arranged for the wife to clean Lucas’s place and bring in regular meals for the next few weeks. He sent her twelve-year-old son to deliver the note for Vera.

By the time Alec had returned to his chaise, it was a quarter past seven, and the streets of Pittsburgh this September morning were already awake and bustling. He stowed his bag and hitched up Fargo, weary to his core and anxious to return home for a few hours of sleep.

It took careful maneuvering to navigate Pittsburgh’s crowded, narrow lanes. He passed the towering spire of Third

Presbyterian, its long shadow casting him back to his conversation with Martin a month past.

“You cannot be at peace when you’re at odds with God.”

In truth, it was only *since* that conversation that Alec had grown unsettled, as if he couldn’t quite find the carefully orchestrated balance he’d built for himself in the years since Nellie’s death.

He snapped on the reins, attempting to distance himself from the church and such heavy thoughts. What he needed was more time to dedicate to his research, which he hadn’t had of late.

No wonder he was unsettled.

The streets quieted as he reached the outskirts of the city. Gentle hills and ancient trees marked the start of the city’s larger estates, where the wealthy were removed from the noise and filth of Pittsburgh. The Maganns’ majestic home, built on a vast acreage, appeared over the rise, giving way to another nudge of guilt. Alec hadn’t attended Thursday dinner for the past two weeks.

Past their property, the dirt-packed road turned north and paralleled the Allegheny River. Exhaustion pulled at Alec’s eyelids. The gentle sway of the chaise and the steady clip-clop of Fargo’s hooves made staying alert a struggle.

But home wasn’t far. Just a mile or so more. He flicked at the reins again, hurrying Fargo and hoping the faster pace would keep him awake. He turned his gaze to the river.

“Stop! Don’t—” a woman screeched.

Alec jolted, pulling at the reins, only to discover that the left rein had slipped from his grasp. Fargo and the chaise turned abruptly, the right wheel jarring and nearly overturning the vehicle.

A heart-wrenching pig squeal shattered the air.

“No!” A blur of curls approached from the side, and if Alec hadn’t lunged for the lost left rein and brought the chaise to a halt, he might have run over the woman as well. She’d stopped

near the wheel and was down on her knees, reaching for the squealing pig he'd clipped. Three of its legs were flailing wildly, while the other one hung limp, the pale skin of its underbelly running with blood. She looked up at him in accusation. "You hit it!"

The moment Alec realized the teary voice and mass of curls belonged to Lady Rowand, anger quickened his pulse. "And your foolhardiness might have made you the next victim! Have you no sense, woman?"

"I have a perfectly adequate amount of sense, thank you, which is why I would never be driving down a road like this at such a speed!"

"Yet you and your perfectly adequate amount of sense were out walking a pig," he muttered.

"I wasn't walking the pig," she retorted, though her attention was on the squealing creature. "I merely saw the collision coming and tried to stop it." Her white- and green-striped dress was already covered in mud. She eased the pig onto her lap and pressed her skirt against its wound, a crimson stain blooming across the fabric. The pig continued to thrash and squeal.

She glared up at him. "Make yourself useful! Surely you have something in that black bag of yours to help stanch the bleeding."

Alec climbed down from the chaise, looking at her in disbelief. "That poor hog needs to be put out of its misery, not doctored! You cannot honestly believe you can save the thing."

She clutched the pig to her. "Of course I cannot, but *you* could! You must do something." The words were said with finality, as if she expected Alec to obey. A peeress giving orders and expecting absolute submission.

Foolhardy woman. He shook his head, his voice sharp. "I'll not waste my precious time doctoring a pig."

Lady Rowand got to her feet, struggling to lift the thrashing creature. The pig wasn't fully grown, but it still had to weigh

at least fifty or sixty pounds. He was surprised she could manage the weight.

She took a step closer to him, out of breath from her efforts. The pig squealed against her shoulder. “Did you or did you not take an oath promising to alleviate the pain of those who are suffering?”

Fatigue and frustration made him snap. “I made an oath to alleviate the suffering of *people*, not pigs!” This had to be the most ridiculous conversation he’d ever had.

Her gray gaze returned to him, fierce, determined. “Do you think it suffers less because it has four legs rather than two?” Her eyes crackled but then softened, and she brought the pig closer to him. “Please.”

Her plea so surprised him, he didn’t immediately refuse. The pig stopped thrashing for a moment before its squeal intensified and it kicked hard, nearly causing Lady Rowand to drop it. Acting on instinct, Alec reached out and took the pig from her. He jerked his head toward the chaise. “Get in. I’ll examine the creature and see if there is anything to be done. I promise nothing more.”

Lady Rowand nodded, and if she was surprised by his sudden change of mind, she didn’t show it. She hastily stepped up and seated herself. Alec climbed up behind her as the pig continued to fight and thrash in his arms. It was all he could do to hold on to the panicked animal. How Lady Rowand had managed for as long as she had was beyond him.

Alec’s pant leg was soon wet with blood. With the depth of the gash and the way the pig kept flailing, it was a real possibility the animal would bleed out before he could do anything for it. “I’ve nothing large enough for a tourniquet in my bag,” he informed Lady Rowand.

Without hesitating, she reached for the hem of her dress. With a strength that belied her willowy figure, she managed to rip a six-inch strip off the bottom of her petticoats. “Tell me where to tie it.”

He spouted off instructions, admiring her quick thinking and

ability to stay calm even while the pig continued to struggle. Within a minute, she'd tied an adequate knot that would stanch the worst of the blood flow.

“That’s all we can do for now. Can you drive?” he asked brusquely.

He couldn't hear her reply over the continuing squeal of the pig, but she picked up the reins with proficiency, urging Fargo forward with a quick snap. After giving Lady Rowand harried directions, Alec tried to adjust his hold on the pig as the rattled animal nearly unseated him.

It was a relief when Alec's house came into view. He was exhausted, covered in blood and sweat from wrestling the pig, and his stomach was growling. If not for the promise he'd made Lady Rowand, he'd take the pig out back and shoot it.

A rasher of bacon would make for an excellent breakfast.

Instead, he climbed down and headed toward the front door. “Bring my bag,” he instructed as he pushed against the door with his back, the pig in his arms. He glanced around the front room, trying to think where he might examine the pig's wounds. He'd need space. And light.

The table was far too small, and it hardly made sense to use the floor, where he'd have to work on his hands and knees.

As if she could read his mind, Lady Rowand came up behind him. “A bed, perhaps?”

The suggestion made him want to throttle her, as there was only one bed in the house—his. But he grunted and headed toward the bedroom, talking as he walked. “I'll need some towels.” He jerked his head toward the chest at the foot of the bed.

Lady Rowand complied, spreading the towels over the quilt before he could even ask. He set the pig down, keeping its back to him, away from the danger of its still-flailing hooves. It took all his energy to hold it down as the pig's head arched back, its eyes wild with fright.

“Now some ether. In the cabinet against the west wall in the main room.”

Lady Rowand's eyes went wide. "You plan to get the pig *drunk?*"

"I cannot do a thing for this blasted pig while I'm using all my strength holding it down. I see no other alternative, do you?"

Without another word, she turned on her heel and disappeared in search of the ether.

Chapter Twelve

CHARLOTTE OPENED THE CABINET DOORS, eyes skimming the rows of bottles as she searched for ether. The bottles were alphabetically arranged in soldier-straight rows, each clearly labeled in what must be Dr. Galloway's masculine hand. She snatched the correct bottle and was back in the bedroom in a few quick steps.

The doctor was half lying across the bed, shoulders straining as he held the pig in place. The poor thing was frightened and in pain, and every instinct in Charlotte wanted her to shout at the doctor to hurry and fix the suffering creature.

The doctor craned his neck. "Get a linen cloth from my bag. Dab the ether onto the linen and then hold it over the pig's nose. And whatever you do, don't *you* breathe it in."

Charlotte wasted no time. The doctor was doing what she'd asked, after all. Despite averting her head, the sweet and mildly pungent scent of the ether filled her nostrils. She held her breath while she put the cloth over the pig's nose, heedful of the doctor's warning. Within half a minute the pig began to mellow, its squeals fading away, the flailing of its legs slowing and then stopping.

Dr. Galloway heaved a sigh, easing his arm out from beneath the pig and getting to his feet. He wiped a hand across his brow and released a breath, as if he'd been struggling for hours, not minutes. He was, for once, entirely ruffled, from his mussed hair and wrinkled clothing to his scuffed boots. Weariness was evident in the lines of his forehead.

Charlotte felt a prick of guilt. Had he been out all night?

His eyes cut to her, swimming with exasperation. "My bag?"

She'd put it on the chest that sat at the end of the bed. The same chest that held not only the towels she'd fetched earlier, but a woman's underthings, carefully stowed away, the white material yellowed by time. It was impossible not to think of his wife, the woman he grieved, as she stood here in the

bedroom they'd once shared.

All at once she felt acutely out of place.

With a grunt of irritation, he snatched the bag off the chest himself, unbuckling the clasps that held it closed. "Are you planning to help, Lady Rowand, or stand in the shadows and criticize me while I work?"

He was not-so-subtly referring to when he'd examined Harriet, of course. Something—the thought of his wife or perhaps the lingering smell of the ether—must have dulled Charlotte's ire, but the scorn in his voice roused it instantly. "Would you prefer I criticize you in full daylight?"

His hazel eyes flashed with anger. "That pig you want so badly to save is still bleeding all over my bed. So you may choose: either make yourself useful and follow my instructions without further comment or remove yourself from this room. I have no qualms telling you which of the two I'd prefer."

Charlotte glanced toward the bed, where the pig lay so unnaturally still that it looked as if it were already dead. She swallowed the insult resting on her tongue. "Very well," she bit out. "How may I be of assistance?"

"You may start by washing your hands in that basin. Use the lye soap."

Still fuming, she washed her hands thoroughly, ignoring the sting of the abrasive soap on her skin. By the time she'd finished, Dr. Galloway had removed his coat, waistcoat, and cravat. His braces—*suspenders*, Liam had told her they were called here—only served to emphasize the breadth of him. As if that wasn't unsettling enough, he began rolling up his shirtsleeves, revealing muscled and lightly tanned forearms. She'd never seen a man so . . . undone.

Charlotte swallowed hard, hoping he wouldn't notice the flush climbing her cheeks.

"I'll need some pasteboard for a splint," he said without looking up. "The trunk in the second bedroom will also have some extra linen bandages." He crossed the room and washed his own hands, drying them on the same towel she'd used.

Charlotte busied herself doing what he'd asked. She returned to find him pulling instruments from his bag and arranging them on a wooden tray he'd placed at the foot of the bed.

"I'll need to work from this side while you stand opposite. Don't touch anything other than what I ask for. I've no way of knowing how long the ether will hold the pig unconscious, so we must hurry."

She nodded, moving to the other side of the bed, anxiously twisting her hands together as she awaited further instruction.

He started by removing the hasty tourniquet she'd tied. The gash was deep, starting in front of the leg and extending up the belly. The pig began to bleed again, though not as freely as before. "Hand me one of the fresh bandages."

She held the bandage out for him to take, watching as he applied it to the deepest part of the wound.

"I need you to hold this here with firm pressure." He removed his hand and she put hers in its place. "Hard. Like this." She hadn't realized how cold her hands were until his warm, calloused hand covered hers.

"I . . . I've got it, I think," she managed to say.

With a nod, he released her. He began feeling the pig's leg, testing the angle of the break, while her head still swam with the memory of his hand over hers.

In the silent tension of the room, she wiped at her brow with the back of her free hand. The day's heat was already building, and the wayward curls that had escaped this morning's hasty bun were plastered against her neck. How she wished for a breeze.

The doctor seemed impervious to the heat as he adjusted the pig, the muscles in his forearms tensing as he rotated its hind leg. Finally, he nodded as if satisfied. All sorts of questions circulated in Charlotte's mind as she watched him work.

He glanced at her across the bed. "You can ask, if you'd like."

She was surprised he was aware enough to notice her curiosity. “Why did you position the leg at such an awkward angle?”

“Before I set the broken leg, the muscles surrounding the bone must be perfectly relaxed. Otherwise, I won’t be able to counter-extend it the way I need to.”

Charlotte winced. “Thank goodness he is unconscious.”

His hands stilled. “He?”

“It’s obvious our pig is male. You’re a doctor. You cannot tell me you didn’t notice.”

Dr. Galloway’s neck went red. “I noticed. I just didn’t realize you’d—”

“Understand the basics of anatomy? I assure you I do.” Now his ears were turning pink. Most young ladies probably wouldn’t broach such topics with a man. “I’ve been around animals all my life, Doctor.”

He made a noncommittal noise.

Perhaps she’d best change the subject. “And now . . . you just set the broken bone?”

He had both hands on the leg now. “Yes. I’ll be honest—I’ve not studied pig anatomy, specifically.” He glanced up at her. “But I assume the principles are the same.”

She winced again at the slight crack as he moved the bone into alignment.

“Normally, I’d apply a soap plaster to the gash, but I’ve little faith that when this pig wakes, it will lie still long enough for the wound to mend.” He shook his head. “I never thought I’d see the day I’d do stitches on a pig.”

As he assembled the needle and fibrous thread, Charlotte watched with fascination.

“So tell me,” he said, with perhaps the least amount of exasperation she’d ever heard in his voice, “do you often find doctors operating on pigs in Scotland? Or is it mostly sheep?”

He was teasing her! She’d not have thought him capable.

“Laugh all you’d like. I wasn’t going to let this poor pig die because we did nothing.”

He tied a knot in the end of the suture and then, needle in hand, bent over the pig, his head inches from her own. “I can promise you this.” He glanced up, meeting her gaze. “If I’m out riding tomorrow and see a cow with a broken leg, I’ll not stop.”

Even angled over the bed and putting pressure on the underside of a bleeding pig, Charlotte managed to raise her chin a notch. “If our cows were as ugly as yours, I’m sure I wouldn’t either.”

His mouth twitched. Why that felt like such a victory, Charlotte didn’t care to examine. Instead, she focused on the ache that was growing in her hand as she continued to apply pressure, the slow rise and fall of the pig’s belly, and its long eyelashes that shuttered as it took a deep breath.

The doctor continued to draw the needle through each side of the wound, pulling on the thread to bring the pig’s skin together. “Have you found *anything* in America that meets with your satisfaction, Lady Rowand?” There was genuine curiosity in his inquiry.

With that one question, the mood of the room shifted. Silence sat between them, with the possibility, if she was careful, of two people sharing a conversation instead of continuing an argument.

“I hardly know yet. I’ve only been here a month, though I am intrigued by the idea of democracy.”

Dr. Galloway made a noise of approval. “A far superior way of determining a leader, I think, than relying on an out-of-touch monarch and the birth order of his offspring.”

“Is it?” Charlotte raised a brow. “You place a great deal of trust in the common man.”

“And you Brits far too little.” He pulled the string taut and looked up to meet her gaze.

“Perhaps,” she said, trying not to smile, “if your democracy extended to the common *woman*, I would be more inclined to

concur.”

With a sigh, he did two more stitches, small and even. “I’ve still yet to hear you mention anything here that meets with your satisfaction.”

“There is plenty here that meets with my satisfaction, Doctor. The Maganns, for one. I’ve known few people I like as much.”

Her answer surprised him; she could tell. “At last, something we can agree on,” he said quietly.

“You’ve known them all your life?” she asked, though she knew the answer.

He nodded, still stitching. “I owe them everything.”

She tilted her head in surprise. “Mr. Magann told me you’ve not accepted any help. That you did everything on your own, even after your father’s death.”

A faint ridge marked the spot between Dr. Galloway’s eyes. He made a noncommittal sound as he continued working. “I suppose Martin didn’t mention that he knew one of the professors in the medical department or that he wrote me a letter of recommendation that ensured my admission.”

She pursed her lips. “He didn’t.”

“That tells you everything you need to know about Martin.” He brushed the hair out of his eyes with his arm. “Even as I get closer to where you are holding, don’t let up on the pressure.” He worked silently, his hands deft but gentle.

She noticed every detail as he worked. The light, almost reddish, hair that lined his arms. The corded muscle in his forearms. She would have guessed that his hands, which had once pounded hot iron into shape, would be clumsy and awkward when doing such intricate work, yet he handled the needle with precision.

There was an intimacy in sharing such a small space, both of them leaning over the patient, heads together, breaths intermingling. She could even smell a hint of Dr. Galloway’s cologne, though it was so faint she couldn’t put a finger on its

scent.

Her attention drifting, she startled when the doctor's fingers closed around her wrist, lifting her hand from where she'd been holding the bandage. "You can let go now." He glanced at her bloodstained fingers. "Wash your hands. I've only ten or twelve more stitches to go."

He released her wrist, and she stepped back, nearly bumping the wall. She washed her hands in the basin as instructed, but her head felt muddled, her reactions sluggish. Perhaps it was because she hadn't eaten yet this morning.

Her mind jolted. What would the Maganns make of her absence? An early riser by nature, she'd spent most mornings out exploring Glen Haven's acreage, but she'd always been back in time to join everyone for the breakfast hour at eight. At least Tavish and Harriet knew it wasn't unusual for her to become distracted.

But today's incident had been more than a mere distraction. She glanced down at herself, taking note of the torn section of her petticoat and the dust and darkened blood that stained her skirt, dreading being seen in such a state.

"Bring me a damp cloth," the doctor commanded, bringing her back to the moment.

She wet a cloth and wrung it out, watching as he washed away the dried blood on the pig's belly. "Now, hand me the pasteboard."

Charlotte dried her hands and retrieved the pasteboard from the tray, setting it in the doctor's waiting hands. "You excel at giving orders, Dr. Galloway. Were you a general before you entered the medical field?"

He held the pasteboard against the pig's leg to measure it before breaking off the excess length. "If I were, I find myself in greatly reduced circumstances. Now I battle pigs, and my inferiors"—he gave her a meaningful look—"are quite insubordinate."

She scoffed. "I'd wager this pig was better behaved than at least half of your patients."

“Hold this right here,” he instructed, his gaze focused.

She held the pasteboard along the length of the pig’s leg while he wrapped it with a bandage, holding the splint in place. “Finished,” he said at last, straightening his back. “I hope you are satisfied, Lady Rowand.”

“I am.” But more than satisfied, she was surprised. Surprised he’d agreed to help her at all.

He only nodded, then washed his hands and began cleaning up, placing the dirty linen strips into a basin and painstakingly cleaning each of the tools he’d used. If the doctor was anything, he was meticulous.

Charlotte admired the even line of stitches that traced the pig’s underside as she removed the bloodied towels from beneath the pig and replaced them with fresh ones. “Will he live, do you think?”

The doctor put several of the tools back into his bag. “He lost so much blood, I wouldn’t dare make such a prediction. But you can rest assured no pig has ever received better care.”

Whether the derision in his tone was directed toward her or himself, it was difficult to tell. She stood beside the bed feeling useless, her hands empty and idle, as the doctor continued to clean up. They’d had a brief reprieve as they’d worked together this morning, but bit by bit, the tension that had accompanied their every meeting returned. She couldn’t leave without addressing it.

“Thank you, Dr. Galloway.” She bit her lip, gathering her courage. “I didn’t expect you to agree to help. I’m grateful you did, despite your obvious . . . aversion to me.”

He stilled, then turned toward her, drying one of his tools with the towel. “I have no aversion toward you.” His features were like stone.

“That isn’t true. Whether you’ve said so directly or not, you disliked me from the moment we met.” She met his gaze, willing him to speak the truth. “I was never quite sure what I’d done to offend you.”

His face closed out any of the intimacy they’d shared a few

moments before. “You’ve done nothing to offend me, Lady Rowand. As for what you overheard, I have long meant to apologize for the harsh words I spoke that evening.” He looked down, his rumpled hair curling at his collar. “They were unkind and uncalled for.”

Charlotte fought to keep her face from crumpling. Why, when she was finally getting the apology she wanted, did she feel so hurt? Because instead of answering her question, he’d offered her platitudes. A meaningless apology that did nothing to explain this *feeling* that hovered between them.

She needed to leave before she burst into tears or, worse, lost her temper. It was her own fault for expecting too much. She regarded the doctor, her face slipping into a mask that guarded her emotions. “Please send the bill for the care of the pig. I cannot expect you to do such distasteful work gratis.” She thrust her trembling hands into the folds of her skirt and started toward door. “I’ll see myself out and leave you to whatever it is you do with your precious time when you’re not doctoring a pig.”

Chapter Thirteen

THE LAST QUARTER MILE LEADING to Glen Haven seemed to take an eternity. The sun seared into Charlotte's back, the now-familiar moisture clinging to the air and making it hard to draw a full breath. She knew she looked a sight with blood smeared across her skirt, a ripped petticoat, and any semblance of order to her hair long gone. And now her eyes were puffy from crying. With any luck she could slip upstairs before running into anyone.

She hesitated at the front door, never quite sure whether she should knock because she was a guest or enter freely since Glen Haven was her home for the next four months. She was spared the decision when a maid stepped out, her arms full of supplies for washing the front windows. The girl's gaze swept down Charlotte's figure, her mouth dropping open as she took in the blood staining Charlotte's dress. To her credit, she recovered quickly. "Shall I fetch someone for you, Lady Rowand?"

The simple question nearly undid Charlotte, homesickness hitting her like a surging wave. She held a hand to her stomach, her breath stolen by longing.

She wanted her mother.

Wanted her reassuring words and soft wisdom, wanted to be enveloped in her scent of rose water and fresh heather. Charlotte bit down hard on her lip to stop a fresh wave of tears and shook her head. "No, thank you."

The maid nodded, holding the door open while Charlotte slipped inside. The bright entryway was empty. Charlotte stopped near the door, her back against the wall, and took a moment to gather herself. Her lungs grew tight from trying to hold in her emotions. If she didn't think of those last moments with the doctor and the hurt she'd felt when he'd returned to his callous and distant self, she could manage.

"I have no aversion toward you."

The echo of his voice, with that hint of a Scottish lilt . . .

Drat. Tears began flowing once more, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to stop herself from sobbing outright.

“Charlotte? Charlotte! Are ye hurt?” The sharpness in Tavish’s voice undid her further. She swiped at her tears as he approached, trying desperately to erase the evidence of things she hadn’t any right to feel.

“What’s happened?” Liam was right on his heels.

Tavish gripped her shoulders. “Tell me where ye’re hurt.”

“I-I’m uninjured,” she managed to get out.

But then Tavish’s arms came around her, pulling her into an embrace that was the closest thing she had to home. She often teased him about his lean figure, but right now his wiry frame was warm and wonderful, and she’d missed him these past two weeks.

He and Liam were working long hours, always off at the ironworks or the coal mines, meeting with bankers, running figures. When she did see him, it was usually in passing—at a dinner or a ball hosted by one of the Maganns’ friends or a night out at the recently completed Pittsburgh Theater.

At length, he pulled back. “Charlotte, where *were* ye this morning?” He glanced down at her dress, his expression full of doubt that she was truly unharmed. “Liam and I were ready tae send the hounds after ye.”

She sniffed. Strange how a good cry made one’s emotions more manageable. “It’s a rather long story . . . but I . . . I ended up helping Dr. Galloway with something.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Liam’s jaw tighten. “I’m not hurt, truly. More than anything, I’m exhausted. And hungry.”

Tavish didn’t leave her side. “Liam, I’ll have tae excuse myself this morning. If ye go ahead tae the bank, I’ll meet ye there when I can.”

Any hint of discord melted from Liam’s face. “Of course. This morning is merely the initial paperwork. And our meeting with Mr. Hutton isn’t until two o’clock.”

Tavish nodded. “I’ll not miss that.”

“I’ll have someone make up a breakfast tray for Charlotte.”
Liam gave her a brief, reassuring smile.

“Thank you, Liam. I’m sorry for monopolizing Tavish this morning.”

“Nonsense. Take all the time you need with him.”

He bowed and then disappeared down the corridor. Tavish led her to the breakfast parlor, a sun-filled room of pale blue and cream on the east side of the house. The side table had been cleared, all signs of the breakfast platters long gone. He pulled out a chair for her and then seated himself in the one beside it. “What happened, Charlotte?”

Charlotte hardly knew where to begin. She traced the edge of the table, feeling the weight of Tavish’s gaze upon her. “Are you ever homesick, Tavish?”

As she waited for his answer, Charlotte considered her time away from home. She missed her family—how could she not? But Pittsburgh was new and exciting, and knowing her time here was temporary made it bearable. And yet . . . somehow a morning spent with Dr. Galloway had unlocked the strength of her longing for home, of that feeling that she’d not be completely whole again until she was back on Scottish soil.

Tavish cleared his throat. “Of course I do. And with Bram and Graeme gone, I worry about my mother. But this past month has been invigorating, and Liam has kept me quite busy . . .” His glasses had slipped down his nose a little, giving him the endearing look of an old man.

“You’re under no obligation to feel homesick, Tavish.”

“I hadn’t sensed it in ye, tae be honest. I’ve been so caught up in—”

She touched a hand to his sleeve. “You’ve been caught up in doing exactly what you should be doing. And I’ve been very well until now; I really have.”

He laid a firm hand on the table. “What happened with the doctor, Charlotte?” he asked, cutting straight to the heart of the matter.

She was already regretting her outburst in the foyer. “You’ll laugh at me when I tell you. Dr. Galloway hit a pig with his chaise.” She ducked her head, remembering the bold words she’d used. “And I . . . *encouraged* him to stitch up the pig and reset its broken leg.”

“Encouraged?” A wry smile turned up the corners of his mouth. “I bet ye did.”

Charlotte laughed. It felt good to laugh instead of cry.

He looked at her carefully. “And did Dr. Galloway carry out yer orders?”

“He did.” She could still hardly believe it. It softened her toward him a little, remembering how gentle he’d been with the pig, despite his many objections.

“That explains the state of yer dress. But not the state of yer . . . emotions.” His brow furrowed, his mouth pulling into a frown. “Charlotte, did the doctor say something unkind tae ye?”

“Yes.” She sighed. “I mean, no. The very opposite. He apologized, actually. But he . . .” Why had she ever thought she could explain this when she couldn’t make sense of it herself?

“He apologized,” Tavish repeated slowly. “And that had you crying because . . . ?” His logic made her sound downright absurd.

But the way Dr. Galloway had closed himself off *had* been hurtful. She’d confronted him with honesty and vulnerability, and he’d withdrawn like a clam, using the farce of an apology as his shell.

It was worth at least trying to explain to Tavish—perhaps he could shed some light on the confounded man. Charlotte took a deep breath before she started in. “When we first met, I thought Dr. Galloway ill-mannered, but I didn’t believe his rudeness was personal. But now, having observed him . . . He keeps his distance from others, yes. But he can be polite and engaging when the circumstance requires it.”

Tavish nodded. “That has been my experience.”

Her thoughts unspooled slowly as she spoke them out loud. “Yet every time I walk into the room, it’s as if he puts on boxing gloves. As if I am to be viewed as an opponent of sorts.”

Tavish steepled his fingers, his full attention on her. “And ye willingly join him in the ring.”

“Well, I . . .” Charlotte wrinkled her nose, displeased with Tavish’s assessment of her. “It’s difficult *not* to defend myself when he’s determined to throw punches!”

“I am not defending his behavior, Charlotte. And I do not claim tae be an expert on pugilism. But answer me this: when is a man most likely tae throw a punch?”

She shook her head, puzzled. “I haven’t the faintest idea.”

He leaned forward, his voice soft. “When he feels threatened.”

Charlotte froze. Tavish was right. For some reason she couldn’t fathom, Dr. Galloway felt threatened by her.

Tavish frowned. “I know Dr. Galloway even less than ye, so I won’t hazard a guess as tae what it is about ye that makes the man so defensive.” He raised his head, his gaze piercing. “Do ye feel something for him, Charlotte?”

That she *hadn’t* expected. She wanted to deny the possibility at once, but instead she found her thoughts drawn back to the doctor’s house, where she’d watched as he held the flailing pig to the bed.

Because she’d asked him to.

“I don’t know.” Her voice was so quiet, it was possible Tavish hadn’t heard her response.

The truth was she *couldn’t* feel anything for the doctor. She couldn’t. She was a future duchess with permanent ties to a title and its accompanying properties back in Scotland. He was a doctor with deep roots here in Pittsburgh. What had Mr. Magann said? That Dr. Galloway had turned down a teaching position in Philadelphia because he’d wanted to come back here? What was the point of even considering whether she felt

anything for him or not?

Tavish's eyes held no judgment. He offered no insight into his own opinion on the matter. He was someone who observed carefully, thought deeply, and kept his views close. Which only made her want his advice more. "What should I do, Tavish?"

"I cannae tell ye." He swallowed. "I like the doctor. I think he's a good man. But from the little I know, he's been dealt a harder hand than most. He's in pain. And sometimes people who are in pain lash out." He looked down at his hands, then raised his head again and met her gaze. "I would not wish tae see ye hurt."

Her heart twisted. *That* was why Dr. Galloway's dismissal this morning had wounded her so deeply. She'd seen glimpses of his pain and brokenness, and it went against her very nature not to somehow make it right. Not to ease pain where she saw it. "I'm not afraid of being hurt."

"I ken." Tavish offered her a small smile, one that said he saw her and knew her, both her flaws and her strengths. "I suppose I'd offer ye just one piece of advice."

Now it was she who was sitting forward.

"No matter what ye decide about Dr. Galloway, it doesn't change the fact that ye have a big heart. One that *could* ease some of his suffering, though it will not be easy, especially if he is determined tae push ye away. And while ye may not understand boxing, ye do understand animals." He pushed his glasses up his nose. "I believe when ye next approach him, ye should do so as ye would a wounded animal."

The rightness of Tavish's counsel hit her square in the chest. As she considered his simple wisdom, the tension of her tightly wound emotions eased, and the pain in her heart receded. She didn't have to decide how she felt about the doctor right now, or how he felt about her.

All she needed to do, all she *could* do, was approach him with gentle restraint. "You are right. Of course you are. Thank you, Tavish." She reached forward and put her arms around

him. "I'm lucky to have a cousin with so much wisdom."

"And I'm lucky tae have a cousin with so much heart." He returned her embrace despite the awkwardness of their positions.

It was the growling of Charlotte's stomach that drew them apart.

"Did ye bring home some wild animal I'm not aware of?" he teased, straightening his coat.

She smirked. "You know how I can be if I haven't eaten."

"Yer tray should have been here by now." He got to his feet. "I'll go see what's keeping it. But first, a homesick lass like yerself might want what was delivered in the post this morning." He patted his pocket, a wide smile gentling the angles of his face.

"From home?" She held out her hand, her fingers fluttering impatiently.

He withdrew a letter from his pocket, placing it in her hands. "We've waited a long while tae hear from home, but its coming today somehow seems providential."

"It really does." Excitement nearly had her crumpling the precious paper. "Did you receive one as well?"

"Aye, one from my mother, and she forwarded a letter from the twins as well."

"It feels like ages since I've heard from them. I know you must go, and we've the theater tonight, but promise that tomorrow you'll share every detail."

"I promise. Are ye sure ye'll be all right?"

"I will. I'm almost as anxious for a bath as I am for my breakfast." She urged him toward the door. "Now, off with you. You have much to do, an important meeting to attend."

"On my way out, I'll see that yer breakfast tray is sent up tae yer room."

"You are better to me than I deserve." With a final brief hug, they parted ways.

Charlotte practically raced up the stairs. She tore open the seal of the letter, tearing the paper a bit in the process, but she couldn't bring herself to care. A page each from Father, Mother, and Iseabel. It felt like Christmastide.

She began with Iseabel's, anxious to see how her sister fared without her. The missive was full of anecdotes about the border collie pups and their antics and her sadness to part with them as they'd been given away one by one. Mother begged for details of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, sent greetings from Aunt Olivia and Grandmother, and provided details about Iseabel's progress with the harp. Father shared particulars about the lambing season and the newest foals and had penned out several verses of scripture. It felt strange to think of life at home continuing without her. She'd known things would change, but to imagine it, to read about it happening, still took her by surprise.

Harriet appeared in her room a few minutes later, her face as dour as Charlotte had ever seen it. "With as late as you are, that blood on your dress had better be your own."

Charlotte was spared having to answer by a knock at the door. A maid bearing a large tray entered. "I'm sorry it took so long, Lady Rowand. We had a bit of a mix-up down in the kitchens."

She wouldn't complain, considering the feast that had been brought. "If you'll just set it on the table near the bed."

The maid obliged. "Is there anything else?"

"A bath," Harriet replied. "As quickly as it can be managed."

The maid nodded and curtsied. "I'll see it done."

Charlotte's stomach growled again, and she reached for a piece of sausage. Harriet moved the tray out of reach. "You are filthy! Not a single bite until you've bathed. Did I truly raise such a barbarian?" She continued grumbling about the state of Charlotte's hair, her ruined dress, and her lack of propriety. "You shouldn't be gadding about by yourself in such an unfamiliar place."

Despite the desperate state of her stomach, Charlotte couldn't bring herself to mind Harriet's overbearing ways. After some time with Tavish, the precious letters she'd received, and an earful of Harriet's grumbling, she felt as near to home as she had in months.

Harriet undid the buttons of Charlotte's dress as an army of maids brought buckets to fill the copper hip tub a footman had delivered. When she climbed into the steaming water, her limbs relaxing in its warmth, Charlotte's mind drifted to the advice Tavish had given her.

When Charlotte was seven, her cat, Cleo, had swiped at a willow warbler and injured the bird's delicate wing. Watching as the poor thing tried to fly, never getting more than a foot or two off the ground, had wreaked havoc on Charlotte's girlish heart. But the warbler had been as wary of her as it had been of Cleo. Every time she'd managed to get close, the bird had evaded her. She'd tried to chase it, and when that hadn't worked, to sneak up and pounce on it. All she'd wanted to do was help.

At seven years old, patience had not been her forte.

Father had found her an hour later, her eyes red from crying. "Ye can offer help, but ye cannot force it. Be patient, Charlotte lass."

She'd raised her tearstained face. "I've tried, Papa. I have. But the bird doesn't want my help! And he'll die out here without two good wings!"

"Approach him slowly. Don't frighten him. Take this." He'd dropped a little beetle into her hands. "Let him come tae ye. If he's going tae have a chance at being healed, it must be his choice."

Father had been right. With his coaching, Charlotte had approached the warbler slowly, minutes passing between each step. Her nerves had been so brittle they'd threatened to snap. But finally, *finally* the bird had wearied of her pursuit. She'd closed the last few inches and reached for it, holding out the beetle before gently scooping the bird into her hands.

The memory was disheartening.

Approaching Alec Galloway would take a great deal more patience. It wasn't merely a broken wing he suffered from, but a broken heart.

She slipped beneath the water, immersing herself completely. And she wished, not for the first time since she'd left home, that her father were here to hold her close, to set her worries aside, to assure her that things would all come right in the end.

Chapter Fourteen

ALEC WOKE TO A SOFT grunting noise. Something wet pressed against his cheek. He threw out an arm and touched smooth, warm skin.

Who was in his bed?

Another grunt.

His eyes flew open. The pig!

He jerked back, fully awake now, and raised up on one elbow.

The pig made no move to get up, only looked at him with wide, doleful eyes, blinking its long lashes. It was probably thirsty. Rays of afternoon sun burst across the bed. It must be nearly four o'clock in the afternoon, which meant Alec had slept nearly seven hours. He remembered cleaning up from the surgery, sitting on the edge of the bed, and pulling off his boots. He didn't remember falling asleep.

And sharing his bed with a pig, apparently.

He sat up and lowered his feet to the ground. His throat felt like sandpaper. A drink. He and the pig both needed a drink. Alec put on his boots and went out to the well, his brain still addled from sleep as he drew a bucket of water. He took a long drink from the dipper, the cool liquid easing the rawness of his throat.

He was covered in the grime of several days of nonstop work, leaving him feeling gritty and in need of a bath. But first, the pig. As he carried the bucket of water back to the house, his thoughts drifted through the morning's events. How had Lady Rowand managed to convince him to operate on a *pig*? He was a doctor, a man who prided himself on logic and rationality.

And there was *nothing* rational about what he'd done.

He valued the known. He valued control. And yet in every interaction with Lady Rowand, she'd wrested both from his grasp. Panic began trickling through his chest. How long had

Martin said she was planning to stay? Whatever the answer, it was too long. Alec truly feared the havoc she'd wreak in his life before returning to Scotland.

His hand shook as he poured water into a small saucer for the pig to drink from. The animal lay on its side exactly where he'd left it. But how long before it tried to get up and pulled out its stitches? Why had he ever agreed to such a preposterous plan?

The pig turned its head as he approached. "Easy now. Stay still, boy." He brought the saucer to the pig's mouth, propping up its head while the pig drank noisily. The water was gone in seconds. Alec refilled the saucer half a dozen times before the pig's thirst was sated.

Setting the saucer on the bedside table, he touched the pig's belly, examining the stitches. Neat and straight. The splint was still in place, at least for now. Given its blood loss, the pig would likely not be strong enough to rise for a day or two.

The pig nuzzled his hand, its breath warm against his skin. Alec pulled away. Infernal pig. "I'll not be sharing my bed with you tonight," he warned.

Now he was *talking* to a pig.

He crossed the room and examined himself in the mirror that hung on the far wall above the dressing table. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so long. For once, his eyes didn't look tired. His beard most certainly needed a trim, though that could wait another day or two. A good washing couldn't.

He quickly unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged out of the sleeves, placing the garment in the pile of shirts that needed laundering. He doused himself in water from the basin and grabbed a bar of soap, working up a lather. After rinsing away the soap he splashed water on his face, his skin tingling from the cold.

A freshly laundered shirt waited in his bureau. He'd just slipped the starched linen over his head when a knock sounded. His thoughts went immediately to his black bag,

determining which supplies were running low and what might need replenishing before he made house calls.

At the door, he was surprised to find a boy of ten or twelve. His hair was coal black, his skin a warm brown. He had eyes that were too large for the angular planes of his face. "As promised, Dr. Galloway." He held up a string of freshly caught fish.

Alec's mind cut back to a few weeks prior, in a small shanty with a woman and her half a dozen children, where he'd treated a crying toddler with a terrible case of croup. As he'd left, this boy had followed him, confessing that his mother didn't have the means to pay for medicine. "But I'll catch you a dozen fish, Doctor. That's a promise."

Alec swallowed and took the proffered string of fish the boy's family probably needed badly. "That's a fine catch. And a promise kept."

Though Alec had not been nearly so scrawny, he saw much of himself in the boy. Eyes that were anxious to please, a determination to provide for his family no matter the cost. "What's your name, young man?"

The boy met his gaze. "Matthew." He shifted, drawing Alec's attention to his muddied feet. He wondered how much responsibility the boy shouldered at home. How many more hours he'd have to spend fishing in order to feed his own siblings.

Alec held up the string of fish, admiring it. "I'll tell you what. I'm a busy man. I've work waiting for me, and I haven't the time to skin and cook these fish right now. If you'll do it for me, I'll take four in payment, and you can take the rest home to your family."

The boy shifted uncomfortably. "Four fish ain't nearly enough for what you did for my sister, sir."

Something told Alec that Matthew would not accept charity. "You're right." Under the boy's expectant gaze, he considered. "But in this heat, these fish won't last long. Six of these fish, skinned and cooked, is more than fair. Do we have a deal?"

Matthew stuck out a grimy hand. "Deal."

Alec shook it, then handed the line of fish back to the boy. "Think you can have them ready by six o'clock?"

He grinned. "I'm a hand at skinnin' fish. I'll be done well afore that."

"Good," Alec replied. "Because I'm already hungry."

* * *

It had been an hour since Alec had sat down at his desk, and he'd barely managed fifteen minutes worth of work. Instead, his mind seemed determined to revisit every moment of this morning's incident, from the fear he'd felt when he thought he might have injured Lady Rowand to his surprise at discovering she possessed such steadiness in the face of crisis.

Not that a wounded pig could be labeled a crisis.

He scooted back from the desk and found himself walking back to his bedroom to check on the pig. The creature was sleeping, no doubt exhausted from the trauma it had endured. Alec wondered who the pig belonged to . . . and how on earth he'd go about finding out.

A vision of Lady Rowand murmuring soft words to the pig sparked to life, her soft, curling hair falling over one shoulder. What kind of woman rushed to the aid of an injured animal with no thought for her own safety and then assisted with the very surgery she'd ordered be performed?

Alec had first believed her flighty and demanding, but while she didn't hesitate to make demands, it was difficult to fault her for it when they were made on behalf of another creature.

Especially when the woman was so *convincing*.

"Do you think it suffers less because it has four legs rather than two?"

Today nearly every opinion he'd formed of her had been turned on its head. So why, when she'd approached Alec with raw honesty, all but asking why he so disliked her, hadn't he been truthful?

Because the words were impossible to say. Because he couldn't tell her that he held a deep-seated resentment against anyone with an English accent. That he dared not examine the attraction that seemed to pulse between them, nor the sparks that flew whenever one of them opened their mouths. Or that his regrets with Nellie made it impossible to think of Lady Rowand as anything other than an obstacle to the vows he'd made when his wife had died.

He was a fire that had been banked three years ago. In the terrible months following Nellie's death, he'd come to exist in a state of dispassionate awareness, as if he and the rest of the world resided on opposite sides of a glass window.

But Lady Rowand, within a short frame of time, had managed to stoke up flames he'd thought were long past reviving. She stirred him. She forced him to feel things he'd managed to avoid for years.

Alec hated it. He put his head in his hands, gripping the roots of his hair until his scalp began to throb.

"I was never quite sure what I'd done to offend you."

Deliverance from his tortured thoughts came only when Matthew knocked on his door, the scent of roasted fish clinging to him. A hot meal in the company of a boy whose roots were as humble as his own was just what Alec needed. Then he'd return to the solace of his research—the companion that demanded nothing, made him feel nothing, and came with no strings attached.

Chapter Fifteen

BEFORE THE SUN BROKE OVER the horizon, Charlotte was out of bed and on her knees, where she stayed for a long while. Patience and long-suffering were not virtues that came easily to her. If she wanted them, she'd have to pray them into existence. She needed all the help she could get in her quest to broach Alec Galloway's walls.

When she rose, her heart felt softer, her purpose clearer.

Kindness.

Gentleness.

Charlotte could at least offer those. She donned a simple day dress, a sprigged muslin with a rounded waist and sash. With a quick twist of her hair and a handful of pins, she managed to tame most of her curls.

Downstairs all was quiet. She'd expected as much on the Sabbath. In the kitchen, however, the day's preparations were well underway, and her request to the harried cook was quickly granted. Bucket in hand, she extended her thanks and made her way back upstairs.

Charlotte slipped out the back door and breathed in deeply. The scent here was so different from home. The subtle smell of honeysuckle, the sweetness of overripe apples from the orchards, and the scent of wet earth that drifted from the river. But today something was different. The air held a crisp note—a welcome change from the sweltering heat that had tortured Charlotte since her arrival in Pennsylvania a month ago.

Long strides carried her down the hill to the road that paralleled the river. The wild beauty of the Highlands, with its jagged peaks and crystal-clear lochs, would always hold her heart, but she tucked away the loveliness of the slow-flowing Allegheny, the opposite bank filled with trees that had just begun dabbling in bursts of color.

As she walked, her thoughts drifted toward her lessons with Clara. Since her first botched lesson, Charlotte had spent hours poring over English texts, observing some of the other tutors,

and doing her best to create simple, direct lesson plans that would ensure they used their limited time together effectively.

But more importantly, she'd been working to connect with Clara. Charlotte's favorite tutors were the ones who'd taken the time to come to know her and allow her to know them. So during the next two lessons, with each new letter Clara learned, Charlotte had shared something about herself that began with that letter and challenged Clara to do the same.

Starting back at *A*, Charlotte had reiterated her love of *animals*. When it was Clara's turn, her thoughtful green eyes had drifted to the ceiling. "I have a brother named Aaaanthony," she'd said at last, her voice breathy as she waited for approval.

"Exactly!" Charlotte had said. "And how old is Anthony, Clara?"

"He's four." She grinned. "And a bundle of trouble, he is."

For *B* and *C*, Charlotte had shared that she loved *blackberries* and that she'd once had a cat named *Cleo*. Clara had said her favorite time of day was *bedtime* and that she loved *candy*. "I had a lemon drop from Willard's Emporium once. It was surely the best thing I've ever tasted."

By the third time they'd met, they were talking and laughing through the lesson, and they'd reached the letter *J*. Clara had even begun to blend simple words together. Charlotte didn't pretend to believe that Clara's quick progress had anything to do with her abilities as a teacher. The young woman soaked up knowledge like dusty fields soaked up rain. It was all Charlotte could do to keep up with her.

Charlotte switched the bucket to her left hand, trying to estimate how far she had yet to go. A half mile, perhaps? Until yesterday, she'd had no idea the doctor lived so close to Glen Haven. If she'd ridden, it wouldn't have taken more than ten minutes, but on foot, it took longer than she'd remembered. Even at the brisk pace she maintained, it was a full half hour before his quaint house came into view. Her palms hurt from the weight she carried, and she'd nearly tripped a few times as the bucket bumped against her leg.

The thudding of her heart grew louder and stronger as she approached the doctor's door. *Patience*, she reminded herself. "*Be not rash with thy mouth.*" She drew her tongue between her teeth, as if to give it a stern warning.

She set the bucket down behind her, but before she'd even gained the courage to knock, the door swung open, Dr. Galloway filling the frame. Charlotte's breath caught. The Sunday-morning light touched strands of auburn in his still-damp hair. While his looks were far from the dandyish style London's elite circles considered handsome, Charlotte found something striking in his discerning hazel eyes, in the chiseled features that bespoke self-assurance.

He looked tidier today, black bag in hand, as if he were off to see a patient. Surprise filtered across his features first, and then his face grew hard. From the pull of his brows and the slant of his mouth, she gathered she was the last person on earth he'd expected to see. And perhaps the last one he wanted to.

Charlotte eased out a little breath, trying for a friendly expression. "Good morning, Dr. Galloway."

He frowned. Nodded. "Lady Rowand." She searched for the hint of hurt that often lingered in his expression. The look of a wounded creature. Instead, his expression was cold, all but demanding an explanation for her presence.

She pictured the injured warbler and lifted her mouth in a warm smile. "How fares our patient this morning? Does he seem to be in much pain?"

"Do you mean *the pig*?" Incredulity dripped from his voice. "If you wondered, you might have inquired through a note." He took a step forward, barring her entrance.

She held her ground. "I came to offer some help. I'd be remiss if I left you with the brunt of the pig's care, when you aided the creature only at my insistence."

"I've no need of your help." His words were clipped and sharp—and they'd hurt, just as he'd intended. But, for a second, she caught something jagged in his expression, a wisp

of the pain that hid behind his stoic mien.

She offered up a silent one-word prayer. *Please*. “I’d like to help, all the same.” She picked up the bucket and held it out. “I brought some slops.”

He peered into the bucket, as if to verify the truth of her statement. “You brought some slops,” he echoed.

“An injured pig still needs to eat, doesn’t he? Is the patient allowed visitors?”

She waited on tenterhooks, hoping against hope that, like the warbler, he’d let her take just one step closer. Finally, he sighed. “I’ve only five minutes.” He stepped back, motioning for her to come in.

She followed him inside, blinking as her eyes adjusted from the bright morning light. Yesterday she’d been preoccupied with the pig, but today her eyes scoured every corner of the room—from the broad stone fireplace to the green wing chair angled toward it. A mahogany clock rested on the mantel. A large masculine desk sat against the far wall, its surface immaculately polished. Above it hung what looked to be some sort of diploma or certificate. Beside the desk was a large wooden case with pigeonhole shelving, papers filling every nook.

It was a pleasing, if sparse, room.

Yet there was something about it that wasn’t quite right.

She turned to examine the small kitchen, trying to pinpoint what was amiss. A small stove took up one corner, and a frying pan hung on the back wall. Did the doctor cook for himself? If so, he hadn’t recently. The room smelled only of woodsmoke and coffee. She spotted a small shelf that held a single plate and a tin cup.

Charlotte envisioned him sitting at the small table, eating by himself night after night. The loneliness of it made her heart twinge.

Had his devotion to his profession as a doctor crowded out space for anything else in his life, or was it the opposite? Bereft of his wife, was his life so hollow, so vacant, that he

threw himself into doctoring to try to plug the gaping emptiness of it?

“Did you come to see the pig or to inspect my home, Lady Rowand?” The doctor’s gruff voice pulled her from her contemplation.

She hastened her steps and followed him into the bedroom. There, in the middle of his bed, lay the pig. If the pig was still in his bed, where had the doctor slept? Had he . . . ? She bit her cheek to keep from laughing at the preposterous image. And then she bit her tongue to refrain from asking.

The pig raised its head a little as she entered. “Oh, don’t get up on my account,” she said, stepping to the pig’s side. She set the bucket at her feet. “You’ll pull out the doctor’s fine stitches.” The creature practically begged for attention, so she laid a hand on its head, trailing her fingers down to its nose. She’d swear the pig’s coloring was better today. The doctor stood in the doorway, his thick arms folded across his chest, watching her.

The pig licked at her fingers, and she reached for a piece of apple peel from the bucket. She laughed as it snorted, chomping down the pieces quicker than she could grab them. “Has he caused you any trouble?”

“No more than any other pig I’ve boarded,” the doctor replied, his tone dry.

“I was speaking to the pig,” she said, unable to resist teasing him.

He sighed, no doubt feeling sorely tried.

“How long until he will be well enough to walk again, do you think?” she asked, scooping out another handful of apple peel and letting the pig eat from the palm of her hand.

“Difficult to say.” A frown marred his brow.

He hadn’t moved from the doorway, and Charlotte could have sworn he had a mental hourglass and was watching each grain of sand as it flowed downward, counting the seconds until she’d leave.

“But if you had to guess,” she prompted, picking up some potato skins and carrot tops. The soft snorts of the pig as he ate brought a smile to her face.

“It’s a spring pig, so it’s still growing. A young person’s bones often mend quicker than someone who is older.” He raked a hand through his hair. “Will the same hold true for a pig? I’m uncertain.”

“It seems a valid theory,” she said, more for the sake of trying to continue the conversation than because she had any real insight into whether pigs and humans followed parallel healing paths.

Dr. Galloway jerked his head toward the door. “Won’t you be late for church, Lady Rowand?”

“Services don’t begin until ten o’clock, so I’ve still time. But I won’t keep you.” She patted the pig one last time and retreated from the room, the doctor on her heels.

As she walked through the front room, Charlotte tried once again to determine why it felt so peculiar. But Dr. Galloway picked up the bag he’d left near the door, and she had no choice but to follow him outside.

The crispness in the air from earlier had vanished. “And will you be joining us at services this morning, Doctor?” Charlotte had never seen him at church, but there were so many congregations here in America, he likely attended a different one.

His entire demeanor darkened. “God has no interest in me, and I none in Him,” he replied, voice as brittle as the dried leaves littering the porch.

Her heart shuddered. With one unwitting question, she’d undone any progress she’d made. And what was worse . . . the disdain in his tone made her realize his wounds went far deeper than she’d imagined.

He grieved more than his dead wife—he’d lost his faith.

How naive she’d been to believe she might have something to offer him. “I . . . I’m sorry you feel that way,” she said, her voice trembling.

“Don’t be. I’m not. Now, you’ll have to excuse me.” He pulled the door shut. “I’ve a patient to see.” He stalked down toward the stable and emerged a few moments later with his horse saddled. Even with one hand holding his doctor’s bag, Dr. Galloway managed to mount gracefully. He kicked the horse’s flanks and pulled sharply on the reins, spurring the horse down the hill and toward the city.

It was only after she’d watched him ride away, kicking up a cloud of dust, and begun her own walk home that Charlotte realized what it was about the doctor’s home that had left her feeling disoriented.

There was no evidence of the man who lived there.

The doctor, yes. His black medical bag. His desk, his cabinet full of medicines. The diploma on the wall.

But there was no imprint of his form in the wing chair by the fire. No pair of slippers on the floor. No pile of books or newspapers a man might read at the end of a long day. In fact, the only truly personal thing she could remember seeing were the woman’s underclothes she’d glimpsed in the trunk in his bedroom. A woman—his wife—who’d died three years past.

It was as if Alec Galloway, the man, didn’t exist.

Or, if he once had, he’d long since been erased.

* * *

Not for the first time, Charlotte marveled over the newness of the First Presbyterian Church. Their own kirk in Edinbane was over three hundred years old, the ancient stones chipped, the air musty. This edifice, with its fresh brick, shining glass, and new benches, never ceased to amaze her.

She followed Harriet into the Maganns’ family pew, arranging her skirts as she took a seat. Her thoughts were like scattered chaff, and it proved difficult to rein them in even once the service began. The bench was hard, the church warm, and the reverend’s voice monotonous.

She pondered what to do, Dr. Galloway’s bitter words from this morning circling endlessly through her mind. His grief, his loss, his lack of faith—all seemed insurmountable, her hopes

of offering him help futile.

She forced herself to be pragmatic. She'd lived a coddled, protected life. She'd come from a loving home and faced no great tragedies. She'd suffered loss, of course, like everyone else. Yet her faith had steadied her through the loss of both Grandfather and Harriet's husband, Archie. But losing a spouse was something she couldn't fathom.

What, really, did she have to offer? Kindness, perhaps. Her quiet faith. But somehow that didn't seem enough for someone like Dr. Galloway, whose life had been marked with such sorrow.

She shut her eyes for a moment, struggling under the weight of indecision, giving in to the heaviness of her eyelids. It seemed just seconds later that Harriet was elbowing her, bringing her out of a deep sleep.

Harriet's gruff voice sounded in her ear. "Time for the Psalms. Perhaps you shouldn't be waking so early every morning."

Charlotte rubbed at her side. "Perhaps *you* need to eat more. Your elbows are quite bony."

Singing the Psalms had always been Charlotte's favorite part of services. She found the words soothing, their messages heartfelt. Today they sang Psalm 147. Her voice joined with those around her, sending up a simple prayer.

*"His mercy melts the stubborn soul,
And makes the broken spirit whole."*

Her mind went to the words found in the third verse, one she'd memorized with her father.

*He healeth the broken in heart,
And bindeth up their wounds.*

How fitting that such words brought a physician to mind. The great Healer. Truth pressed itself upon her heart in that moment. Only God could heal; only *He* could bind up Alec Galloway's many wounds. But just as she'd done the other day as the doctor had performed makeshift surgery on a pig, she

could *assist*. She could play a role, however small, if that was what the Lord wanted. And the gentle whispering in her soul said that that *was* what He wanted. As the song ended, she put away her hymnal and reached for her parasol, her spirits lighter.

Alice leaned over and whispered, “Our reverend was livelier when he was younger, I assure you. The size of our congregation has dwindled as he’s aged.”

Charlotte worked to suppress a smile. He’d become progressively duller in just the four weeks she’d been attending. Yet coming to this beautiful house of worship still fed her spirit.

“Now, now, don’t be too hard on him,” Mr. Magann said over his wife’s shoulder.

She wrinkled her nose. “I’m stating facts.”

Tavish and Liam, both holding their hats, joined their little circle as they moved to the aisle. “Shall we?” Liam asked.

Mr. Magann’s gaze drifted over the groups of people milling about. Liam leaned toward his father, his voice low. “He isn’t here.”

He . . . Dr. Galloway?

“The carriage is waiting and so is Sunday dinner,” Alice said, taking her husband’s arm.

They made it to the doors before they were waved down by Mrs. Borden, her lofty coiffure swaying precariously. “Mrs. Magann! Lady Rowand! Just the two I was hoping to see.” Her brassy voice carried to the far corners of the church. “I’m in need of some extra help this week. Several of the ladies who lead our sewing and knitting circles are sick. Might I prevail upon the two of you to take a few extra sessions this week?”

Alice looked to Charlotte, who nodded. “I see no reason why not,” Alice said. “Why don’t you send a note by and let us know when we’ll be needed.”

Mrs. Borden broke into a wide smile. “I will indeed. Oh, thank you! It is so nice to have such dependable supporters for

our cause! I try not to cancel if I can help it, you know. Our pupils are always so disappointed.” Her gaze caught on someone else. “Oh, do excuse me. I see Mrs. Bixby and I must speak with her as well!” She hustled off to recruit more help.

“Dependable supporters,” Tavish mused as they all shared a smile. “I daresay she’s right.” They descended the steps, moving onto the lawn, yellowed from the persistent summer heat.

“Only for just causes, of course,” Charlotte replied. “Just a few days ago Mrs. Meister tried to convince us to join her millinery society. We were polite when we turned down her offer, but I couldn’t imagine meeting twice a week to trim bonnets!”

Everyone chuckled as they reached the edge of the lawn. The Maganns’ carriage was waiting half a block up. Charlotte saw an opportunity for a word with Liam and fell into step beside him, leaving Tavish to walk with Harriet. “Was Dr. Galloway ever a believer?” she asked, trying not to sound overly interested.

Liam peered down at her, as if trying to read her intentions. “He was,” he answered finally. “He came from a faith-filled home. Both his grandfather and father were very devout. But he lost them both when he was still quite young. And then his wife.” He blew out a breath and shook his head. “So much loss. It isn’t difficult to see why he’s come to the conclusion that God doesn’t care. He buried his faith with Nellie.”

Nellie. Hearing her name caused a twinge at the back of Charlotte’s throat. She stayed silent, hoping Liam would continue.

His gaze rested somewhere in the distance. “It’s more complicated for Alec than a simple lack of faith. He struggles with grief and regret but also guilt. He believes God failed Nellie, but he thinks he failed her as well.”

“A heavy burden to bear,” Charlotte said softly.

“Indeed,” Liam agreed. “Especially since life has taught him he can count on no one save himself. It’s part of what makes

him such a good doctor. He demands absolute perfection of himself.”

Sympathy swelled in her breast. Who could live up to such exacting standards? “And when he fails?” she asked with bated breath.

Liam’s mouth twisted in a sad sort of smile. “He’s been punishing himself for the last three years for failing Nellie.”

Chapter Sixteen

SUNDAY TURNED OUT TO BE busier than Alec had planned for. Most considered it a day of rest, which meant it was usually a day he dedicated to his research. But when Lady Rowand had unexpectedly shown up on his doorstep, bringing *slops* of all things, he should have known the day wouldn't go to plan. Her visit, though brief, had left him off-balance, her attempts at kindness jarring.

It had made it more difficult to exhibit irritation and indifference, which was precisely what he *should* have been feeling.

It had taken him the first full ten minutes of his ride into the city to reorder his thoughts and prepare for his visit to Lucas. Thankfully, Vera's poultices had worked just as he'd hoped, and the inflammation in Lucas's leg had abated considerably. Since he'd been nearby, Alec had called on the mother whose twins he'd delivered two nights ago to ensure she'd not suffered a relapse in her bleeding. Having lost his own mother to childbirth, he always felt a certain protectiveness toward the women who put their lives in danger to bring children into the world.

He'd returned home to find a waiting meal and a note from Vera asking why there was an invalid pig in his bed. Halfway through his meal he'd been summoned to a family whose three daughters had come down with racking coughs. Though the older two daughters seemed to be managing, the five-year-old's cough was deep in her lungs, and he hadn't left until he'd drawn out some of the infection and her breathing had steadied.

Though such cases were gratifying, they were lengthy and exhausting, and the hours he'd planned to work on his research had been eaten up. His mood hadn't improved any when he'd returned home to the needy pig.

So when a knock sounded and Alec opened his door Monday morning to find Lady Rowand standing on his porch, knuckles white from holding yet another bucket of slops, he

nearly growled.

The sight shouldn't have surprised him. Given all that had happened in the last few days, he should be well beyond that. Yet leaving as he had yesterday, with his cynical opinions and curt goodbye, he'd assumed he'd done enough to frighten her off for good.

Apparently not, for here she was, her curls barely tamed, wearing a pale-blue dress that looked far too fine for carting around slops. Either she was more thickheaded than he'd imagined, or she was just plain stubborn. Perhaps a little of both.

"Good morning, Doctor." A friendly, if wary, smile.

He didn't even try to soften the frown on his face. "You're here to see the pig, I presume?"

"I am." She straightened her shoulders.

This ridiculous charade couldn't continue. But as he opened his mouth to disabuse her of the notion that she could show up on his doorstep every morning, his gaze caught on her earnest gray eyes, almost blue in the soft morning light. His hand tightened on the door in a moment of indecision. He'd been about to check the stitches under the pig's bandage anyway, he supposed.

"Come in, then, though once again, I've not much time." Not exactly a lie, as his research was always waiting, but he had no scheduled appointments.

As Lady Rowand followed him inside, Alec was glad he'd moved the pig to the main room earlier this morning. Besides having slept with the pig two nights too many, he had no intention of making a habit of welcoming Lady Rowand into his bedroom. As a doctor, he didn't stand on ceremony, but tongues would surely start wagging.

"How was your Sabbath?" she asked, her voice strained from carrying that ridiculous bucket.

"Fine." The word came as almost a growl. He led her over to the fireplace, in front of which he'd laid the pig on a quilt, positioned in the beam of sunlight coming through the front

window.

Alec shook his head as Lady Rowand knelt and greeted the pig in a voice most would reserve for a newborn babe. “Do you have many visits to make?” she asked Alec. She bent over the pig, feeding it bits of food from the bucket.

Alec cursed himself for the way his eyes traced over the slender line of her neck. “Not so many today, no. But plenty of work to occupy me.” Was it too much to hope she’d take such a hint? He went to the spare bedroom for a fresh bandage for the pig’s leg, resenting every minute he’d spent on the swine.

“I imagine in your profession there is a never-ending list of things to do,” she said when he returned. “It must be exhausting.”

He began cutting away the bandage at the top of the pig’s leg. “I prefer to stay busy, Lady Rowand,” he said, kneeling opposite her. How much longer would she stay and force him to make conversation?

“And I prefer Charlotte over Lady Rowand.”

He nearly jabbed the pig with the scissors as her meaning became clear. For the pig’s safety, he palmed the scissors, then raised his head. Her expression was free of guile, a genuine offering with no expectation. Until now he hadn’t noticed the faint dusting of freckles that stretched across her nose and cheeks, softening her patrician beauty. He returned to cutting the bandage.

Charlotte. Even *considering* using her Christian name felt akin to removing the figurative boxing gloves he’d taken to donning in her presence. In their earlier verbal altercations, such formalities had kept them from becoming too familiar with one another. Allowing such an intimacy would mean their next go-round would be a bare-knuckle fight. More personal and far more dangerous.

He shouldn’t.

She rubbed a finger down the pig’s nose, her gaze still trained on him, waiting. “Only if you’d like, Doctor.”

Something in her words gave him pause. Alec was

accustomed to demands. Demands on his time. Demands on his attention. Society's unspoken demand that he somehow return to the man he'd been before Nellie's death.

But she seemed to have no such expectation. She hadn't known him before, and because of that, she accepted him as he was.

That revelation was as simple as it was surprising. It made him want to give her something in return—even if only to grant her simple request.

Even if it cost him.

“Charlotte, then.” He pulled the bandage away from the pig's leg, not missing the hint of a smile that brushed Charlotte's lips. “Though the bone is setting well, the pig will likely walk with a limp. The stitches are holding, at least,” he said gruffly.

She fed the pig the top of a turnip. “It seems pigs make for excellent patients.”

Grunting, Alec reached for the bandage. Charlotte laid one hand on the pig, holding it still, feeding it with the other as he worked in silence, wrapping the broken leg. “Finished,” he said, giving the pig a reluctant pat on the belly.

He got to his feet, hoping to hurry Charlotte along. She picked up the pail and followed him to the door. Alec walked her onto the porch, but she seemed not to sense his urgency.

“Have I mentioned I have a sister?” she asked offhandedly. “Iseabel. She's only eleven. Quiet.”

“Your sister? Quiet?” He leaned against one of the beams framing the porch, his chest tight with the need to return to his work.

“It's hard to imagine, I'm sure.” She stood beside him, her hands clasped in front of her, holding the pail, face lit with a smile. “My father always jokes that if Iseabel were as talkative as I, he'd need four ears instead of two.”

Against his will, Alec's lips twitched.

“Iseabel is my opposite in more ways than one,” she

continued. “She’s quiet and studious. Loves to read.”

He didn’t know which was worse—this inane chatter or their heated arguments from before. She must know he had no interest in such details. But letting her talk was preferable to her expecting him to do so. Perhaps if he stayed quiet, she’d soon be on her way.

“She named our border collie pups after her favorite writers. Keats, Burns, Austen, Defoe, Hugo, Blake. And what was the last girl? Oh yes. Radcliffe.”

“And does she imagine quoting poetry will somehow help them in their herding abilities?” He shook his head. “I see a lily on thy brow, With anguish moist and fever-dew, And on thy cheeks a fading rose, Fast withereth too.”

Charlotte threw her head back, laughing, and Alec wished his eyes weren’t drawn to the delicate column of her throat or the charming curve of her lips.

She tipped her head to one side. “I must admit, Doctor, as a man of science and logic, I would not have expected . . .” She hesitated. “I would not have expected you to have . . . a knowledge of poetry.”

His brows drew together, her judgment not at all to his liking. “You mean you didn’t expect someone like me to understand the finer feelings expressed in such language.”

“That is not what I meant at all,” she protested. “I merely supposed that your tastes ran to medical books, not that you are incapable of appreciating lyrical verse. Anyone who can quote Keats . . .”

“It has been a long time since I picked up a book of poetry,” he admitted. After Nellie died, it seemed an enjoyment he didn’t deserve. “It was my grandfather who instilled me with a love of the written word. He could quote long passages of Milton and Shakespeare and would often put me to sleep with one of Hamlet’s monologues or an excerpt of *Paradise Lost*.”

“With bedtime stories like that, it’s a mystery as to why you aren’t more of an optimist,” she said dryly.

The barest smirk emerged on his lips. It was true that his

grandfather's tastes had run toward Shakespeare's darker works. But given Grandfather's history, who could blame him? "What about you?" he found himself asking. "Is it only your sister who appreciates poetry?"

"I do enjoy poetry, though I'm more selective than Iseabel. Burns is my favorite." She flashed a smile, then quoted in a deep Scottish brogue, "Farewell to the Highlands, Farewell to the North, The birth-place of Valour, The country of Worth." She closed her eyes for a moment, her face glowing beneath the sun's rays. "Wherever I wander, Wherever I rove, The hills of the Highlands For ever I love."

Alec had never read any Burns, though he liked the lilting cadence in Charlotte's voice. And he remembered his grandfather's stories of the Highlands. The way he'd reminisced in his thick Scots speech, his vivid descriptions, remained bright in Alec's memory. If only those memories weren't colored by the horrors of the suffering his grandfather had endured.

"And did your love of poetry outlive your grandfather?" Charlotte asked softly, as if somehow sensing she was intruding on his thoughts.

He thrust his hands into his pockets, letting out a slow breath. "I was a blacksmith before I saved up the funds for medical school. Those were long days of hard labor. At night, weary as my body was, I craved the beauty of the written word. I'd read as long as I could manage to stay awake. It gave me something to hold to, an escape for my mind during the long hours of the next day." He shook his head. "Nowadays, I read too many medical texts and journals to give much time to poetry. My work requires concentration, attention to detail. My mind is not free to wander as it once did."

"Are you like Sisyphus, then? Never allowed to put down your load for even a moment?" No judgment colored her tone, only curiosity.

He laughed without mirth at the apt description. While it was true his days were exhausting, setting down the load he carried was not a possibility he ever allowed himself to

consider. “Some burdens are our own to shoulder,” he said. There was a gritty feeling in his chest, their conversation stirring up sediment that had settled long ago.

“Yes, we each have those,” she conceded. She set down the bucket and rested her gloved hands on the railing that lined the porch. “But do you not think there are people who would willingly help you bear the weight? Alice and Martin? Liam?” She hesitated, averting her gaze. “Perhaps me, if you’d allow it?”

He made no reply. Did she not understand? It was the strain, the ache of holding up the weight that kept a greater pain at bay.

“The Maganns told me about your wife. Your loss.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “I’m so very sorry.”

The simple words cut Alec to his core. He’d done nothing to deserve her kindness or understanding. If anything, he’d merited her dislike. Why was she going out of her way to show him compassion?

Charlotte sank her teeth into her bottom lip. “I don’t know the weight or shape of your grief. I suspect no one does, though I’m certain you’ve been given your fair share of advice for how best to move on.” She clasped her hands together, interlacing her fingers.

Alec hadn’t the faintest idea what she’d say next. His stomach clenched as he waited for another unwelcome opinion.

“I’m no expert on grief, but I think you should allow yourself a verse or two of poetry now and then. A bit of beauty and brightness can make the heaviest burdens lighter.” Her soft smile was adorned by a faint dimple.

Her suggestion was so unexpected, Alec didn’t have a ready answer. But she didn’t seem to expect one. They stood side by side, the silence only broken by the rustle of the wind as it stirred through the trees and the occasional quack of a loon down by the riverbank.

He tried to imagine reading verses and stanzas as he used to

do. Tried to imagine setting down a book of poetry and falling into the deep and dreamless sleep that had once come easily.

“I don’t sleep well,” he said quietly, surprised at his own admission. When was the last time he’d shared something so personal . . . with anyone?

The full weight of Charlotte’s gaze settled on him. “Because she is gone?” Caution laced her tone.

Because the answer wasn’t a simple yes or no, he answered her question with one of his own. “Has Martin told you how Nellie died?”

Charlotte shook her head.

“Cholera.” He stared straight ahead, not daring to take in even a speck of the understanding he knew he’d find in Charlotte’s expression. “I’d been gone for several days, visiting patient after patient, and I came home that night to find her . . . gone.” His voice grew tight with suppressed emotion.

Even now, the regret hit him like a shot to the gut. He should have been there. But he’d been so caught up in the epidemic, answering summons after summons as the disease spread, that he’d missed the beginning signs of what had been right in front of him.

He cleared his throat, trying to ease the knot that had formed there. “I dream of it, over and over. Finding Nellie, her skin tinted blue.” He rested his forearms on the railing, head bent, intensely aware of Charlotte in his periphery.

When people learned Nellie’s tragic story, they reacted in one of three ways. Most tripped over themselves in their hurry to express sympathy. Some insisted on sharing their own stories of grief, as if their sadness might somehow compare with Alec’s. Others stuttered awkwardly.

Charlotte didn’t do any of those things. She bit her cheek, her gaze on the fiery-colored leaves of the maple tree that sat atop the hill. A minute passed. Then two.

At last she turned, her back to the railing, facing him. “A heavy burden, that,” she said.

He stared at her. At her long lashes the color of coal dust. At the perfectly formed nose that often wrinkled when she smiled or laughed. At the mouth whose utterances always managed to surprise him.

Never had anyone *truly* acknowledged the weight he carried with him.

Something loosened in his chest. The tight band of pressure that never seemed to ease now slackened just a bit.

“Do you ever miss your days as a blacksmith?” she asked, veering away from the heaviness of their previous topic. She seemed unwilling to make him linger in the past.

He straightened, considering. “The monotony of it? No. But I do miss the utter exhaustion that once let me sleep through the night without waking.”

“Ah yes. The sleep. Might I suggest . . .” She paused, mischief ticking at the corner of her mouth. “Counting sheep?”

A brief, low chuckle rumbled through him. “Is that a national pastime in Scotland, then?”

Another flash of her dimple. “It might be.”

“You Scots are a strange lot.” Alec shook his head.

“As I understand it, you’re one of us.” She eyed him curiously. “But I’m afraid that story will have to wait. I’ve already taken too much of your time, Dr. Galloway.” She picked up her bucket and walked to the steps.

He nodded, a twinge of disappointment filtering through him. Ridiculous, really, since ten minutes before, he’d been watching the clock, waiting for her to leave.

“Goodbye.” From where she stood at the base of the steps, she waved and turned to go.

“Charlotte,” he said. He moved toward her, one foot resting on the top step. The pulse in his neck beat like drum, a warning to close his mouth before he did something foolish.

She turned, wild curls framing her face. “Yes?”

“Alec.” He cleared his throat, his mouth dry. “I’d prefer you

to call me Alec.”

Something foolish, precisely like that.

Chapter Seventeen

CHARLOTTE SAT IN THE WINDOW seat in the corridor adjacent to her room, ankles tucked beneath her. The window was open, a mid-September breeze making the curtains dance. She flipped through her father's journal, finding the last spot she'd left off.

August 5, 1812

Father has informed—yes, informed—me of my upcoming marriage to Lady Katherine, granddaughter of the Earl of Hadleigh. To no one's surprise, least of all mine, she is English through and through.

An arranged marriage is never what I imagined for myself. Moreover, I cannot suppose that wedding a stranger is to anyone's advantage.

Charlotte bent over the pages, going back through the last entries she'd read. Had she missed something? She could have sworn Father's time in Barbados had been before he'd married her mother, yet there'd been no mention of it at all so far. Strange.

She turned back to where she'd left off, but her mind wasn't back in Edinbane, feeling her father's tension as he waited to meet her mother, but on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, watching the doctor's hands gently bandage the pig's leg . . . seeing the trail of sorrow pass over his face as he'd told her of Nellie's death . . . remembering the roughness in his voice as he'd asked her to call him Alec . . .

She closed the leather cover. The much-anticipated meeting between her father and mother would have to wait until she could give it the attention it deserved.

Her eyes drifted closed, recalling those last moments on the doctor's porch.

"I'd prefer you to call me Alec."

Alec. Two small syllables that cut through the formality of the doctor, allowing her the freedom to address him as . . .

A man.

It felt momentous, miraculous even.

Such an invitation meant far more to her than some gentleman's request to dance, partner with her for supper, or take her out for a drive.

It meant more than any of the grand romantic gestures Philip had made back in London. She squeezed her eyes shut, banishing him from her mind.

In truth, she'd been so flustered by the invitation to call Alec by his given name that she'd been able to do nothing but nod and walk away with what she'd hoped was a degree of decorum. No small feat when her heart had been racing and her stomach swarming with butterflies. She'd likely had a giddy smile plastered to her face, just as she did now. Worst of all, she'd set off walking in the wrong direction. With Alec watching from the porch, there'd been nothing to do but pretend she'd intended on that route all along. Later, when she was out of view, she'd cut back through the thicket of trees and returned to the Maganns'.

The progress she was making with Alec was slow, slower even than she'd imagined. She nearly laughed aloud remembering the look on his face this morning when she'd begun babbling about Iseabel. Truly, she'd been desperate. He was always so eager to be rid of her.

But today . . . with its slow, candid moments, had felt like a victory.

"Charlotte?" Alice appeared at the top of the stairs, pulling on her gloves. "Are you ready?"

Was it truly already one o'clock? Charlotte swung her legs down from the window seat. "I need to fetch a few things from my room. May I meet you downstairs?"

"Yes, of course. I've already called for the carriage, so it shouldn't be long. I'm heading down to have a brief word with Cook about Thursday's dinner."

As Charlotte went to her room, her steps were quick with excitement. A few nights before, as she'd been reading her

father's journal, a small painting had slipped out, one clearly done by her mother, of Charlotte as a young child on a swing, in the shadow of two oak trees.

The painting had sparked a memory of the book she'd been given for her birthday one year, filled with her mother's paintings. Charlotte had loved the book, its pages filled with silly verses and whimsical pictures of animals drinking tea and dueling.

Though Charlotte's painting skills were nothing compared to her mother's, she'd made her own book—one she hoped would help Clara keep pace with her insatiable thirst to learn.

In her chamber she found Harriet pressing the gown for tonight's outing to the theater. "Will you be wanting your cloak for tonight?" Harriet asked without looking up. "If so, I'll need to press it."

"I think not. The theater is always so stuffy, and the carriage ride isn't long." Charlotte picked out one of her favorite ribbons and threaded it through the holes of the stacked pages she'd stayed up working on late last night, securing them with a tidy bow. The small stand Tavish had made at her request sat on her trunk, and she tucked it under one arm. Last, she reached for the small slate and satchel of chalk she used for her lessons with Clara.

Harriet smirked. "Not to mention the sleeves on this dress are practically a cloak in and of themselves."

Charlotte laughed. "'Tis the fashion, much as you abhor it. Would you please put that pincushion on top of these papers?" She should have thought to find a bag to hold everything.

Today, after her lesson with Clara, Charlotte was taking over the sewing circle for the first time, while Alice would be working with a group learning knitting.

On their way into town, Charlotte tried to recall what she could of Mrs. Borden's methods. How she was quick to praise, kind in correction, and somehow managed to coax everyone into joining the group conversation.

They arrived a few minutes early, and Charlotte hurried

upstairs to set up her surprise for Clara. At the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs, she set the bound pages on the stand and obscured the book she'd made by standing in front of the table.

She and Clara were vastly more comfortable with each other now, and Clara greeted her with a wide and welcome smile. "I've been trying to recognize the letters on signs, as you suggested. They're everywhere."

Charlotte's hands rested behind her back, thrumming with excitement. "And you're only halfway through the alphabet. Though, today I've brought something I hope will speed our progress."

Clara's expressive brows lifted.

"Learning just a few letters each time we meet is too slow for you, which is why I made you this book so you can learn on your own a bit as well." Charlotte stepped to the side, revealing her project.

The small stand propped up the book of letters she'd made, opened to the first page that held the letter *A*. "Each page has a letter, along with several pictures that represent the sound the letter makes." She pointed. "Here's *A*, for example, with a picture of an apple, an apron, and an armchair. All *A*'s. You see?" She'd carefully chosen objects that represented the different sounds an *A* could make. "I thought you could prop the book open as you do laundry." She smiled, waiting anxiously for Clara's reaction.

But Clara's lip wobbled, her eyes shining with tears.

"My pictures aren't that dreadful, are they?"

Clara stepped forward and touched the first page. Her fingers gentle, she turned to the page with a *B* and its pictures of a bowl, a barn, and a baby. "I've never been given anything half so nice." She turned to Charlotte, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. "Thank you."

Charlotte's heart warmed, slowly expanding like rising dough, feeling that if it grew any more, her chest might burst with joy.

Since the day she'd learned she would be the future Duchess of Edinbane, Charlotte had dedicated herself to becoming educated on current issues, working to inform her views and opinions and discover which causes were worthy of her attention. But standing here, watching Clara, knowing what it meant to her to have the opportunity to learn to read . . . in that moment, Charlotte knew. Education—for the lower classes and particularly for women—would be one of the causes she championed. If she had traveled all the way across the Atlantic just for this, it had been worth it.

She only hoped she could do justice to all that needed doing. Clearing the emotion from her throat, she asked, "Shall we give it a try?"

Every time they learned a new letter they continued the pattern from their second lesson, sharing something about themselves, except now Charlotte always had Clara go first. *K* was difficult because it made the same sound as *C*, but after a few tries, Clara shared that her mother was the *kindest* person she'd ever known.

Charlotte, in turn, tried to explain what a kilt was. "It's a skirt that hits at the knee," Charlotte said. "For men."

Clara's eyes flew wide.

Charlotte laughed. "They're worn by men in the Highlands, where I'm from."

Clara began giggling outright. "Men? In skirts? My brothers won't believe it! I'll have to include it in one of my stories."

Charlotte, still laughing herself, sketched a crude picture of a Highlander in a kilt on the slate.

Next they bent over the pages of the book Charlotte had made, and she turned the page to *L*, with its pictures of a lamb, a log, and a pile of laundry. "Laundry. Now, that's somethin' I'm well familiar with." Clara laughed.

"I thought so," Charlotte said, grinning. "Lllllaundry. Now, go ahead. Think of something that begins with that same sound."

They moved on to *M*, *N*, and *O*, and by then their hour was

up. As usual, the time had sped by.

The book and small stand went straight into Clara's waiting hands. Charlotte lifted her gaze, her throat swelling a little as she realized how much she'd come to enjoy her camaraderie with Clara and value their time together. "I can't wait to see your progress next week. And you tell your brothers I can write home and have my mother send them each a kilt if they'd like."

Downstairs, Charlotte found that all seven of the women for this afternoon's sewing circle had already arrived. Taking her pincushion from the shelf where she'd set it, she introduced herself and took a seat. The circle boasted a great variety of ages, with one girl as young as twelve and an old woman who was nearly seventy.

With a few well-timed questions, Charlotte had the group talking, and besides the occasional correction or word of praise, she listened.

Most of them worked from well before dawn until well after dusk. Three of the women labored in the fishing industry, one scaling and deboning, the other two curing and drying fish. The smell on them, one that likely couldn't be removed even with a scalding bath, forced Charlotte to breathe through her mouth.

One quiet woman worked as a domestic servant but was hoping to improve her stitches and someday become a lady's maid. Another woman cooked for those in the coal-miner camps, spending her days surrounded by crude and uncouth workmen who treated her poorly. Charlotte's stomach turned at the thought of the disparaging comments and coarse propositions these women received.

The bareness, the bleakness of their days was unimaginable.

Charlotte had always thought herself well-versed in the human condition. She'd delivered plenty of baskets to the poor with her mother, serving those in need within their parish. Her own cousins, including Tavish, had come from a vastly different background than she.

But this—

This was poverty up close, in a way she'd never known. Never even imagined.

It made her heartsick, though these conditions were far from exclusive to Pittsburgh. She knew there was plenty of the same in the cities back at home. And although she could not do much in Pittsburgh beyond helping these women improve their stitches or teaching Clara to read, back home the possibilities were endless.

There was *so much* good she could do. She was a woman of means and influence who could enact real and lasting change. She'd never felt her title's weight or its power more keenly.

Much as she hated to admit it, part of the reason Charlotte had come with Tavish was to escape. To avoid her looming future. But watching these women quietly forging through their difficult lives was humbling. They continued to work, heads bent over their stitches, doing what was required of them day and in and day out.

It made her believe she could do the same, no matter how daunting her future.

She stood, walking from woman to woman, bending low as she showed one how to do a corner stitch, another how make a neat tie in her thread. Several of the women commented on her accent and asked her questions about Scotland. And Charlotte was happy to satisfy their curiosity about the places she'd traveled, about the differences between America and Britain, about what it was like to have a King.

But what Charlotte didn't tell them, as she thought back on the struggling tenants and crofters in Edinbane or the streets and alleys in London she'd been escorted quickly past, was that when it came to the disparity between the poor and the wealthy, Britain and America were not so different at all.

Chapter Eighteen

ON TUESDAY MORNING, CHARLOTTE JOINED Liam and Tavish on a tour of the glassworks. But despite the enthusiasm she'd originally expressed when Tavish had invited her, she regretted the commitment when she realized it meant she'd have to forgo her visit to Alec and the pig.

Come Wednesday morning Charlotte was anxious, waking even earlier than usual to begin the day with her morning walk. She hadn't gone far, however, when she crossed paths with Mr. Magann, who was setting out for an early ride. "Charlotte, I didn't realize you were in the habit of waking so early! Where are you off to?"

When she responded, rather lamely, that she enjoyed exploring Glen Haven's acreage, he immediately had his horse returned to the stables and insisted on giving her a proper tour. "Shame on us for neglecting such a necessity. You must allow me."

What else could she do but join him?

It was a lovely morning, truly, and one she would have thoroughly enjoyed . . . if a large part of her brain hadn't been occupied with questions about Alec.

Had he picked up a book of poetry?

Had the pig attempted to walk?

Would hearing Alec call her by name a second time elicit the same thrill in her as it had the first?

Come Thursday, she determined that *nothing* would keep her from her morning visit to the doctor. Not the heavy rain clouds gathered overhead nor the sprawling mist that obscured her view of the river.

Shawl wrapped around her shoulders, Charlotte set off at a brisk pace.

As she walked, the breeze whipped at her face, snarling her curls and beating at her skirts. Her cheeks stung from the chill wind, but she embraced it as only a Highlander could. She

could almost imagine she was back home, with the hair blowing in off the ocean, its smoky-white mist creating the mystical atmosphere Scotland was known for.

Caught up in the moment, she removed her shawl and let it flutter and snap in the wind. When the clouds released the beginnings of a drizzle, she tipped back her head and smiled. A dreich day. The first since she'd arrived in Pennsylvania.

Charlotte had been made for the rain. More familiar with its cool spray than the warmth of the sun's rays, she'd missed the constant wet upon her skin, the way her hair curled and held, like all it needed was a drink to behave, the comforting sound of the rain's pitter-patter soaking into the earth and making the whole world smell new.

The drizzle grew into a steady shower as she made her way up the hill to the doctor's cabin, skirts heavy with the rain. A surge of delight shot through her when Alec's home came into sight.

She stopped where she was, her pulse stuttering with the realization of how much she'd missed him.

She'd missed trying to decipher the smallest tells behind his stoic expression. She'd missed watching his hands at work—so large yet capable of such intricate work. She'd missed hearing his sighs of frustration when she fussed over the pig.

In short, she'd missed him too much.

Far too much for mere friendship, a token kindness, which was what she'd managed to convince herself their relationship was.

Until now.

As she stood there, the rain began in earnest. The soft shower became a heavy sheet that soaked her boots and shawl and began to seep through her dress, and she broke into a run, anxious to escape the deluge. When she reached the covered porch, she took in deep gasping breaths, laughing as she wiped the water from her eyes and tried to ring out her hair. But it was no use. She was soaked.

She rapped on the front door and waited for it to open. Long

seconds went by. With the roar of the rain hitting the roof, perhaps the doctor hadn't heard her knock. She tried again, banging at the door with a strong fist. Now that she'd stopped moving, she was starting to feel the cold.

No answer.

Even if Alec wasn't home, she needed a place to wait out the storm, to dry off and warm herself before heading back. She tried the doorknob, grateful to find it unlocked. The door opened without so much as a creak, as if the hinges had been recently oiled.

"Alec?" she called.

All she could hear was the sound of the rain on the roof.

On this stormy day, the space was dim. The hearth lay cold and dark, making Charlotte wonder if Alec was out on a night call. The wind slammed the door open, banging it against the wall. She left it open as she hunted for matches, easily located on the small shelf that hung near the front door.

Wet clothes cold against her skin, Charlotte shivered. She was in dire need of a crackling fire. Bracing the door with her shoulder, she shut it against the strength of the wind that continued to howl outside. She reached for a match and lit a candle, using the shield of her palm to protect it from the lingering draft. Once the flame steadied, she set down the candle and removed her boots and stockings, her feet like ice.

Wherever Alec was, he surely wouldn't make the journey home until the rain let up. By the time he returned, she'd have erased all evidence of her visit and would be far away.

With the candle, she ignited some kindling to start a small fire in the hearth. Once the kindling caught, she began adding larger sticks and, finally, a log. She watched as the flames licked the dry bark and then burned toward the center of the wood.

The light from the fire was welcoming, the warmth immediate. Charlotte draped her wet shawl and stockings over the fire screen and positioned herself as close to the heat as she could bear, making slow rotations to dry out her dress. Her icy

fingers were numb, and they hurt as the fire warmed them, feeling slowly returning to her extremities.

She jerked at the sound of shuffling coming from one of the bedrooms, having been certain she was alone. Her heart pounded. She reached for the candle she'd set atop the mantel.

Limping along on three legs, the pig came around the corner and hobbled into the main room.

Charlotte placed a hand over her breastbone, laughing. "Look at you, walking."

The pig tottered over to her, and Charlotte knelt and scratched behind his ears. The pig nuzzled her hand, likely looking for the slops she'd forgotten this morning in her haste to get out the door. "The doctor has been feeding you, hasn't he?"

An answering snort.

"That's a good boy. Now, come lie by the fire. It's quite chilly today." Once she'd helped the pig stretch out by the fire, Charlotte went to the bedroom and took the blanket that lay at the foot of the bed. The wind roared. The rain poured down relentlessly.

Back in the main room, she dragged the armchair closer to the fire, took a seat, and tucked the blanket in around her. With the pig at her feet, the comforting crackle of the fire drying her clothes, and her body finally warm, she allowed her eyes to drift shut, promising herself she'd sleep for only a few minutes and would soon be on her way.

* * *

Alec couldn't think beyond putting one foot in front of the other. His body craved the most basic of needs: warmth, sleep, and food, preferably in that order. His neck stung from the hail that had assaulted him as he'd made his way out of the city, his coat drenched through from the rain that had resumed once the hail had abated. He unbuckled the saddle with cold and clumsy fingers. Once he stabled Fargo, it was only force of habit that had him checking the troughs of feed and water before he trudged up to his cabin.

The all-night vigil spent with Mr. Browning, a longtime patient who suffered from heart failure, and his hysterical wife had pushed Alec to the edge of exhaustion. It had been a particularly bad spell for Mr. Browning, and although the man had seemed well enough when Alec had left this morning, it was only a brief reprieve. His heart would soon give out on him for good.

The light emanating from the front window didn't register until Alec had walked inside to find a fire roaring in the hearth. He shut the door behind him, the room's warmth encircling him at once. Had Vera come by earlier and laid the fire? He removed his soaking overcoat and pulled off his wet boots, only to discover a small pair of lady's boots at the edge of the rug.

All at once Alec came fully awake. A trail of water led from the front door toward the hearth. His gaze caught on a pair of stockings and a shawl draped over the fire screen.

And there, in the armchair by the fire, pig at her feet, was Charlotte.

Asleep.

Her breathing was soft, marked only by the rise and fall of her chest. Damp curls tumbled over her shoulder. She had her legs tucked under her, and across her lap was draped Alec's own blanket. Her eyelids reflected the glowing dance of the fire, her cheeks rosy from its warmth.

He stood there, dripping wet, hands and feet still numb, unwilling to move. Oddly enough, it eased his exhaustion a fraction to see her nestled in his chair, having made herself at home.

Which was ridiculous, given how obvious the truth was. She'd been wet and cold and his cabin had been a place where she could dry herself out and get warm. She'd gotten caught in the downpour and come here as a matter of necessity.

Necessity, he told himself firmly.

Yet that knowledge didn't stop Alec from reveling in the feeling of coming home to a cabin that wasn't empty. A warm

hearth, a set of boots beside his own, a shawl drying by the fire.

Alec removed his cravat and hung his coat and vest next to Charlotte's shawl so they could begin to dry. He knew he should wake her, but he stalled, combing back his damp hair and running a hand over his beard.

The pig grunted a little, rolling onto its side, as if it meant to try to rise. Alec went down on one knee, rubbing the pig's belly gently. "Shh," he urged. The pig demanded his attention, and he indulged the creature for a full minute before he rose and went to his desk, tempted to light a few more candles and return to the research he'd abandoned when he'd been summoned by Mrs. Browning.

Instead, he picked up his chair, carrying it across the room to place it in front of the fire a mere foot from the armchair where Charlotte slept. He sat down heavily—too heavily. The chair's legs scraped against the puncheon floor.

Charlotte let out a gentle moan before blinking awake. "Oh." She blinked again and then sat up and pressed her hands to her cheeks. "Oh! You must think me very forward, making myself at home like this."

Alec should, he knew. It *was* forward. But seated near her, the fire's light scattering shadows, he couldn't bring himself to care. "Did you get caught in the storm?" he asked, voice soft.

She nodded. "I meant to be gone by the time you returned." She cocked her head, listening to the rain on the roof. "You rode through the storm?"

"Aye. But it's good you waited here. There was some heavy hail for a bit. Just pebble-sized, but they stung mightily." He rubbed at the back of his neck, where he'd taken the worst of it. "It's back to raining now, with no sign of letting up."

Her smoky gray eyes still blinked away sleep. "You were out all night?"

He nodded. The fire's heat reached slowly through his clothing, melting away the worst of the cold as it reached his core. But where before his eyelids had been heavy, now, sitting

beside Charlotte, his limbs thrummed with unanticipated tension.

She gave him a measured look, taking in his wet and rumpled clothing. “You must be exhausted. I’ll make some tea for the both of us. One should never start the day without tea.” She got to her feet, and Alec didn’t miss the bare toes peeking out from beneath her dress.

He’d seen plenty of women’s stockingless feet as a doctor examining a patient. Seeing Charlotte’s bare feet as she made her way across the room toward his small cast-iron stove was something else entirely.

Right now he was not a doctor.

He was a man. Seeing an intimacy, a vulnerability usually reserved for marriage. The simple domesticity of the picture was so unexpected it hit him like a blow to the chest.

Alec squeezed out a breath and got to his feet. He couldn’t sit another moment. “I have no tea. Only coffee,” he said abruptly, hoping to dissuade her.

She lit the coals in the stove and stirred them. “Your shocking words the other day made me suspect you were a heathen, but this confirms it. Coffee it is.”

On the rare occasions Alec shared his views on God, he was the recipient of disapproving looks and pity. To have Charlotte make light of it . . . his mouth hitched up a little at the bewilderment of it.

She began rummaging through his things, looking for the coffee grounds. “I dearly hope you have sugar.”

He reached for his black bag and dried it off, then opened it and began sorting through its contents. He mentally willed the rain to stop, despite the futility of it.

Charlotte filled the Neapolitan copper pot with water Alec had drawn yesterday, added the coffee grounds she’d found in the cupboard, and set it on to boil.

He needed something between them, some form of distraction. “I wouldn’t have guessed you knew how to make a

cup of coffee,” he said without looking up. He rolled up a bandage and returned it to his stores.

She stirred the coals again. “My family has what many would consider a tainted background. Though my grandmother married a duke, she came from the humblest of beginnings. The daughter of a crofter who lived in a one-room cottage. My cousin Tavish was born in a home that was not much bigger.

“And while I was raised in a home befitting a duke, it was the greatest adventure when I was allowed to stay over with Aunt Olivia and her boys, where I slept on a straw tick and learned to harvest peat moss for the fire and draw water from the well.” She looked up at him, her mouth pursed in a half smile. “And, of course, how to boil water and make coffee.”

For every one thing Alec learned about this woman, he wished to know a dozen more. But something was bothering him. “So you lived a life of affluence and they lived in relative poverty? How do you explain that?”

“The same way you’d explain why you didn’t allow the Maganns to put you through medical school.” She gave him a coquettish grin that went straight to his chest. “That Scots pride you won’t own up to.”

Blast. It needed to stop raining. Yet still it came, ignorant of his pleas, its warlike drumbeat peppering the roof and sides of his cabin. He returned his bag to its place near the front door.

“I received a letter from my family at long last,” Charlotte said, filling the silence. “My parents wonder if I made the right choice in coming here.” She plucked his tin cup off the shelf and found a chipped teacup in the same cupboard where he stored the coffee grounds. “They won’t say as much, of course, but I can read between the lines. Truth be told, I’ve wondered the same a time or two myself. It’s taken me some time to find a sense of purpose.”

He crossed the room to his desk, desperate to anchor himself in his research. “And that purpose is the swine lying over there on the floor?”

Mirth filled her expression. “Don’t mock me, Alec.”

He stilled at the sound of his name on her lips—he’d forgotten he’d given her leave to use it. The room, the short space between his desk and the stove, seemed to shrink.

Unaware of the maelstrom she’d unleashed in him, Charlotte went on. “I joined Mrs. Borden’s Education and Improvement Society for Women. For the past few weeks I’ve been teaching a young woman named Clara to read and write.”

Alec raised his head. “It’s admirable work, to be certain.”

“*Hard* work.” She grinned. “The truth is I can barely keep up with her.”

A pouch containing a new batch of surveys from the poorer sections of Philadelphia rested on the hook near the shelving. He pulled it down and removed the sheath of papers. “She’s hungry to learn?”

Charlotte traced the rim of the teacup with her forefinger, gingerly touching the chip. “Oh yes. I took my own education for granted, but being with Clara reminds me what a gift it is. She’s plowing forward, and I’m just trying not to stand in her way. I’m grateful to be a part of her journey, even for just the brief time I’m here.”

Why was it so jarring to be reminded that her stay here was of a limited duration? In a short time she’d managed to become a fixture in his life. A rather inconvenient fixture, to be sure, but a fixture all the same. He ran a hand through his hair, then began arranging the papers on his desk, organizing them by date of death.

She removed the pot from the stove and flipped it upside down, allowing the boiling water to filter through the coffee grounds and into the empty chamber. “The Maganns told me you are one of the few doctors here in Pittsburgh who provides medical treatment to anyone, regardless of their ability to pay. And here I thought you Americans were all driven by greed.”

Alec lifted a brow. “As opposed to you British, who operate strictly on benevolence?”

Charlotte inclined her head, her mouth lifted in a half smile.

“Point taken.”

He gave up trying to sort the surveys and walked to the window. “I give help where I can.” He thought of Matthew, who’d knocked on his door a few weeks before. “And most find their own ways to pay me for my services.”

From where he stood, his back leaning against the wall, he observed the contradiction of a marchioness with regal bearing standing barefoot at his stove and pouring coffee. Its earthy aroma filled the room.

“But my contribution is paltry in comparison to some,” he continued. “The Maganns, for example, are always finding ways to give.”

She unwrapped the sugarloaf he’d forgotten he had, tapping off small chunks. “Sugar?” she asked, glancing up at him.

He shook his head, crossing to the stove so she’d not need to bring it to him. “I prefer mine black.”

Charlotte met his gaze, passing the cup of dark brew into his hands, her slender fingers grazing his. “Those who receive your care would hardly consider it a paltry offering.”

The sincerity lacing her words warmed him far more than the steam that wafted from the cup. He took a sip of his coffee, hardly tasting it, then set it down on the stove.

Far from the fire, this side of the room was darker. But if anything, the play of light and shadows only heightened his awareness of Charlotte’s beauty, the curl that was tucked behind the shell of her ear, the arch of her dark brows, her full bottom lip.

Her eyes met his. Something swirled within their depths, a liveliness and intensity that made his gut tighten with longing. Her gaze dropped as she lifted the teacup to her mouth and took a sip, her tongue tracing her lip as she swallowed. She set the teacup down, her lashes still lowered.

An unfamiliar hunger gripped him, growing with every word she spoke, her every glance in his direction. How long had it been since he’d allowed himself to look at a woman this way?

How long since he'd wanted to?

Fear reared its ugly head, insisting that Charlotte posed a threat to his composure, to the tentative grasp he'd managed to keep on life these past three years. Guilt was fast on its heels, reminding him that he had no right to indulge in the company of any woman, let alone one whose presence was far from permanent.

A host of *shoulds* crowded his mind.

He should step back and put distance between them.

He should pull out his research and bury himself in it.

He should go outside and let the pouring rain pound some sense into him.

But he was restive and undone, his defenses far lower than usual, so he did none of those things. Instead, he stood stock-still, allowing himself the pleasure of her nearness, breathing in the soft floral scent of her that hung heavy with the rain.

* * *

Charlotte swallowed, unable to lift her eyes above the triangle of skin showing at Alec's throat, his wet cravat discarded. Only one button was undone, but it revealed just a hint of the light-colored hair his buttoned shirt concealed. Her stomach smoldered with softly glowing embers, sparks of yearning swirling through her veins.

The mood in the room had changed as she'd handed Alec his cup of coffee. The space between them fairly crackled, warning of possible peril. If anyone were to discover them together with no chaperone present, the consequences would be dire. Her reputation would be left in shreds.

But at this moment, with blood pumping through her body so furiously that it pulsed in her ears, it wasn't her reputation she was concerned with, but her heart.

And his.

"Alec," she whispered, her voice husky.

At the sound of his name on her lips, Alec's hazel eyes grew

keen, like those of a stag caught in a hunter's line of sight. Tension sheathed him, in every line and feature, as if he wasn't sure whether to lean forward or away.

Charlotte teetered on the edge of an unknown precipice, one she'd been walking toward from the instant they'd met. The moment demanded caution. Despite Alec's strength, his determination, his stubbornness . . .

He was fragile.

And she would not be careless with a man whose heart had already endured so much.

She lifted a hand and touched it lightly to his chest. The charged feeling of a lightning storm tiptoed up her skin. There was no give at all in the muscle beneath her palm, no reaction from him, save for the quickening of his heart.

Her gaze traced over his features, exploring, discovering. He was tired. It was evident in the lines that marked his eyes and the furrow between his brows. Weary from a night spent at someone's side, but it was more than that.

It was the grief that bowed his shoulders.

The taut line of his jaw that never softened.

The mouth that never pushed into a smile.

She'd made a mistake in looking at his mouth, his lips perfectly formed, their outline edged by an impeccably trimmed beard. She'd never felt so strong a pull, a desire that sang through her at the thought of closing the space between them.

"Be not rash with thy lips."

That scripture *would* come to mind *now*, of all times. Fortunately, she was well-practiced at discarding those words when she found them inconvenient.

She took the tiniest step closer. The space between them all but disappeared. Heat flared in every place they touched. Her palm slid up his chest, her fingers tracing the patch of bared skin at his throat.

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing.

Her hand slid behind Alec's neck, gently tugging him toward her. She wanted him closer. Charlotte pressed her lips to his cheek, and Alec stilled beneath her touch. Next she moved closer to his lips, where she laid a whisper of a kiss on the bristle that lined his face. He didn't move.

Finally, she pushed up onto her toes and touched her mouth to his. She was acting on instinct, asking him to trust her, desperately hoping he'd let down his walls and allow her in, wishing he could feel even a quarter of what he'd awakened in her.

Her hand slid up from the back of his neck, her fingers combing through the thick waves of his hair. Yet still he didn't respond. Charlotte knew she hadn't misread the flare of desire in his expression, but there was a despondency in the way he held himself back. A hopeless restraint in the tenseness of his body. She pressed another kiss to his lips. He tasted of the agony of yesterdays, of a future he believed could no longer exist.

A tear slid down her cheek.

How she wanted to take his heart in her hands. To school it in the ways of love. To teach him that there was more to life than despair and darkness, that love could be good and right and beautiful.

As if he could sense the longing within her, he softened.

Charlotte knew the moment he came to life beneath her touch. His large hand banded around her waist, and his lips molded to hers, assuring her that beneath the stone statue exterior lived a man, one whose desires and passions were far from dead.

"Charlotte," he breathed against her mouth. Beneath the fervor of his kisses, she grew dizzy and breathless. The room whirled, her mind spun, but his gentle hands held her in place, anchoring her within the longing that sparked around them.

She returned his kisses with her own, wanting to erase all trace of the anguish life had subjected him to. Her hand

tightened on his shoulder. She pressed herself closer, as if she could reach through and touch his soul, take away his pain, and soothe his scars.

Alec froze, jerking back as he released her, something haunted in his expression. “No,” he heaved out.

She gasped at the abruptness of his retreat. The fire she’d felt at his touch turned to ash.

“Go,” he said hoarsely.

Her chest contracted. “Alec?” She could barely hear herself over the wild thumping of her heart.

“*Please, go.*” His eyes were tortured, as if her kiss had physically wounded him.

She stumbled backward, bumping into the stove and knocking over her teacup, coffee splashing as it fell to the floor and the cup shattered. How she managed to gather her things, she didn’t know. With her hand on the doorknob, she turned back to look at him. Alec stood unmoving with his back to the wall, his hands gripping the roots of his hair and his chest heaving.

As for herself, she could hardly breathe either. The gravity of what she’d done pressed down on her, a physical weight that settled on her lungs. She stepped outside and pulled the door closed behind her, hurrying down the steps and away from the doctor’s cabin.

The rain had softened to a drizzle, but Charlotte knew nothing but a sharp sense of loss. Instead of treading cautiously, as she’d resolved to do, she had made a vast, and perhaps final, mistake.

But she *had* treaded cautiously, hadn’t she? Taken one slow step at a time, her hand extended, an offering with no expectation. She’d come to him exactly where he was. And when they’d finally met . . .

He’d pulled back.

Fled.

She walked swiftly, as if she could outpace the growing ache

inside of her. But with each step she grew more certain. She had offered her heart, or at least a piece of it, and he'd retreated.

There was only one way forward. The choice, quite simply, was Alec's. If he needed distance, she would give it to him. If he wanted someone to walk beside him through his grief, she was willing. And if he wanted a chance to see what this *something* between them could be, she would be waiting.

But this time he would have to come to her.

Chapter Nineteen

ALEC SAT AT HIS DESK, papers spread before him. One of the candles guttered, a testament to the lateness of the hour. But it wasn't the lack of light that kept him from his work.

He was useless.

Since Charlotte's quick retreat over twelve hours before, he'd not slept. He'd not eaten. His hair had been ravaged by running his hands through it too many times to count. The cup of coffee she had made him sat unfinished and cold, the dark liquid she'd spilled and the broken pieces of her teacup untouched.

A perfect metaphor. His ordered life, now in disarray.

When, where had it all begun? He couldn't say.

All he knew was that as she'd kissed him, something within him had changed.

Alec was a medical man. A doctor. He'd been educated and trained by some of the best minds in science. Spent years studying the human body and its operations. So, logically, he knew the organ that pumped blood through his body had continued to function since the blow of Nellie's death. And yet . . .

He could have sworn that as Charlotte kissed him, his heart had started beating for the first time in three years.

Thump.

Thump, thump.

With the beating of his heart had come consciousness. An awakening. A slow awareness of the woman in the circle of his arms. Charlotte—her softness, her loveliness, her poignant kisses. Something warm and velvet had unfurled in his chest, so long suppressed that he hardly recognized it. Desire. It yawned within him, waking after these long years, the sheer power of it breathtaking.

So he'd kissed her back.

The joining of their mouths had been sweet ecstasy. A mix of light, heat, and passion. A blazing trail of discovery in which he was reminded that life was more than drudgery and duty. More than regret and despair. There could be tenderness. There could be beauty.

There could be Charlotte.

And it was *that*. Reality had crashed over him like a tidal wave of despair. Because no matter how badly he wanted her, there *couldn't* be a Charlotte. Or any other woman. No love could hold up under the weight of his regrets with Nellie. No woman deserved a man who was chained to an eternal whipping post. Whose attempts at atonement were nothing compared to the mountain of mistakes he'd made.

He'd been a fool to forget, even for a moment.

So he'd pushed her away.

And he'd tried to stop the beat of his heart. Tried to rebuild the wall that kept him separate from the world. But it was no use. Somehow he couldn't summon his passionless existence from before.

He was raw and vulnerable and without defense.

A loud bang on the door forced Alec up from the abyss of his thoughts. His gaze shifted to the clock on the mantel. Just after eleven. Another night call meant another night of no sleep. He set his papers aside and rubbed at his eyes.

Three successive bangs resounded so hard they made his front door shake. "Alec, I know you're in there! I can see the candle burning!"

Liam? At this hour?

Alec was in no state for a visit. He got to his feet, trying to tamp down the river of emotion that ran through him unfettered. It was terrifying, having no walls or barriers to block its path.

Another bang. "Alec! Open up!"

Alec hurried over before Liam broke the door off its hinges. He undid the latch and opened the door. "What has you here at

so unholy an hour?” he asked, his voice rough from disuse.

Even in the pale moonlight Alec could see that Liam’s face was dark with anger, his brows bunched low over his eyes.

Liam shouldered the door open and stood in its frame. “Why don’t you tell me, Alec! Am I here because my parents set a place at their table for you tonight, just as they do every Thursday night, and once again, I had to pretend not to notice their disappointment when you didn’t come?”

Alec scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Liam, I’m sorry. I —”

Liam cut him off. “Or perhaps I’m here because Charlotte was on the verge of tears all evening, and I’ve observed enough to know there’s something going on between the two of you.” His voice was louder now, his breaths ragged.

Anger rumbled through Alec. “You’ve no idea—”

Liam shoved him hard in the chest, and Alec stumbled back a step. “Or perhaps I’m here for *me*! I’ve been back a month, and still—nothing! Not even an offer to meet me for a meal at Elliott’s.” He was breathing hard, his nostrils flaring, his face mere inches from Alec’s own. “I told myself you needed time. I gave you your space. But it’s been three *years*, and nothing’s changed! You know I’d do anything for you—I’d give you my own unbroken heart if I could—but you won’t let me. You won’t let *anyone*. Just how long are you willing to let the cloud of your grief hang over everyone you love?”

Alec’s own anger was building. He shoved Liam back out onto the porch. “You know *nothing* of my grief!” Alec followed him, needing air, needing space. Fargo whinnied from the stable.

“Don’t I?” Liam taunted. “I know you use it as a shield, a way of keeping people out! I know it’s easier to bury yourself in it and in your hours of research rather than face the truth of how you felt about Nellie.”

Alec gritted his teeth, fists clenched, his control on the verge of snapping. “Don’t you dare say a *word* about Nellie,” he growled.

A lock of Liam's usually perfectly pomaded hair fell across his forehead. "What are you really grieving? Her death?" He met Alec's gaze with a look of challenge. "Or the fact that you never really loved her?"

Alec's anger exploded and his fist flew, a sharp crack as it connected with Liam's cheekbone. Liam's head snapped back, but within seconds he recovered, head forward, feet apart, as if bracing for another blow. Blood trickled from a small cut beneath the eye that was already beginning to swell.

Alec's own hand trembled, his knuckles split and bleeding.

"Grieving her loss will not change the fact that you didn't love her." Liam touched the rising welt, wincing. "And neither will hitting me."

All the fight went out of Alec. He let his weight sag against the doorframe. Exhaustion pushed him down until he was sitting on the rough-hewn planks of the porch, the door to his cabin still half open.

Liam lowered beside him, wiping at the blood on his cheek with the back of his hand. Uncomfortable silence hung between them, the only sounds their heavy breathing from spent emotion and the orchestral clicking of cicadas.

"I'm not sure I'll ever forgive myself," Alec said, his throat catching. "For not loving her."

Liam was silent. He looked older than Alec remembered, now fully a man, his jaw shadowed at the end of the day. Gone was the boy who had followed Alec through the smithy, peppering him with questions and hanging on his every word. Somewhere along the way, Liam had grown up. Matured. Enough to notice the truth that Alec had never dared share with anyone.

He *hadn't* loved Nellie.

Theirs had been an auspicious start. Nellie's father, David Hallewell, had been a close friend of Martin's and a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine. After receiving a persuasive letter from Martin, he'd been convinced to take a chance on a modest blacksmith

with dreams of becoming a doctor.

Alec hadn't even known David Hallewell had a daughter until he'd been invited, on the eve of his graduation, to a ball where Nellie and her father had been in attendance. When Alec had mentioned their meeting in a letter to Martin, Martin had spoken of the Hallewells in the warmest of terms, strongly suggesting Alec seek a further acquaintance with Nellie. After all Martin had done for him, how could he say no?

It had been a whirlwind of a summer. Alec's elation at earning his MD. The unexpected invitation to stay on at the university as a professor. And his and Nellie's hasty courtship, with constant invitations to dinners, balls, and the theater. Those summer nights glittered in his memory—drinks and dancing amongst Philadelphia's political and social elite with a dazzling Nellie on his arm. Looking back, he knew that sparkle had blinded him to the fact that such a woman, accustomed to living her life at the center of Society, was ill-equipped to become a doctor's wife in a rugged city like Pittsburgh.

But he'd gotten caught up in the idea of having someone to share his life with as he began his career. And Nellie's attention had been addictive. She'd sought Alec out amongst a host of suitors who'd clamored for her attention. It was only now that he realized part of what had attracted her was how vastly different he was from other men of her acquaintance. She'd admired his tenacity, the ambition that had taken him from his humble beginnings to a renowned medical school.

In return Alec had adored her. She'd craved being at the center of attention, and he'd been more than happy to give her the stage. She'd needed constant reassurance, and he'd willingly offered it. He'd never dreamed that someone like her, so well-bred and refined, would pay him even an ounce of attention.

But in truth, they'd hardly known each other. It had occurred to him, in the months following their wedding, that rounds of dancing and drinks and dinner might not be the best circumstances under which to find a life partner. That one's character was unlikely to be revealed on the ballroom floor or

in a drawing room. But he'd been caught up in a sort of hazy wonder during their month-long engagement, October wedding, and honeymoon trip to New York City.

Then it was back to Pittsburgh. The look on her face when he'd taken her home to the rustic cabin where he'd been raised had served as a jolt of reality to wake Alec from the dream he'd been living in.

It had only grown worse from there.

He had been fully engaged in trying to build up his medical practice. Nellie had become jealous when his time and attention weren't solely focused on her, as they'd been before.

During their courtship, she'd been fascinated by his past, the tragedy of his upbringing. But faced with a firsthand knowledge of the modest man she'd yoked herself to, she'd been judgmental of him. She'd turned outward, filling the gaps of his absence with the growing city's social offerings, becoming the darling of Pittsburgh. He'd been hurt by her cold dismissal and had grown to resent her disinterest in his work.

Instead of growing together in the ten short months they'd been married, they'd grown apart.

Alec knew he looked back on it with a jaded perspective. It hadn't been all bad. There'd been weekly dinners with the Maganns, whom Nellie adored. Days when there'd been lulls in his work and he'd taken her for drives along the river. Brief pockets of joy that provided glimpses into what might have been a happy future.

But love?

No.

In truth, Alec grieved for what might have been, rather than what was. He liked to think that, given time, it would have come. That Nellie would have outgrown her selfishness, that he would have made her needs a priority.

But he'd been a fool, believing time was an endless commodity. Believing it was Nellie who'd needed to mature into the role of a doctor's wife. Never even considering taking her back to Philadelphia and building up his practice there.

Never contemplating his own selfishness and shortcomings.

He'd now had three years to think of little else.

He would never have a chance to make things right with Nellie. All he could do, all he'd *been* doing these last years, was trying to atone for his many wrongs. Find the cure for cholera. Live in the constant state of regret he deserved. And never again hurt anyone the way he'd hurt Nellie.

Yet, even in his attempts to make things right, Alec was falling short. He was no closer to discovering the cure for the disease that had stolen her away. In withdrawing himself in the years since, he'd hurt his closest friends, the Maganns. And this morning with Charlotte he'd lost sight, however briefly, of his regret.

The weight of his failures hung heavy.

Liam's baritone voice broke the silence. "I don't doubt your regret, Alec. Or the grief it has caused you. But at what point will the debt be satisfied?"

The question pierced him, its tip as pointed as the sharpest arrow.

Was there a way for Alec to repay the debt? Or was it too immense to ever be forgiven? Alec knew the answer he'd be given if he still attended church.

The debt had already been paid.

He shook off such foolishness; there was no peace down that path. He'd quit himself of the habit of expecting anything from God. It was easier when the only person he ever expected anything of was himself.

Alec sucked in a heavy breath and ignored Liam's question. "I'm sorry, Liam. Sorry for the pain I've caused you and your parents." Remorse filled him as he rubbed at the dried blood on his sore knuckles. "Sorry that I hit you."

The look Liam leveled at him was cool and measured. He was a great deal like his father, his natural state one of calm control. Which was why it had been a shock to see him so upset tonight. It showed how gravely Alec had wounded him.

Liam sighed. “My parents still love you, you know. They hurt for you. And keeping your distance won’t change that.”

Alec scrubbed at his beard. “I sometimes wish it would.”

The turn of Liam’s mouth betrayed his skepticism. “No matter how many years pass by or how far you retreat, those ties won’t break. You’re a son to them.” He cleared his throat, looking out into the darkness. “And you’re a brother to me.”

To Alec, Liam’s words were as much a threat as they were a promise. Such constancy, such dependability, was not something Alec was familiar with. Life had taught him to expect the worse because that was all it offered.

And the one time he’d been foolish enough to forget it . . .

He’d lost Nellie.

This time the silence was broken by a snort. The pig limped toward the open door, crossed the threshold, and began nuzzling Alec’s leg. He sighed and began stroking the pig’s back, preparing himself for the barrage of questions he knew was coming.

Liam’s eyes went wide. “Is that a *splint* on the pig’s leg?”

The pig lay down beside Alec, its warmth seeping through his trousers. “Don’t look too closely, but there are some sutures as well.”

Liam laughed. A bright, mellow sound against the darkness of the night. “Have you decided people are too much trouble? Now you prefer patients who don’t talk?”

This was *truly* humiliating. Alec almost preferred the uncomfortable soul-searching they’d been doing to a discussion about the swine that grunted beside him. “It’s one pig,” he said, defending himself. “A case I took under special circumstances to appease a . . . person of influence.”

“A person of . . .” His voice trailed off, and Alec could practically see his mind working. “Charlotte?” Liam asked with disbelief.

Alec looked away.

Liam guffawed. He stared at the pig sleeping against Alec's thigh, and wave after wave of laughter rolled out of him.

Much to his chagrin, a slip of laughter escaped Alec as well. The situation *was* ridiculous. Hard as he tried to keep ahold of it, another chuckle leaked out. Soon Alec had joined Liam, laughter splitting the cool air, their stomachs shaking and faces red. If anyone saw the two of them sitting on Alec's porch in such a state, they'd be carted off to Bedlam.

Slowly their laughter petered out. Alec had forgotten how much they used to laugh together. Over Liam's attempts to wield Alec's hammer. Over the antics of a skunk. Over Alice's firm rebukes when Liam attempted to cheat at cards. It was now so foreign to Alec that his stomach muscles ached.

"A person of influence," Liam mused. "Because of her title? Or does her influence have to do with the"—he waved his hand—"something between you?"

Lead filled Alec's gut as he remembered, still just as tortured by that branding kiss, still just as certain it had been a mistake.

Liam's eyes narrowed. "She's a good woman, Alec."

There were too many barriers to name, so Alec stated only the most obvious. "She lives a world away, Liam."

Liam's jaw tightened. "But I am here. And so are my parents. And Vera. Yet you hedge yourself in, allow yourself no ties." He cleared his throat, his face stern. "What I came here to tell you tonight is this: I'll expect you at Thursday dinners from now on."

Alec opened his mouth to protest, but Liam held up a hand. "No excuses. It's been long enough, Alec. But beyond that, I'd like to think this"—he rubbed at his swollen eye—"gives me a little leverage. At ten o'clock this Sunday, you'll also be in the Magann pew at First Presbyterian. I don't care if you curse God the entire hour. But come for my parents. You've no idea what it would mean to them." He paused, searching Alec's face. "Yes, there's more."

"I didn't hit you hard enough for there to be more," Alec

protested. But a part of him, a tiny part, felt a hint of relief that Liam cared enough to bring him back. That he wouldn't have to take these steps on his own.

“You still swing like a blacksmith. There is more.” Liam’s face softened. “I know how little tolerance you have for social events, but you should come to a few of those too.”

Alec squeezed his eyes closed. “I . . . *can't*.”

Liam lumbered to his feet and moved to the edge of the porch. The night air ruffled his hair, but he stood firm, his posture resolved. “Perhaps you need to consider the *why* behind your actions. These past three years you’ve lived your life apart from everyone and everything. But I wonder . . . do you keep yourself detached to protect yourself? Or because you think in doing so you are somehow protecting us?”

With a soft shuffle of his boots, Liam was gone and Alec was left alone once more, with nothing more than a snoring pig for company. The space behind Alec’s ribcage hurt. Much as he wanted to believe it was merely sore from laughter, he knew it was something else entirely.

It was the prospect of facing the past. He’d kept it all at bay for so long, locking away the memories and emotions that had caused such wrenching pain. And he had managed life that way.

Survived.

Endured.

But Liam demanded more. Liam expected him to go through the motions, if not for himself, then at least for the sake of others. Could Alec do it? Could he walk into church because he cared for Alice and Martin? Attend a dinner here and there for Liam?

Once again he was back by the stove in his cabin, the room flickering with firelight, Charlotte’s hand pressed against his chest, against the very place his heart resided.

Why, when Alec thought of attempting the things Liam had asked of him, was it the image of her face that first came to mind?

Chapter Twenty

ON SUNDAY MORNING ALEC ROSE early. He nearly tripped over the sleeping pig at the foot of the bed. Much to his chagrin, the creature was no longer content to sleep in the main room, in the small hay-filled box he'd built for it, but now it pawed at his bedroom door every night until he let it in. It had also taken to lying at his feet while he worked at his desk. Bothersome swine.

The pig wakened, dragging its back leg as it followed Alec into the front room, where he stoked the fire. "You'll simply have to go," Alec told the pig.

The pig stared at him, blinking, clueless as to its future. It nuzzled his ankle. Alec sighed, rubbing the soft skin behind its ears. "You're becoming an embarrassment," he scolded.

That didn't stop the pig from following him around as he dressed for the day, made his coffee, and put on his coat. When he went to the door, the pig was right on his heels. "Good day, Pig," he said gruffly, realizing how ridiculous he sounded. The pig needed a name.

Instead of saddling Fargo, Alec walked into Pittsburgh, craving the outlet of exercise, needing the time to think and arrange his thoughts. It was a perfect fall morning, the air crisp, the sun casting gilded light through the trees. Leaves crunched underfoot, and the breeze carried a smoky tang. Most would glory in it. But gray skies and mist-covered hills would have better suited Alec's mood.

The past two days he'd wrestled without ceasing, contemplating the promises he'd made to himself when he'd buried Nellie. Reliving that rainy morning with Charlotte. Pondering Liam's hard truths and difficult queries.

He felt like a ship adrift, floating to and fro on the waves, carried with the shift in the winds, the change in the tides.

He yearned for an anchor.

Long strides carried him along the wharf. When he turned down Oliver Avenue, his tumbling thoughts landed again on

Nellie. Within minutes he stood outside the cemetery that served as her resting place.

His heart was heavy, the guilt nearly strangling.

He stepped into the mournful space, where the sun rarely reached. The stone that marked Nellie's grave was covered with leaves shaken from hovering trees.

Alec cleared them away, wishing it were as easy to wipe away the detritus that shrouded his soul. He knelt in front of the stone, his head bent, muscles rigid, Liam's question echoing in his head.

“At what point will the debt be satisfied?”

The burden he carried had never felt heavier. The future before him was bleaker than he could bear. He could hardly draw sufficient air into his lungs. From somewhere deep inside him came a groan. And the realization that, no matter how many times he came here, regret bowing his head in shame; how many hours he sat at his desk, poring over his research; how long he denied himself everything that brought him joy . . .

It would change nothing.

The stone marking Nellie's death would remain.

Regret for the mistakes he'd made would linger.

His sorrow would persist.

A breeze sent the leaves nearby whirling, spinning in circles before they found a new resting place. Within a few months they'd be snow-covered, slowly deteriorating until spring came and they were incorporated back into the earth. New leaves would grow, fresh and green.

Were the promises he'd made at Nellie's death like trying to hold on to fallen leaves? So brown and brittle they crumbled at the slightest touch?

Had the time come to let go of the past and embrace life after Nellie? He looked at the aged trees that edged the cemetery, their trunks bent and battered by time and wind and storm. Even they could grow new leaves.

But the thought of releasing the regret he'd clung to these past years terrified him. Emotion knotted in Alec's throat at just considering such a thing.

Spring brought no guarantees, after all. A late frost could devastate new growth. Pests could defoliate the healthiest branch. Early heat could foster sunscald, damaging a tree's bark.

But there were no guarantees in this eternal winter Alec found himself in either.

So, for the first time in years, Alec allowed himself to want something *other* than the endless stretch of a blizzard landscape. Given that permission, Alec found there were many things he wanted.

A dinner with Martin, Alice, and Liam where he fully allowed himself the pleasure of their company. The thrill he'd once found in doctoring, knowing he was helping people as he hadn't been able to help his father. The solace to be discovered in beautiful poetry.

The church bell began ringing, and Alec opened his eyes and stood, brushing at his damp trousers, feeling less burdened than he had in years.

Regret lingered—he doubted he would ever be fully free of it—but neither did its chains hold him fast as they had for so long.

The cemetery, which had always felt so dark and mournful, felt peaceful. Alec stood still, staring down at his boots, conscious of the slow beating of his heart, the unfamiliar calm within him.

“Alec,” Liam called.

Alec lifted his gaze to find Liam standing at the entrance to the cemetery, raising his hand in greeting, his smile tentative. The bruise under his eye had bloomed into a dark purple, the deep color amplified by swelling. “I thought I'd have to haul you to church forcibly.” He glanced at the wall of First Presbyterian that enclosed one side of the cemetery.

Church.

Just because Alec had decided to try to let go of his regrets and mistakes didn't mean he was ready for *that*. Bitterness still choked him whenever he thought of God. And he wasn't ready to face Charlotte. He hadn't even had the chance to fully consider what this morning's revelation meant.

But it would mean the world to Alice and Martin.

"With my eye the way it is, I fear I may need a doctor at any moment." Liam's mouth twitched. "It's your duty to come in with me, just in case."

Alec eased out a breath and stepped forward. "Just in case," he muttered and followed Liam inside.

* * *

Charlotte slid into the pew as the last bell chimed. She took her place beside Harriet, removing her cloak and settling it over her legs. When she glanced around, she was surprised to find that Liam wasn't with them.

She turned her head one way and then the other, wondering what had become of him.

"Pay attention," Harriet urged.

Charlotte did as instructed, trying to appear attentive as she reached for her hymnal. Her voice joined with those in the congregation, and yet her mind wandered, as it had done every minute of every hour the past few days.

Days colored with red.

Crimson anger at Alec for pushing her away.

Scarlet shame for her own forwardness, the presumptuous way she'd kissed him. She'd kissed *him*—like a wanton woman. Her cheeks flushed every time she recalled the feel of his lips on hers. And she'd recalled it plenty.

And finally, a maroon-tinted mournfulness. A sense of loss, not for what she and Alec had but for what might have been.

Every hour that had passed since he'd asked her to leave had been agony. Worse than those dark days in London. Then, at least, she'd been privy to every whispered rumor, every bit of

hearsay and tittle-tattle. But despite the dinners and balls she'd attended with the Maganns these past few days, there was nothing.

No word from Alec. No visit.

Not that he'd not been discussed.

"Dr. Galloway has done wonders for my husband's gout."

"Dr. Galloway took such care with my Louisa when she broke her arm."

"Given that he came to the reception you hosted, do you think Dr. Galloway might attend our ball next month?"

If misery could be defined, it was those long evenings hearing Alec's name spoken everywhere but having not a single insight into his heart or mind.

The one thing she did have was a sneaking suspicion that Liam had been to see him.

Thursday night had been a wretched affair. Charlotte herself had been on pins and needles the hour before dinner, hoping against hope that Alec would appear, yet terrified at the thought of seeing him again.

She needn't have worried.

He hadn't come.

A pall of disappointment had hung over the evening. Martin and Alice had worked hard to put on a good face and keep the conversation lively, of course, and Tavish had aided them in their efforts. As for Charlotte, her contributions to the evening had been meager. She'd been wound up in internal knots, hardly able to exchange pleasantries. Yet even she had been aware of Liam's palpable agitation. Just a few minutes after they'd retired to the drawing room, he'd excused himself and not returned until breakfast the next morning, his eye dark and swollen. It hadn't taken much effort to surmise where he'd been.

Still, it was only a guess. Charlotte hadn't the courage to ask outright, but Liam's silence had only added to the trepidation growing inside her. Did Alec have a black eye to match?

The song ended and Charlotte replaced her hymnal. One of the elders went to the pulpit and announced that Reverend Harrison had taken ill, reminding everyone to keep him in their prayers. Today, in his absence, a Reverend Lewis, visiting from Philadelphia, would be giving the sermon. To her shame, Charlotte was excited at the prospect of a new name and face. She was in sore need of a spiritual balm for her soul.

The man she assumed to be Reverend Lewis stood and walked to the pulpit. He was tall and wiry and wore glasses that framed crystal-blue eyes. His gaze swept over the crowd, his glasses doing nothing to soften the intensity in his eyes, the feeling that he could look into a person's soul.

“Good morning, brothers and sisters,” he said, the tone of his voice personable and welcoming. “I’m sure your prayers are with Reverend Harrison, as are my own. Today I’d like to focus my sermon on a scripture from Isaiah. ‘Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine.’” He looked up from his Bible. “Does He truly know my name? And yours? And what does it mean to be His?”

His fervor had Charlotte paying rapt attention.

Until Alec appeared at the edge of their pew, his large figure casting a shadow over her. He made no move to sit; indeed, he looked as if he wanted to flee. Liam came up behind him and whispered something. Alec nodded and eased his body into the seat next to Charlotte. The pew wasn't made for a man of his size, and his knees knocked against the wooden back of the bench in front of them.

Charlotte tried to make sense of his presence here today. She knew God could work miracles, but this seemed impressive even for Him.

Liam had played a part, no doubt. He extended his leg across the opening at the end of the pew, as if to bar Alec's exit.

She thought back to her shock when Alec had expressed his doubts in God. “*God has no interest in me, and I none in Him.*” A prayer swelled inside her, a hope that even one thing the visiting reverend said today might take root in Alec. A

start, no matter how small, to his healing.

He sat forward, forearms braced on his knees, head bent. Charlotte's eyes slipped over him, tracing over the waves in his dark-blond hair, the way it curled over his collar. She stared at his coat, its seams straining over the expanse of his broad shoulders.

Everything about him was so very . . . solid. Unyielding. As if he could weather any storm. Perhaps he was wounded, but he didn't cower, didn't give up or allow his pain to paralyze him. Instead, he faced the demands placed upon him head-on, stalwart, moving forward as time demanded. The thought of having someone like that, like *him*, by her side throughout life made her catch her breath.

She faced forward, her body tense, attuned to the bear of the man next to her. She was aware of every inch between them. Of every breath he took and the way just sitting beside him awakened every nerve ending in her body.

What had started out as a desire to help Alec had grown into something much more. Tavish had warned her. He'd told her Alec might lash out, that she might be hurt in her attempts to aid him. What she hadn't expected was for her heart to attach itself so quickly. To become so wrapped up in a man whose pain was still so acute.

Charlotte fiddled with her gloves and tried to convince herself that she would be happy if only Alec could mend his relationship with God. That seeing him healed in that capacity would be enough for her.

But the ache in her chest said otherwise.

The swell of hope she'd felt at seeing him told her she was too far in to pull away without being hurt. So did the stab of pain that radiated through her even now, when he made no effort to acknowledge her presence.

"We are His," Reverend Lewis went on. "Nothing we say or do can change that. The only choice we can truly make is how much distance we put between us and God. The Lord would have us draw near to Him. He would have us pray without

ceasing, plead with Him. Pour out our hearts to Him. If we allow Him to, He can be our refuge. A place to turn during our deepest sorrows and greatest trials.”

Charlotte allowed the beauty of the reverend’s words to sweep over her. Allowed those poignant truths to penetrate her heart, the promise that the Lord could wash away even the sorrow of future loss. If Alec broke her heart, God would heal it, just as he’d done in the painful months following her retreat from London.

Alec didn’t move during the whole of the sermon. He didn’t shift, didn’t raise his head. It was impossible not to wonder whether he was listening, what he was thinking and feeling.

With each minute that passed, Charlotte grew more tense. She continued to fiddle with her gloves. She interlaced her fingers and then pulled them apart. She traced the stitches on her cloak. Finally, as Reverend Lewis closed his sermon, Harriet slapped Charlotte’s knee. “Stop fidgeting!” she hissed.

Alec glanced at her then, but she couldn’t face him. With her head facing forward, her hands resting in her lap, Charlotte held herself so still she might have been mistaken for a statue.

At last, it was over. The low rumble of voices filled the chapel. People began to rise. Charlotte didn’t move a muscle until Liam and Alec had exited the pew, and when she did, she made sure Harriet was right beside her. Alice and Martin had their eyes on Alec as they exited the pew, their faces beaming. Liam’s attention was fixed on his parents.

“Now, now,” Alec warned. “Don’t make a scene, or I’ll not come again.”

“Very well. I’ll just make polite conversation, then,” Alice said, a teasing gleam in her eyes. “Wasn’t that a lovely sermon? Reverend Lewis truly outdid himself. What was your favorite part, Alec?”

“The part when he said amen and stepped down,” Alec said without missing a beat. “Those pews are even smaller than I remembered.”

Charlotte’s lips twitched.

“Oh, you!” Alice slapped him with her fan, laughing. “Tell me you don’t have any appointments this afternoon. You can ride over and join us for dinner.” She looked at him so eagerly, Charlotte would be impressed if Alec managed to turn her down.

He glanced down the aisle at the hoard of people, women chatting, children dodging in and out, men herding their families toward the back doors. “If I can manage to make it out of the church without anyone engaging my services today, I’ll join you for dinner.”

Alice raised her brows, seemingly calculating the chances of that possibility. “I believe,” she said, a mischievous glint in her eyes, “there’s another door just this way.”

Alec still hadn’t looked at her. In fact, Charlotte might have said he was pointedly looking everywhere *but* at her. She let out a little sigh. The thought of enduring an entire evening this way was almost too much to bear.

Chapter Twenty-One

ALEC WALKED WITH BRISK STRIDES, as if he could outpace his thoughts. He'd spent the last hour feeling as if he were being hit by a battering ram. The assault had been two-pronged, with Charlotte on one side of him and the impassioned reverend on the other. With Charlotte, there was nothing to be done but ignore the curl of attraction that hovered in his belly whenever she was near.

Against God, at least, he had better defenses. It had been easy to batten them down by recalling every prayer he'd ever uttered that had gone unanswered. He had a long list of grievances, and he'd laid them all at God's feet.

Those grievances had made it easy to dismiss the reverend's assurance that the Lord could be a refuge, a place to turn during sorrows and trials. He'd believed that once. After his father's death, as a boy of just eleven, everyone had told him to have faith. In response Alec had prayed more fervently. Been more diligent in memorizing passages of scripture. Tried to live the precepts taught on Sundays.

But three short years later, when Alec was on the cusp of manhood, his grandfather had passed. He'd received the same platitudes. Martin had once told Alec that no matter how it felt, he would never be alone.

And still he'd believed it.

Until the night he'd found Nellie dead on the floor. He'd begged God for another chance. Begged to make things right with her. Begged until he'd gone hoarse and there was nothing left to ask for. Come dawn Nellie was still cold and stiff in his arms.

That was when he'd known God didn't care. God had no interest in him or his desires. And Alec refused to seek comfort in a Being who refused to answer when Alec needed Him most.

His thoughts wandered to Charlotte. He'd had fewer defenses against her and less practice pushing her away. A

problem, to be sure. Because he hadn't imagined the hint of expectation that had hovered in the air between them today.

Without conscious permission, his thoughts had drifted back over every one of their meetings. When they'd been introduced at Martin's welcoming reception and Alec had all but snubbed her. The insulting words she'd overheard. The next morning when her fire had fanned to life in defense of Harriet and she'd curtly dismissed his advice. Their argument over coal-mining conditions and slavery. Her demands that he save the injured pig. Working alongside her as he'd stitched up the swine and reset its leg. Her early-morning visits with a bucket of slops and conversations he'd found himself enjoying against his will.

His surprise that rainy morning, when he'd come home to find Charlotte curled up in his chair. Her bare feet. The potent thrall of watching her make coffee and the brush of her fingers as she'd handed him his cup. And then her kiss. A searing, scalding memory that still lingered on his lips.

But he couldn't forget the moment he'd pulled back. The surprise on Charlotte's face, followed quickly by hurt. In his years of schooling, he'd been trained to look for injury.

And he'd wounded her.

Given his past, he wasn't certain he trusted himself not to do it again.

Alec shoved his hands into his pockets. The dirt path beneath his feet was one he'd traveled so many times, rote memory guided him home. His thoughts darted this way and that, hope endlessly looping them in different directions.

But in the end, the verdict remained the same.

If he let things develop any further between him and Charlotte, the inevitable conclusion was marriage. Which was . . . impossible. Just the thought of such a tie made him break out in a cold sweat. The failure of his first marriage was, in no small part, due to his own shortcomings. Who could say he was a different man than the one who had failed so abysmally then?

And that wasn't the only reason he was hesitant to give rise to any expectation on Charlotte's part. He was a doctor in Pittsburgh, she a peeress in Scotland. Their lives were set on different paths, intersecting only temporarily. Even if he entertained so ludicrous a thought as to believe they might have a future . . . what then? Would he give up his life here? Would she cut ties with all she held dear back home?

There was no way forward. Charlotte, with her soft heart and hopeful gray eyes, might not see it, but he did. And he was duty bound to put a stop to it.

But when he was ushered into the Maganns' drawing room later that day, only to realize Charlotte was its only other occupant, he wavered.

She sat on the sofa, facing away from him, her posture elegant, her gaze wandering the wall of portraits to her right. He took in every detail as he approached—the pale-blue silk gown that caressed her every curve making Alec's gaze linger, the mass of curls that brushed her nape, the cock of her head when she heard his footsteps on the rug. She turned and met his gaze, her eyes the color of the mist-covered Allegheny mountains.

Alec drank in the sight of her.

A faint blush pinked her cheeks. "I'm usually the last one. To come for dinner, I mean. But tonight I confess I—"

Just what she planned to confess he didn't know, because Martin's entrance stopped her short.

He crossed the room with his cane, reaching out his free hand to pat Alec on the back. "Alec! Such a pleasure to have you. And on a Sunday, no less. Alice will be down shortly. Something about a missing button." He turned and greeted Charlotte with a smile. "My dear, how are you this evening?"

Alec felt a twinge of disappointment at the missed opportunity with Charlotte, but it was for the best. Within a few minutes Tavish and Liam had joined them. Alice came last, her movements harried. "Apologies to all of you for my tardiness. Cook will have my head if we don't go into dinner

at once.”

Martin took Alice’s arm and escorted her in, and Alec fell into step beside Tavish.

He was relieved when he and Charlotte were seated at opposite ends of the table. He needed time and space to collect himself, to remind himself of the futility of a future between them. For tonight, he would turn his efforts to Martin and Alice. He’d hurt them these past years, and he intended to try to make it up to them.

The two of them seemed to sense that something in Alec had changed, because during dinner they were at ease in a way he’d forgotten they were capable of. As if they’d finally stopped tiptoeing around him. Martin was less cautious when he posed a question to Alec. Liam teased him without fear of kindling his ire. Alice laughed and smiled more, her demeanor carefree.

The once-familiar rhythm of their dinners slowly returned as he waded back into a world he’d been absent from for so long. He had to remind himself to relax. Not to frown. To fully listen and not let his mind wander to his research. Or Charlotte.

But surrounded by the Maganns, the transition wasn’t as daunting as he’d imagined. He could feel what his presence meant to them, and it made him want to try, despite the unsettling newness of it all.

Charlotte’s furtive glances had an entirely different effect, filling his stomach with forbidden warmth. It took concentrated effort to keep his attention from her.

For the entirety of the meal, conversation flowed easily, and although Alec didn’t speak much, he allowed the camaraderie at the table to filter through him, a reminder of something that had once been second nature to him. Martin and Alice were at their best tonight, telling stories and making everyone laugh, their ebullience contagious.

After the final course, Alice set down her wine glass and cleared her throat. “Alec, you’ll forgive me for telling this

story, but I cannot help myself. Tavish and Charlotte simply must hear it.”

He stifled a groan.

She grinned. “It is one of my favorite stories from Alec’s childhood. He was always big for his age, but he had such a tender heart.” She set a hand on his sleeve. “And he always had us laughing because he took everything so *literally*. He couldn’t have been older than three or four this one year, when in the weeks leading up to Christmas, he announced that he’d be getting each of us a piece of gold. We wondered what he could mean by it. Had he found some shiny rocks? Or mistaken something colored yellow for gold? We had no idea.”

Charlotte and Tavish, who’d never heard the story before, sat forward as they anxiously awaited the story’s conclusion.

Alice looked quite pleased with herself. “Imagine our surprise when on Christmas morning, we were each given . . . a piece of coal!”

“Coal?” Charlotte repeated.

“Coal.” Alice nodded, smiling. “Poor Alec was terribly upset when we were more confused than awed by his gift.”

Charlotte glanced at Alec. “But however could he have mistaken coal for . . . gold?”

In reply Alice laughed her full-hearted laugh. “Apparently, Alec had overheard his father telling one of his customers that coal was a blacksmith’s gold. And Alec took that, as I told you before, very literally.”

Martin chimed in. “We spent most of Christmas morning laughing. Your grandfather, especially, found it amusing. He kept making jokes about how Pittsburgh was a national treasure because of all the gold in these hills.”

Alec heaved a sigh, letting them know what a trial it was to hear this story repeated once again. He turned to Tavish. “The worst part of the whole story is that it became a Christmas tradition. Now every year everyone receives a lump of coal on Christmas morning. And at the end of the day, everyone thinks it’s a great joke and gives their piece to me, even though I’m

no longer a blacksmith.”

In truth, Alec had always found comfort in the reliability of the tradition, especially after his father and grandfather had passed on. But for the past three years, he’d excluded himself from Christmas celebrations. Only now was he realizing how much he’d missed it.

“On a cold year, coal *is* better than gold,” Tavish said. “Back home, we always burned peat because we couldn’t afford coal. Charlotte and I used tae take turns feeding it tae the fire.”

“I find the story endearing,” Charlotte said. “Alec must have been so disappointed to learn he was mistaken.”

“He was,” Martin confirmed. “Until Leith showed him how the pieces of coal he’d given out for Christmas could be used to build a fire that could melt gold down and aid in the process of refining it.”

“How sweet of him,” Charlotte said.

“Leith was a gentle, patient father. He truly adored Alec.” Martin glanced at the clock. “Shall we adjourn to the drawing room?” Everyone agreed, and the group rose, soft chatter and footsteps moving toward the door.

Alec pushed in his chair and turned to follow the others. Only as he reached the head of the table did he realize that Charlotte had taken her time smoothing her dress and adjusting her gloves as she waited for him. He felt both the tug of her presence and the need to distance himself. She reached his side, and they walked to the door together, a little ways behind the others.

“Do you remember it?” Charlotte asked. “Your father showing you how to purify gold?”

Alec nodded. “I do.” Though, he hadn’t thought of it in ages. “It was the first time my father ever let me inside the smithy. He set me on a barrel, far from the forge’s fire, and let me watch as he worked. I was mesmerized. And when we were finished, he gave me a small gold band he’d made for me, one that was too big to fit anywhere but on a chain I wore around my neck.”

It was one of Alec's most vivid memories. Alice had been off in her recounting; he must have been at least five or six to remember it so clearly. The firelight. The sweat on his father's brow. The smell of hot iron, the sizzle of water as it cooled. His father's voice, soft with a Scottish lilt, bestowing a life lesson. *"I want ye tae remember how much coal we had tae feed the fire in order tae purify the gold tae make this wee ring. Like gold, all the most precious things in life require plenty of effort, Alec. Don't forget that."*

"Do you still have it?" Charlotte asked, bringing Alec back to the present.

He nodded. "At home." In a drawer in his bedside table. How long had it been since he'd looked at that ring? Pondered on his father's wisdom? Too long.

They turned down the hall, falling into step together. When they reached the door to the drawing room, they both paused, as if by mutual agreement. Every minute alone with Charlotte was torture for Alec and unfair to her, but resisting the pull between them was proving almost impossible.

Charlotte's gaze was discerning, her voice low. "You miss your father a great deal."

He gave the barest nod.

"He must have been a very good man, to have raised someone like you." She lifted her eyes and her gaze burned into him, a blaze he felt all the way down his middle. The huskiness in her voice strummed some inner chord in Alec, her ability to touch his heart and mind just as powerful as the physical pull between them. Deep hunger tugged him closer.

His gaze dropped to her lips. How easy it would be to fall into this. But he'd fallen once before. And he wouldn't . . . not again. If ever he allowed himself to explore a future with another woman, it would be a decision he made deliberately. A conscious choice.

So he pulled back. Again.

"I need to go." His voice was shaky, unsteady. "I've given all . . . I can today. You'll explain to the others?"

Charlotte's features were filled with nothing but kindness. She nodded. "Of course."

He almost wished she'd not been so understanding. That she'd shown a degree of frustration or pushed back on his reticence.

Because if she'd given the slightest indication that she'd wanted him to, he might've stayed.

Where she was concerned, he was helpless.

A terrifying thought.

Chapter Twenty-Two

TUCKED BENEATH THE COUNTERPANE, A single candle burning on the bedside table, Charlotte opened her father's journal. Disappointment rested heavy in her stomach. On this night, of all nights, she *needed* to believe in love and happy endings.

Every moment with Alec tonight had been bittersweet. It was as if Charlotte had been given tickets to an exquisitely beautiful performance . . . not one of fanfare or grand gestures but of subtlety, where the tiniest details expressed more than Shakespeare's most celebrated monologues. Watching Alec consciously choose to open himself up was something she would not soon forget.

She knew his anguish still rested just beneath the surface, but to see him enjoy a dinner with the people who were the nearest thing to family he had had been truly moving. It had made her all the more determined to extend grace, to show him patience.

The battle against his grief and regret wouldn't be won in a day.

So when he'd decided to leave early this evening, rather than rejoin the others, she'd allowed him his space. She continued to surprise herself, for that certainly was not the Charlotte she was back home.

When Iseabel was quite young, Charlotte had begun to develop the habit of defining herself in juxtaposition to her sister. Charlotte had once heard someone describe Iseabel as angelic. When no one said the same about her, she'd taken that to mean she fell short of such heavenly standards. Some distinctions were pointed out by others and some she'd come to observe herself.

Iseabel was quiet and reserved, which meant Charlotte was talkative and sociable.

Iseabel loved books. Charlotte preferred the outdoors.

Iseabel shied away from attention. Charlotte, as a future duchess, had little choice but to embrace it.

Iseabel disliked passionate discussions. Charlotte loved the heat of a good argument.

Bit by bit those distinctions had written the narrative of how Charlotte defined herself, a narrative with precisely drawn lines and little room for flexibility. And, for the most part, Charlotte had accepted them. It wasn't until a few years ago that she'd begun to find those self-imposed constructs repressive.

But with Alec, Charlotte wasn't constrained by those definitions. Yes, there'd been plenty of heated debates between them. But they'd also enjoyed peaceful discussions of things big and small. They'd experienced quiet camaraderie as they'd cared for the pig. There'd been moments of comfortable silence.

And in those moments, a different version of Charlotte had emerged. A milder, softer Charlotte. There seemed to be something about the fierce brokenness in Alec that brought out the gentleness in her. And she liked it.

She didn't have to be all fire, all the time.

She could be a warm blanket instead.

That realization only made Alec's reticence tonight more excruciating. With each interaction, she became more certain of her heart. Not that she loved him. But that she *could*. The path was there, one she was willing to take. But she couldn't walk it alone.

So much depended on . . . him.

What she felt was not wholly one-sided. That had been evident tonight, when the two of them had been alone for those brief moments in the corridor. He wanted her. But it was more than some unfulfilled base desire. It was the need for connection between two minds, real and lasting. It was a link between two souls that couldn't rationally be explained. One that had sparked into existence the moment they'd stepped into the same room.

Certainty dawned.

That was the *why* behind the beginning of their relationship.

Why Alec had always felt so threatened, why he'd continually donned boxing gloves and insisted on sparring through their every interaction. He'd felt the power of that link. And it scared him.

But he had been different tonight at dinner, at least with Martin, Alice, and Liam. Was it possible something significant had changed? And if it had . . .

Did that mean anything for him and Charlotte? Even if Alec *were* willing to open himself to the possibility of love again—and that was an enormous if—it would be unfair for either of them to move ahead blindly. With such disparate lives, the future must be a real and present consideration.

How could she ask him to consider such looming choices in a future of unknown tomorrows when he was still finding his way through the grief of yesterdays?

It was too much.

Too fast.

If she were a different woman, with the freedom to stay and explore possibilities . . . if she weren't the heiress to a duchy with the weight of so many people on her shoulders . . .

In the eight years since she'd learned that she would one day inherit her father's title, she'd been scared and uncertain, thrilled and excited, and of course overwhelmed. But tonight was the first time she truly resented that inheritance and what it meant for her future.

Her life was not her own, with a trail yet to be discovered. She knew exactly what path she would walk, the things she would do, and where she would live. At thirty and forty. Sixty-two. Seventy-seven.

The only thing that was still hazy at this point?

Who would be by her side along that path.

She sighed, rubbing at her temples. *That* was a question she was still nowhere near answering.

For now, she'd have to content herself with the story written on the pages resting in her hands. That story, at least, had a

happy ending. One she could rest on with certainty when she doubted the future.

September 15, 1812

I met my bride-to-be today, under the most unexpected of circumstances. I'd just spent hours with Uncle Blair, getting as many sheep as we could to higher ground before the dam broke. Half the flock was swept away, and I nearly lost him as well. His losses are great, but all that matters is his safety. We'll find a way to replace his lost sheep.

When I opened the door to head home, I was shocked to come face-to-face with a thin young woman with expressive blue eyes and pretty features. She also happened to be soaked to the bone. When she explained that she was on her way to Castleton Manor, the pieces fell into place.

I was, at last, standing before my intended.

Everything about her and our meeting surprised me. We fell into conversation easily. She has a lyrical voice, a gentle laugh, and best of all, good humor, which she managed to maintain despite the ills that had befallen her on her journey.

I hadn't expected her to be so enchanting.

I hadn't expected to like her at all.

Charlotte laughed, imagining their meeting in her mind. Her father had been so determined he wouldn't like the woman his own father had chosen for him. His wonder at being betrothed to a woman he found both attractive and likable nearly leaped off the page.

Katie has complicated things in a way I didn't expect.

For so long, my father has held the power in our family. But suddenly, in his anxiousness for this marriage to take place—to settle the dukedom and have an heir—the power is now mine. I struck a bargain with him. I agreed to marry Lady Katherine

without complaint in return for his promise to replace the sheep from Uncle Blair's flock.

Imagine my surprise when he agreed.

Tomorrow Katie and I will wed, the beginning of a life neither of us anticipated, perhaps neither of us would have chosen. But after meeting her today, I believe there is promise in our union, which is more than I ever hoped for.

Fatigue pulling at her, Charlotte shut the book, a half smile lifting the corners of her mouth. Had her father fallen first? He seemed poised to. His Scottish fire made him prone to feel things deeply, and she'd seen that in his love for her mother, in the fierce loyalty and sweet tenderness that defined their relationship.

It was hard not to envy it.

And it was hard to keep her thoughts from Alec. His deep-souled hazel eyes. The unruly waves in his hair. The scars and calluses on his gentle hands. His studious mind. The intensity with which he approached every problem and obstacle. The quiet strength that permeated his very soul.

Charlotte set her father's journal on her bedside table and was about to snuff out the candle when Harriet came in.

"I thought I saw a light beneath your door." Several of Charlotte's dresses were draped over Harriet's arm. "What has you up so late?" She opened the doors of the wardrobe.

"My father's journal. I was reading about when my parents first met before their wedding. Were you with my mother back then? Did you see them wed?"

Harriet's shoulders went rigid, but she continued folding. "No, I wasn't with your mother then. Archie and I . . . joined her a few months before you were born."

Charlotte nodded, disappointed. She would have loved to hear the story from Harriet's perspective. "So you didn't watch as their arranged marriage became a love match?"

Harriet glanced at Charlotte over her shoulder. "Their

marriage hasn't always been what it is now, you know."

Of course her parents' marriage had grown and matured in the years since they'd wed—that was to be expected. Charlotte glanced at the weatherworn journal. "Harriet?"

"Hmm?" Harriet finished her task and closed the wardrobe. She put away the pins on the dressing table and brushed away a speck of dust.

"I'd always thought my father spent his years in Barbados before he married my mother, but I can't find any mention of it in his journal. Did he go abroad before he was twenty-three?"

Harriet came to the side of the bed. Little wisps of white hair had escaped her bun, softening her round, wrinkled features. "Your father went abroad in the years before I knew him." She frowned, her expression accentuated by deep wrinkles. "I couldn't give you more details than that."

"Ah well." Charlotte sighed. "I suppose I can ask him in my next letter."

"You should get to bed." Harriet gestured to the candle. "May I?"

"Yes, go ahead." Charlotte put up a hand to cover a yawn.

Harriet lifted the snuffer but paused before she put it over the flame. "Charlotte, you might read things in your father's journal . . . that surprise you."

Charlotte's brow furrowed, confused at Harriet's meaning. "Surprise me?"

Harriet sighed and took a seat on the edge of the bed. The bed sagged a bit under her weight as she sat facing Charlotte. "What your parents have together now . . . it was hard won. It didn't come without pain or heartbreak." Her eyes grew hazy, as if she were somewhere far away. "People want to believe that love comes easily, but I've rarely found that to be the case."

Unease slid through Charlotte's belly. "What do you mean, Harriet?" Why wouldn't she simply be direct?

"Only this: no one is perfect. Not your mother. Not your

father. Every person has their troughs and valleys. Craggs and stony hillsides. Heaven knows my Archie had plenty of them. But God has a way of smoothing out those rough surfaces. So if you read a thing or two that makes you think less of someone, keep reading. It'll all come right."

Charlotte nodded, though she was still uncertain who Harriet was alluding to. Her father? He'd always been so solid, so unbendingly good, that Charlotte couldn't imagine him any other way. Though, that night when she'd listened outside her father's study . . . What had he said? Something about his concern that Charlotte put too much trust in him?

Curiosity tugged at her, but her eyes were tired of fighting the weight of her eyelids. "Good night, Harriet. And thank you—for coming with me. I cannot imagine being here without you."

Harriet looked at Charlotte, a rare smile on her face. She reached out and patted Charlotte's cheek. "I've been with you since the day you were born, with splotchy red skin and a set of lusty lungs. I've no intention of letting you out of my sight until I leave this mortal travail. Now, sleep."

She snuffed the candle and made her way across the room in the dark, leaving Charlotte to wonder at the abundance of the blessings in her life when there were people—good people, like Clara—who had so little.

* * *

The next morning Charlotte studiously avoided walking toward Alec's cabin, well aware of the fact that she'd grown careless with her reputation.

Instead, she headed in the opposite direction, her early-morning walk taking her farther down the river path than ever before. She was enchanted by the stunning contrast of colors—yellow leaves and green grass, red bushes and blue sky, orange ferns and purple hills, all reflected in the river's empty canvas.

By the time she returned and made herself presentable for the day, only Alice, still sipping her tea, sat in the breakfast

parlor. “The others left a few minutes ago. I hope you aren’t too disappointed.”

“Not at all,” Charlotte assured her. She went to the sideboard and took a scone, a hard-boiled egg, and some peach slices, then poured herself a cup of tea. “They’re usually knee-deep in business by breakfast and poor company anyway.”

“You should have seen it! They’d begun discussing plans for the day when I butted in to inform them of this week’s engagements. Within two minutes they were gone, assuring me they had *important* appointments they couldn’t be late for. The knaves!”

Charlotte laughed at Alice’s outrage. She took a seat and spread her napkin over her lap. “I, for one, am all ears.”

Having finally found a willing audience, Alice shared the week’s plans in elaborate detail. Dinner parties, a ball, a night at the theater, a musical soiree. Every night, save for Thursday, was engaged. In the month since she’d arrived in Pittsburgh, Charlotte had been introduced to nearly everyone in the city’s high Society, she’d worn through two pairs of dancing slippers, and she’d begun receiving hordes of morning callers interested in furthering her acquaintance.

But how empty it all felt. She’d trade a week’s worth of social events for just a quarter hour helping Alec feed and care for the pig. A degree of distress must have shown on her face, because Alice paused. “Is there something about our plans that displeases you? If you’d rather not attend dinner at the Graveses’, just say the word, and I can—”

“No, please.” Charlotte hesitated. It wasn’t that Alice wasn’t easy to talk to or was unwilling to listen; it was that Charlotte feared the woman might read too much into what she might say.

Alice set her tea down and shot Charlotte a puzzled look. “What is it, then?”

“What about Thursday? Is Dr. Galloway coming to dinner?”

“After last night, I have every reason to believe—” She looked sharply at Charlotte.

Charlotte grew crimson under her scrutiny.

Alice sat forward. “Have you come to care for the doctor, Charlotte?”

This was the second time Charlotte had been asked that question, but this time she was more certain of the answer. She *did* care for Alec. She only wondered if there was space, amidst all the weight he carried, for him to care for her. Heart in her throat, she nodded. “I’m afraid I’m already in too deep. There are so many unknowns. Alec’s heart most of all.”

Alice reached for her hand. It was a small hand, but her grip was reassuring. “Love can be a frightening prospect, can it not?”

Charlotte depressed her lungs and nodded.

Alice’s mouth lifted at the corners. “But it can also be quite exhilarating. There’s nothing like it in the world, if you’ll simply let go and allow yourself to fall.”

Charlotte glanced down at her lap, wishing it were as easy as it sounded. She drew in a measured breath and raised her gaze. “I want to,” she whispered. “But there’s nothing simple about falling in love with Alec Galloway.”

“In matters of love, the rewards are only as great as the risks you take.” Her words were infused with quiet, reassuring confidence. “And I can tell you, Alec’s heart would be a great reward indeed.”

“I know,” Charlotte replied, swallowing. She had never realized how easily everything in life had come to her until she’d come to Pittsburgh. The effort she’d put into her lessons with Clara was beyond anything she’d known she was capable of. And with Alec, what she wanted most seemed beyond reach.

“Am I wrong in suspecting that some of these changes I see in Alec are thanks to you?” Alice’s other hand closed over Charlotte’s. “A month ago I’d have wagered against him ever setting foot inside a church again.”

Charlotte ducked her head. “I’m not certain. But the truth is my own influence will never be enough. What he needs more

than anything is to mend his relationship with God.”

Alice nodded, her expression contemplative. “I’ve prayed these past three years, wearing out the rug and the Lord’s ear with my pleas on Alec’s behalf, but I promise I’ll not stop. He deserves happiness. If he finds it with you, all the better.”

Tears pricked Charlotte’s eyes. Her own prayers were fervent and heartfelt, but it brought her peace to know she was not the only one pleading for Alec and his healing.

Alice patted Charlotte’s hand. “It’s a special woman who can look past the heartache and turmoil of Alec’s past and see the valuable treasure hidden underneath. Don’t give up hope. The love of a good woman can work miracles.”

Charlotte managed a wobbly smile. How badly she wanted to believe it. She’d been missing her mother this past week, wishing for her guidance. But Alice, with her faith and love, who knew and loved Alec like he was her own, brought Charlotte unexpected comfort.

She squeezed the woman’s hands, hoping Alice could sense the depth of her gratitude. “Thank you, Alice. I’ll forever be grateful for you welcoming me into your home.”

“You’ll always have a place here. I hope you know that.”

Charlotte nodded. She glanced at the clock, feeling the empty hours stretch before her. Though she still had plenty of work to do to prepare, her next lesson with Clara wasn’t until Wednesday, which seemed an eternity away. Charlotte had never been so grateful to have something to look forward to each week. She needed to feel useful, to work, and to serve . . . because otherwise she’d spend all her time waiting. Waiting on Alec. Waiting on the Lord. Both of which required more patience than she possessed.

Alice set down her teacup and got to her feet. “And now I must be off. I’ve a visit to make to a dear friend who recently lost her husband, so I’ll leave you to eat in peace. Tonight’s soiree begins at eight.”

Charlotte smiled politely and nodded. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“If there’s one similarity between our two countries, it’s that no one looks forward to a musical soiree,” Alice said.

A laugh burst out of Charlotte.

A twinkle appeared in Alice’s eyes. “But never you fear. I’ve a plan. If the evening grows too tedious, I’ll pretend to have a fainting spell.”

“There’s no need for anything as dramatic as that,” Charlotte protested.

“Of course there is,” Alice replied. “For then I’ll have the perfect excuse to have Martin send for Dr. Galloway.”

And Charlotte’s heart, the traitorous thing, quickened at the thought.

Chapter Twenty-Three

AFTER FINISHING UP HIS ELEVEN o'clock appointment, Alec headed toward Perry Street, carrying the crate of supplies Mrs. Borden had requested. But even with the heavy crate in his arms, his steps felt lighter than they had in a long while.

One might have thought ridding himself of such weight would be easy, but despite his newfound determination to rid himself of the chains that had bound him for so long, it was a daily, hourly, and sometimes momentary struggle to shake free of them. He'd grown accustomed to the feel of guilt and the burden of regret, and consciously putting them down—and choosing not to pick them back up—took a great deal of effort.

Without them, he felt bare. Vulnerable.

Still, he was trying. On the way to visit patients, Alec forced himself to look around, to be present. And little by little, his senses reawakened. He'd been surrounded by the ever-changing world for so long, but now he wasn't merely an observer; he was a participant.

It was this attempt to be fully present that had finally led him to respond to a request Mrs. Borden had made long ago: some basic medical supplies for some of the poorest women in the community.

Before, he'd been so caught up in his research as he tried to make up for the wrongs of the past that he'd been afraid to add another burden to his already heavy load. Which meant that beyond the needs of his patients, he had put off other demands on his time.

Just yesterday, while going through an old stack of missives, he'd found Mrs. Borden's unanswered request, so here he was, his arms full of the supplies she'd asked for—quinine, cathartic pills, ammonia, morphine, bandages—and more.

He liked to think the supplies in his crate had more to do with his convictions about helping those in need than on the women's society's newest member, but he hadn't examined his motives too closely.

When he finally made it to the Perry Street address, he shifted the crate into one arm and pushed open the door. Alec immediately came face-to-face with a circle of wide-eyed, staring women. This being the Education and Improvement Society for *Women*, it seemed they weren't accustomed to seeing many men at their meetings.

"I'm here to see Mrs. Borden," he said gruffly, uncomfortable under so many curious looks.

A petite woman got to her feet at once, sewing still in hand. Alice. "She's in the back office by the stairs, Alec."

It was a relief to see a familiar face. "Thank you, Alice."

He moved toward the stairs. Shifting the heavy crate back into both arms, he turned at the sound of footsteps on the stairs and bumped into someone.

Charlotte.

He stepped back.

Her hand dropped from the banister.

For the past few days, he'd gone over in his mind every detail of her features, but a sweeping glance assured him his memory didn't do her justice. The fringe of dark lashes that rimmed her smoky-gray eyes. The light dusting of freckles across her nose and rose-colored cheeks. But it was the smile she unleashed, her dimples emerging, that truly rattled him.

"Excuse me, Al—Dr. Galloway," she said, still smiling. "I didn't expect to run into you here. Will you allow me to introduce you to Clara?" She moved aside and motioned to the young woman standing on the steps behind her and holding some papers against her chest.

Alec's gaze shifted to Clara, and he offered a brief nod. Clara's face split into the quick and ready grin she reserved for people she knew well. "I helped bring Clara's youngest two brothers into the world, so you might say she and I are already acquainted."

"Of course. You know everyone in Pittsburgh." Charlotte turned to Clara. "Don't tell me . . . your two youngest

brothers . . .” Her nose scrunched in thought. “Anthony and . . . Henry?”

Clara laughed, nodding. “I don’t know how you remember ’em all when I can barely manage to.”

Alec cleared his throat. “How is your mother, Clara? Has her cough improved any?”

Her head bobbed. “Those herbs worked wonders for her congestion. Thank you, Doctor.”

“I’ll pass your thanks along to Vera. Those herbal remedies are all hers.”

“You’ll have to excuse me now.” Clara descended the last step. “I really must get back to the laundry.”

Charlotte stepped to the wall to let her pass. “Until next Friday!” she called to Clara’s retreating figure.

Clara turned back and waved, then opened the front door and slipped out.

Alec and Charlotte stood in silence, the crate still in his arms. “I apologize,” she said ruefully. “You obviously have somewhere to be. And that looks heavy—”

“It’s no trouble. Do you know where I might find Mrs. Borden?”

“I believe she’s in her office, just back here.” Charlotte stepped past Alec, leading him toward a small door that was tucked beneath the stairs. She knocked softly. “Mrs. Borden?”

The door opened, its frame filled by the thickset woman and her bouffant hair. Charlotte stepped aside. “Dr. Galloway to see you.”

“Dr. Galloway!” Mrs. Borden chirped.

Without a free hand to gesture with, he stepped forward. “I’ve brought some of the supplies you requested. I apologize it has taken me so long to get them to you.”

“Oh, Doctor, thank you! And I must say, your timing is excellent. I was just about to draft another round of letters asking for supplies. Would you set them on the shelf, just

there?” She stepped out so he could enter.

The office was small but organized. Every bit of wall space was taken up with shelves, save for the corner that held her desk and chair, both of which looked much too small for Mrs. Borden’s robust figure. Alec had to bend his head quite low to avoid hitting it on the angled ceiling. He set the crate on the shelf she’d indicated and then made a quick exit.

Now able to stand without stooping his shoulders, it felt as though he could take a full breath. “Anything else I can do to help?”

Mrs. Borden leaned in a bit. “Keep an ear out for those who may be willing to donate to our cause. You know we can always use more help. But for now, the supplies are enough. They’ll do a world of good; I promise you that.” She turned her attention to Charlotte, her hands clasped in front of her. “And how was your lesson with Clara?”

“She’s a wonder,” Charlotte replied, her eyes bright. “You’ve spoiled me with such an eager student.”

“They’re all eager. Every one of them.” Mrs. Borden wore a satisfied expression. “Perhaps in a few weeks you’d be willing to take on another?”

“As soon as you need me.” The liveliness in Charlotte’s tone told Alec her efforts weren’t merely hours of benevolent work she thought befitting her station, but rather a true passion for Mrs. Borden’s endeavors.

“I’ll let you know once I’ve another student lined up,” Mrs. Borden said with a nod. “Now, I hate to shoo you away, but I’ve a dozen things vying for my attention and only one afternoon.”

The two of them bade her good day as she retreated into her tiny office beneath the stairs.

Charlotte turned to Alec. “May I see you out?”

He nodded, and they walked toward the sewing circle near the front of the room. “Are you finished with your lesson, then, Charlotte?” Alice asked.

Charlotte nodded. "But I can join you in the circle until you've finished."

Alice glanced at the clock on the wall. "Didn't you say you needed something at the bookshop? Perhaps you could accompany her, Alec. You wouldn't mind, would you? And I'll have finished up here by one o'clock."

Charlotte's face pinked and Alec couldn't blame her. Alice didn't seem to feel the need for subtlety. But a brief public outing was harmless enough. "I don't mind at all, if Charlotte is in agreement." He looked to Charlotte. "May I accompany you?"

Face still rosy, she nodded once, then went to the wall where her bonnet and cloak hung. Setting the bonnet on her head, she hurriedly tied the ribbon beneath her chin, then removed her gloves from the pocket of her cloak and slipped them on. She laid the cloak over her arm.

Alec held the door open for her and followed her out into the slowly warming afternoon. "Where to?" he asked.

"Randolph's?" she asked, uncertain. "Alice mentioned they carry books, stationery, and art supplies."

He nodded. "Randolph's is the street over." Out of practice as he felt, he offered her his arm.

She glanced up at him, as if he might change his mind and withdraw it. When he held her gaze, she placed a hesitant hand in the crook of his arm. The warmth of it was unexpected. He froze, trying to remember the last time he'd had a woman on his arm.

Nellie.

The familiar tightness banded across his chest, the chains of guilt that had bound him for so long threatening to clang back into place.

Charlotte, as if sensing his discomfort, began to withdraw her arm.

Alec was at a crossroads, the question looming over him: the crumbling leaves of autumn or the new buds of spring?

Past or present?

Settling his hand over her slender fingers, the chains fell away. “This way,” he said, jaw tense as he led Charlotte across the street. They passed shop after shop, turning onto the next street. Carriages rattled by, horses whinnied, shoppers stopped to greet one another.

Alec forced the muscles in his arm to relax so Charlotte wouldn’t feel as if she were tethered to a hitching post. In doing so, he became more aware of her hand on his arm. Such a simple touch shouldn’t affect him so, yet it did.

He found himself as oblivious to his surroundings as he’d been the past three years, but for a much different reason. He was preoccupied with Charlotte—her arm tucked in his, her curves snug beside him, the rustle of her skirts against his leg.

Today she didn’t seem compelled, as she sometimes did, to fill the silence. It was as if she sensed that walking arm in arm with her was all Alec was capable of.

“Is that Randolph’s?” She pointed to the gold-lettered sign posted above a freshly painted red door.

“It is.”

She released his arm as he reached for the door, and he felt the loss of it. For something that had initially required so much effort, he’d adjusted to the simple pleasure rather quickly.

The little bell on the doorknob tinkled as the door closed behind them. The interior was welcoming, with large oak shelves brimming with books and an attached sliding ladder.

Charlotte turned, taking it all in. She began perusing the nearest shelf and reached for one of the books. “I’m a little afraid to ask, but did you ever discover who our pig belongs to?” She turned toward him, those untamed curls framing her face so fetchingly that his pulse ticked faster.

He swallowed. “I’ve been asking, but so far I’ve heard nothing. You realize if we do find the owner, the pig will likely be the main course of their Christmas dinner.”

She shuddered, as if such a thought pained her. “At least you

haven't thrown the poor thing out. There's hope for you yet."

He merely grunted. Alec didn't want to admit that he'd become accustomed to the pig greeting him at the end of his long days, the heavy sound of its breathing as he drifted to sleep, the way the pig woke him by licking his hand. Or that he'd named it.

Charlotte took another book off the shelf, examining its cover. "What supplies did you bring to Mrs. Borden?"

She had to be the most curious woman he knew. "She is broadening her vision of educating women to help those in poverty. As I understand it, she is working to distribute basic medical supplies to those in need. The poor can rarely afford to send for a doctor and must get by the best they can on their own."

Charlotte took another step down the aisle. "Even when the situation is dire?"

Alec lowered his voice. "Not all doctors are willing to attend to such patients."

"Because they cannot pay?"

He shook his head. "Not only that. There's a strong prejudice against those who live in poverty. Some doctors fear the squalor and filth found in such homes."

She leaned in, lowering her voice to match his. "But not you." She said it as a statement of fact, rather than as a question.

"How can I, when I come from such humble beginnings myself? No one can help the circumstances into which they were born."

She nodded, approval in her gaze. "But how can you afford to provide such services to those who cannot pay while still dedicating time to your research?"

Their discussion was growing too personal for the front of the bookstore. He put a hand on the small of her back and led her past the stationery, pens, and inkwells, deeper into the bookstore. "I have plenty of patients who do pay. And I've

received several donations that make my research possible.” He turned down a dim and solitary aisle where few people ventured.

“Mm-hmm,” Charlotte murmured. Without looking, she took another book from the nearest shelf and added it to her pile, as if she were merely an enthusiastic bibliophile.

Alec’s mouth lifted in a half smile at her attempted nonchalance.

“Do you ever wonder . . . ?” She turned her head just enough to catch his eye. “Do you ever wonder over all the good that needs doing . . . and fear you’ll not do enough?”

He stood behind her, his mouth just a few inches from her ear. His answer seemed to matter to her. “I do.” His breath made the curl tucked behind her ear flutter.

“I’m a future duchess with many depending on me. But I wonder, sometimes, if I’ll do enough. If I’ll know what to focus on and what causes to champion. There is so much that needs to be done.” Her head dropped, her chest rising and falling. “What if I fail, Alec?” she whispered.

Of one thing he was certain. “You won’t fail.” She cared too deeply to fail. Even if she didn’t get it right all at once, she would keep working at it until she did succeed. “You need only surround yourself with people who will help and support you.”

A frisson of expectancy hummed in the air between them.

Alec exhaled. “How old are you, Charlotte?” he asked, giving voice to a question he’d long wondered.

She swallowed. “Twenty-three.”

A smile ghosted his lips as he remembered her impertinence the morning he’d examined Harriet. “Take it from a man *of my age*—there’s time yet to make your mark on the world.”

She stilled, but humor danced in her eyes. “I should not have said that.”

Alec chuckled. “Given how overbearing I was, it was no more than I deserved.”

“Perhaps.” Then she shook her head and released a breath. “Did you know I thought Mrs. Borden a little flighty—scatterbrained, even—when we first met?” she asked, returning to the safer, less personal topic of before. Twisting to look at him, her face rested just inches from his own. “But it’s only because she’s trying to do so much good.”

Alec nodded, thinking of Mrs. Borden’s compact office. “I’ve never known a more determined woman. Save perhaps you, when there’s a wounded pig.”

She tilted her head and laughed, soft and low. “You meant that as a compliment, I’m sure.”

Alec sensed that Charlotte had been made to feel that her determination wasn’t a positive trait. No great surprise, given her status, especially in a world where men held most of the power. But Alec admired her determination, and it was suddenly important to him that she know it. “I’m not in the business of giving compliments, Charlotte. ’Tis only what I’ve observed.”

Her lips parted in surprise. She stared at him, looking as if she’d willingly live off such meager praise if he were the one to bestow it. It only made him want to give her more, to offer her the adoration she deserved.

And it wasn’t because of *what* Charlotte was, like it had been with Nellie—when he’d been awed by her attention and stunned by the good fortune of her having chosen him. It was because of *who* Charlotte was. A woman with a generous spirit. A quick wit. A well of determination. A gentle heart.

Standing so close, with her blinking up at him, Alec remembered—in truth, he couldn’t forget—the feel of her lips beneath his. He wanted to kiss her again. Badly. With mere inches between them, he need only lower his head . . .

But the ache in his gut reminded him that he had no business giving rise to any expectation between them. He wasn’t yet where he needed to be. A woman like Charlotte deserved a man with more to give and less to forget.

The bell on the front door jangled.

“Charlotte? Alec?” Alice’s singsong voice came from the front of the shop.

Charlotte stepped back, bumping the shelf behind her. She turned away from him, taking a few steps down the aisle before reaching for another book to add to her growing pile. Alec followed, blood still thrumming from their almost-kiss.

“We’re here, Alice,” Charlotte answered. Alec wondered if Alice caught the breathlessness in her voice. “Do you mind waiting while I make this purchase?”

“Of course not, dear. Take your time. I’m sorry I was delayed.”

Had she been? It felt as if he and Charlotte hadn’t had more than a handful of minutes together. Alec joined Alice over by one of the displays near the counter. She asked him about several of his patients, made sure he was coming to dinner on Thursday.

Yet all the while Alec’s attention never wavered from Charlotte, who stood at the counter. The light from the window outlined her profile. She was more appealing than any woman had a right to be.

Her soft conversation with the clerk drifted back to Alec, and then her low laugh as the bespectacled man commented on the number of books she was buying as he wrapped one into a parcel. After paying, she reached for the large stack on the counter. She must have purchased every one of the books she’d collected as they’d perused the store.

Alec stepped forward. “May I help you carry those?”

She shook her head. “No need. But you may take this one.” She shifted the books into one arm, using her free hand to pluck the one from the top, tied in brown wrapping paper. She handed it to him, a soft smile on her face. “This one is for you.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN as long as he could remember, Alec sat in his green wing chair, legs extended. In his hands lay the wrapped book Charlotte had given him. And all that time he'd thought she'd been mindlessly browsing. He untied the twine, slipped a finger beneath the brown paper, and unwrapped it.

Inside was a rich-red leatherbound book. There was no title on the front, so he opened it carefully, taking care with the spine as he turned the first pages. It was titled *The Scots Musical Museum*, and it promised hundreds of songs—the proclaimed lyrical poetry and music of Scotland.

Alec was immediately intrigued. His grandfather would have treasured such a volume. He thumbed through the pages to the index and quickly discovered that Robert Burns was its most frequent contributor.

Charlotte's favorite poet.

An unexpected gift from an unexpected woman.

A fire crackled in the hearth, warming the cabin on this mid-September night that could very well bring the first autumn frost. The pig, whom Alec had named *Jambe de Bois*, after the peg-legged French pirate, had followed him to his chair and now slept at his feet. The clock resting on the mantel read half past eight.

A few hours earlier, Vera had stopped by with dinner. Seeing her on his front porch, her back stooped over the tray she was carrying, a fresh wave of guilt had hit Alec. How long had she been feeding him, laundering his shirts, and attending to his every need? He hadn't asked for any of those things, of course, but she'd done them all the same. And Alec had let her, offering nothing more than a generous wage in return.

So even though he'd already spread the latest batch of surveys across his desk in preparation for a long night's work, he'd invited her to stay. And instead of plowing through the food on his plate like he usually did, he'd taken his time, indulging her in the gossip she so loved, asking her about her

physic garden, allowing her to tease him about the pig he boarded. When she'd finished, he'd made her a cup of coffee to round out her meal.

All the while, his work had waited. She'd sat sipping coffee, telling him stories of when she'd first come to Fort Pitt while he'd washed dishes. And when twilight descended, he'd walked her home, offering her his arm while he carried the tray.

He'd had every intention of starting his work the minute he'd returned, but once he'd tended to Fargo, fed Jambe de Bois, and built up the fire, he'd felt an unusual desire to sit, relax, and just . . . be. When his gaze had caught on his black bag by the door, the wrapped book laying atop it, he'd promised himself he'd dive back into his research once he'd opened it.

But now, holding this little book in his hands, he struggled to find the discipline to set it aside and do what he ought. Charlotte had said Burns was her favorite poet, and he wanted to learn why. He turned the pages, intrigued to see the verses set to songs, rather than written out in their usual form.

Skimming titles as he went, he looked for something that fit his mood. "The Lovely Lass of Inverness," "A Red, Red Rose," "A Lassie All Alone," "Jamie 'o the Glen."

"Auld Lang Syne." Hmm. He knew a fair bit of Scots from his grandfather, if he could manage to recall it. Roughly translated, the phrase meant "old long since" or, to an English speaker, "times long past." He began reading.

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,

And never brought to mind?

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,

And auld lang syne?

The simple words went deep, scoring his heart. His finger paused mid-page, his mind drifting to Nellie. For three years he'd punished himself. His every action and every deed had been in atonement for failing her. And yet he'd fastidiously trained himself not to think of any of it. Not to think of her or

their marriage or her death.

But now, when he'd finally decided to live in the present, the words on the page were urging him not to forget her. It seemed to be a contradiction. And yet . . . He shifted, sitting forward, bringing the book closer to the firelight.

*For auld lang syne, my jo,
For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.*

Anyone with an ounce of Scots blood in them knew what was meant by “a cup o’ kindness,” and Alec didn’t have to be told twice. He set the book down and went to the cupboard, pulling out a bottle of whiskey, one imported from Scotland herself, gifted him by a wealthy husband after Alec had attended the man’s wife during the birth of their first son. Pouring himself a finger of the amber liquid, he took a short gulp, an indulgence he’d not allowed himself since before Nellie’s death.

He returned to his chair, tumbler in hand. Settling the book on his lap, he heard his grandfather’s rich brogue gliding over the words as he read the rest of the song. Once finished, Alec set the book aside and sat back.

Lured into a quiet tranquility by the warmth of the whiskey, the pop and crack of the fire, and the comfort of his chair, he allowed the shadows of the past to tiptoe in. To the first time he’d met Nellie. To the crystalline blue of her gaze and the pale corn-silk color of her hair. The pout of her heart-shaped lips.

He took another sip of his whiskey, bolstering himself against the prospect of wading in deeper. As the memories came, he let them, recalling the tinkling chime of her laugh, the particular care she’d taken with her appearance, her near obsession with peppermint sticks. The way she’d once had of making him feel like he was the only person in the room.

A wave of pain enveloped him when he remembered the swift change in her after their marriage—the vicious anger she

was capable of, her disinterest in his work, her disregard for those she deemed beneath her.

There was light and darkness, good mixed with bad. A smile touched his lips at the memory of the time he'd come home to find a squirrel in their cabin, Nellie screeching from atop the table, throwing things at the creature and howling about the unrefined wildlife in Pittsburgh. Her face had been so red, her posture so indignant, that he couldn't help but laugh, infuriating her further. He laughed aloud as he replayed the scene in his mind, both comical and poignant.

But within seconds, tears pricked at his eyes.

He scrubbed a hand over his beard, wrestling with his grief. Something inside him began to crack, like ice on a river breaking up in the spring thaw. His shoulders began to shake, loosening the viselike grip he'd kept on his emotions. Once free, it began to pour out of him, and Alec put his face in his hands and cried. He didn't try to force it back down. Instead, he let it come, wave after wave rolling over him.

Mourning, grieving, letting go.

The gain and loss of a wife. The beginning and end of a marriage.

Harsh sobs. Then quiet tears. And finally, silence.

Calm.

After several moments had passed, Alec wiped at his eyes, blinking them open. Stillness permeated the room.

He felt hollowed out. Three years of grief and regret had carved an enormous canyon through the center of him, so deep and wide that the vast emptiness within him echoed.

He let out a breath and let his eyes drift closed.

He sat and wondered at the weight that had lifted from him. How long had he feared working through the past, worried that by scouring his scabbed-over wounds, he'd cause them to bleed afresh? Instead, there'd been a measure of healing.

A salve, a balm.

Unbidden, an old scripture leaped to mind. “*Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there?*” He bowed his head and pressed a fist to his mouth.

A physician, yes.

And one far greater than he.

Alec was unprepared for the gentle river of peace that wound its way through his soul, filling up his emptiness, soothing the jagged parts of him, quenching his thirst with a water he’d long denied himself.

And then he wept again.

Chapter Twenty-Five

CHARLOTTE SAT AT HER DRESSING table, lost in thought as Harriet arranged her hair. Had Alec opened the book she'd given him? Would he read it and enjoy it when he did? Despite the impressive size of Randolph's, Charlotte had been nothing short of astounded when she'd plucked the volume from the shelf. A volume of *The Scots Musical Museum*, here in Pittsburgh, of all places.

She'd known at once it needed to be Alec's. If nothing else, giving him a book of Scots music might lead to a conversation about his Scottish roots, which she was sorely curious about.

She lifted her gaze when Harriet inserted another hairpin. With each piece of hair she pinned, she grumbled. *That* was nothing unusual.

The woman had been in her life from the day Charlotte was born, and she'd grown so accustomed to Harriet's grumbling that she hardly noticed it anymore. It was Harriet's way of expressing love.

"A household that's run amok, that's what I think," Harriet muttered. She twisted a piece of Charlotte's hair, pulling at her scalp.

Charlotte winced. "Are you speaking of the Maganns' household?" she asked in surprise.

"Hardly a speck of organization. And the maids are slothful. The other day I caught one just standing, staring out your window." She blew out a breath of frustration.

Charlotte looked closely at Harriet's reflection. Harriet knew as well as Charlotte did that Glen Haven was perfectly run. Alice took pride in her home, in her servants, and in the household's smooth operation. Could the edge to her complaints indicate she was homesick?

At over seventy years old, Harriet had journeyed to a foreign country, where nothing was familiar save for Charlotte and Tavish. And the two of them had been heavily occupied ever since. Of *course* Harriet was homesick. Charlotte must

have been blind not to see it sooner.

“All finished.” Harriet patted her shoulder and began clearing away the brush and pins from atop the dressing table.

Charlotte stood, watching her, encompassed by a wave of gratitude for the woman and her unwavering devotion. Unable to hold herself back, she put her arms around the old woman and held her tightly. “I love you, Harriet,” she whispered.

“Stuff and nonsense,” Harriet muttered, shrugging out of Charlotte’s embrace after a few seconds. But Charlotte was certain Harriet’s eyes were wet with emotion as she turned away.

All through her morning visits, while doing her best to be amiable and engaged, Charlotte’s mind worked, determined to find an hour to sneak into town and purchase a little gift that would remind Harriet of home. Perhaps a little thoughtfulness on Charlotte’s part could turn the tide of Harriet’s homesickness.

That afternoon she took the carriage into town, in search of some shortbread. The first bakery she tried didn’t carry it, but she was directed to another bakery several streets over. As Charlotte suspected, in a city with so many people of Scottish descent, someone had to be selling shortbread.

The second bakery owner was from Edinburgh, and Charlotte enjoyed the sound of home in the woman’s thick brogue as she packaged up some shortbread, as well as clottie dumplings and Dundee cakes. Charlotte walked away with not only a taste of home for Harriet but a sampling of Scottish treats for the Maganns to try as well.

Her next stop was not far from the second bakery, a little perfumery on Liberty Street. As she pushed the shop door open, a tinkling bell on the doorknob was enough to send Charlotte back to her time in the bookshop with Alec yesterday.

Was it wrong to feel such hope? She’d spent what felt like hours on her knees last night, praying for him, praying that he might open himself to the possibility of caring for her,

wondering what their future would look like if he did. It felt greedy to want so much for herself. But when he'd offered her his arm yesterday, it had only made her want more.

And he'd given more. A measure of trust in the whisper of his breath across her skin. His genuine faith in her. A sincere bit of praise in the low lilt of his voice. And an almost-kiss in the dim aisle of the bookshop. Charlotte had been sorely tempted to trace her fingers along the edge of his beard. To press her lips to his and see if he'd come alive the way he had before.

But yesterday, it had been his kiss to give.

And when he'd hesitated, instead of seeing it as a dismissal, she recognized it for what it was: caution. She couldn't begrudge him that. If there was to be a future for them—tomorrow, the day after, or more . . . she wanted him to be sure.

She knew all too well what it was to feel doubt and uncertainty. The pain of getting caught up in something before having a chance to fully consider its ramifications. And the inevitable wish to unmake a decision that should never have been made.

"Miss? Can I help you?"

She turned. A short balding man wearing a shop apron approached her.

"Yes, if you please." The combination of scents in the shop hung heavy, nearly making her sneeze. "I'm looking to purchase a small sachet. One scented with heather, if you have it, though I know the chances are slim."

A crease formed between his brows. "Our sachets are over this way. But heather . . . that's not something I'm sure I've seen before."

He guided her past shelves that held perfume bottles, a display of lotions and oils, and an array of scented soaps. He showed her sachets with rose and lavender, violet, gardenia, and jasmine. But no heather.

She thanked him for his help and spent a few minutes

smelling the soaps. To her surprise, she found an orange and honey one that smelled like the soap they used back home. She made the purchase, and the man wrapped it up for her.

Back at Glen Haven, she wrote a note to Harriet, hoping that a private expression of her appreciation would not go amiss. As she folded the paper in two, she couldn't help but be struck by how different she was here and now than she'd been during her last Season in London.

Then she'd been able to think of little but herself and Philip, almost as if the two of them had resided in a bubble and couldn't be bothered with the outside world. But her feelings for Alec were so different. They didn't eclipse her awareness of others; instead, they enlarged her empathy and awareness for those around her. That realization was . . . telling.

Charlotte's nerves had been simmering all day in anticipation of tonight's dinner, but when Harriet arrived to prepare her for the evening, Charlotte's nerves began in earnest. Alice had assured her that Alec had agreed to come, but with him being a doctor, there were invariably emergencies that could arise. So, even though it felt selfish, she prayed that if sickness or harm befell anyone, it would happen *after* the dinner hour.

Once Harriet had finished with the last of the pins, she looked Charlotte over and gave a brief nod. Then she was picking up Charlotte's discarded day dress and hustling from the room.

"Thank you, Harriet," Charlotte called to her retreating figure. Once Harriet was out of sight, Charlotte retrieved the note, the sweets, and the bar of soap. She set them atop the dressing table, where Harriet would be sure to see them.

Downstairs, Charlotte met Alice outside of the drawing room. With a single simple look, Charlotte knew Alec was within, waiting with the others to be called in for dinner. Her palms grew damp within her gloves.

Before Alice could turn the doorknob, Charlotte whispered, "Please, no matchmaking tonight. I don't want Alec to feel any sense of obligation. Especially here. Your home should be

a haven, a place where he can feel safe.” Her mouth lifted in a wry smile. “Not like a fox being run to ground.”

A sigh of disappointment escaped Alice. “Oh, very well. Though it pains me greatly, I shall resign myself to the role of a spectator,” she said, motioning for Charlotte to go first.

Thankfully, Alec stood in conversation with Liam, his back to her, so she had a moment to collect herself before coming face-to-face with him.

She greeted Mr. Magann, her eyes darting toward Alec as she walked over to join Tavish, who sat on the sofa with a book in his lap.

When she approached, Tavish set his book down. “Good evening.”

Alec and Liam finished their conversation, and they made their way slowly across the room to join the Maganns. Charlotte’s bristling awareness of Alec was almost painful.

Trying to distract herself, she relayed her concerns about Harriet’s homesickness to Tavish. “The smallest effort from you would mean a great deal to her. She’s always liked you best, you know.”

Tavish pushed his glasses up his nose. “Only because Bram and Graeme were pure trouble.”

“True. But in Harriet’s eyes, not causing trouble goes far to recommend you.”

“You know they just arrived back home?” He patted his pocket and reached in and pulled out a letter. “Maybe I’ll give Harriet Mother’s letter with a recounting of their latest escapades. *That* might be enough tae make her appreciate being on this side of the ocean with the two of us.”

Charlotte laughed aloud, drawing the attention of the others. She could feel Alec’s gaze pressing into her.

“Are we ready for dinner?” Alice asked.

Mr. and Mrs. Magann never felt the need to stand on ceremony in their intimate group, and the two of them led the way, followed by Liam and Alec, with Charlotte and Tavish

taking up the rear.

At dinner she and Alec were seated across from one another. He was drawn into a conversation with Mr. Magann about a hunting trip he hoped to take, and Charlotte took full advantage of the opportunity to study Alec.

From the first time she'd met him, she'd thought him attractive, but tonight she was struck anew by his handsome features. Wavy dark-blond hair that nearly brushed his chin, a striking beard that accentuated the angled line of his jaw. Expressive brows over soulful hazel eyes. But there was something different too. He looked younger, the brackets around his mouth not so deep, his eyes not so world-weary.

He looked . . . if not happy, close to it.

It made her chest expand with warmth, his happiness igniting her own. Perhaps, even if he didn't care for her, even if they didn't have a future together, she could be satisfied knowing *he'd* found a measure of happiness.

After they'd finished dinner, they retired to the drawing room. Alice began pressing everyone about the night's entertainment, calling from across the room, "Alec, Tavish, what say you to a game? Or would you prefer conversation tonight?" She looked at Charlotte hopefully. "Perhaps music?"

Charlotte held up a hand and released a soft laugh. "I'm afraid to disappoint you, but my sister is the one with the musical bent in our family."

"Charlotte has many talents," Tavish said. "But playing an instrument"—he shook his head, a rueful smile on his face—"is not one of them."

Everyone laughed, including Charlotte.

"Another round of *vieux garçon*?" Mr. Magann suggested. "Perhaps with Alec here I'll have a fighting chance."

"Let's not be too optimistic now," Liam said with a cheeky grin. "I've a better idea. Let's think of a controversial topic . . . and let Alec and Charlotte debate it. We could keep a running tally of who makes the best points in their verbal sparring."

And to think it had been Alice whom Charlotte had been worried about. "Alec and I have agreed to a cease-fire," she said. "So I'm afraid that won't do."

It was strange to think that a few weeks before, there'd been nothing between them but arguments and debates. She glanced at him, coloring a bit at the realization that she more easily recalled the taste of his lips than the exasperated tone of his voice as they'd quarreled.

"We have," Alec acknowledged. "I'm afraid you'll have to look for entertainment elsewhere."

His gaze caught hers, the warmth in it so disarming that Charlotte's insides melted like candle wax. How she wished for an evening with him alone, one in which she was at liberty to ask what he thought of the book she'd purchased for him, inquire about his most recent house calls, and share the contents of the letter she'd received from home yesterday.

Alec cleared his throat. "Perhaps we could introduce these Scots to something new. Charlotte can be a bit hard to please," he said, with the barest hint of a smirk, "but I doubt either she or Tavish have tried popcorn before."

"Popcorn?" Charlotte and Tavish asked in unison.

"Popcorn! I didn't even think!" Alice clapped her hands together. "But of course they've not had it. It's a perfect activity for this evening. Let me send down to the kitchen for the pan and some dried corn kernels."

Charlotte's brows nudged upward in interest.

"Do explain about . . . *popcorn*," Tavish said, testing out the word as Alice went to have a word with one of the footmen. "If she's sending down tae the kitchen, I must assume it is something tae eat?"

"Yes." Liam laughed. "It's something to eat. It's difficult to explain, but I promise you'll enjoy it."

"'Tis one of my favorite treats," Mr. Magann added. "And Alec's, too, if I remember correctly."

Alec nodded. "I've not had it for a good while though." His

gaze slid toward Charlotte. “I am anxious to see what our Scottish friends think.”

Why did Alec’s use of the word *friends* cause such a nauseating gloom to settle in Charlotte’s stomach?

Alice rejoined the group, looking pleased. “The popper and kernels will be up in no time. Perhaps we could scoot up some chairs for me and Martin. You young people can sit on the floor near the fire, but I doubt his knees or my dignity are up for it.”

Liam and Tavish acquiesced at once, and by the time they’d arranged two of the leather chairs near the fire, the footman returned with his arms full. He handed Alice a kitchen towel and a jar filled with golden-orange seeds and gave Alec a strange-looking frying pan with a longer-than-usual handle.

Charlotte’s interest was fully piqued.

Alec went down on one knee, setting the pan down a few feet from the hearth.

“Would you like to pour the kernels into the popper, Charlotte?” Alice twisted the lid off and handed her the jar.

Charlotte took it and lowered herself to the floor beside Alec. “The whole jar? Or just a few?”

He removed the lid from the frying pan, where she could see there was a light coating of butter or grease. “We want a single layer covering the bottom of the pan,” he said.

The Maganns settled into their chairs, and Liam and Tavish hovered behind Alec and Charlotte, watching. Charlotte tipped the jar, pouring a little at a time as she tried to get an even layer, the kernels making a soft plinking noise as they hit the bottom of the pan.

Alec nodded. “That should do.”

Charlotte handed the jar back to Alice, intrigued to know how these kernels would taste once heated. Alec replaced the lid and Alice handed him the towel, which he wrapped around the handle.

“Pop . . . *corn*?” Tavish asked. “Do these kernels come from

corn?”

“Indeed.” Mr. Magann chuckled. “And you’ll see where the ‘pop’ comes from soon enough.”

Alec moved closer to the fire, dropped to his haunches, and held the pan over the flames.

Charlotte was all curiosity. Still on her knees, she scooted forward until she reached the fire’s wall of warmth. On this chilly evening, dressed in a gown of thin satin, having Alec beside her and the fire in front of her felt heavenly.

“And now we . . . wait?” she asked.

Liam, standing at the mantel, nodded. “It won’t be long.”

Charlotte watched Alec, his gaze focused on the pan as he kept it moving, the kernels within sliding from side to side. “Is there a special technique for cooking popcorn?”

Alec glanced up at Liam, a wry look about his mouth. “Not burning it.”

Liam smirked. “It was one time! And I was twelve!”

“Yes, and this room smelled for *weeks* afterward,” Alec returned. “Since then, I’ve been given popcorn duties. I think Alice and Martin believe somehow my years working over the fire as a blacksmith make me the best suited for the task.”

“You are doing a fine job,” Charlotte said gravely and then laughed. “To my untrained eye, at least.”

Alec’s lips curved up just a bit, and Charlotte realized . . . she’d never seen him smile. Not a true smile anyway. Nothing more than a slight curve or slant upward.

As the others fell into conversation, Alec adjusted his position, his shoulder just inches from her own. “I wanted to thank you,” he said in a low voice. “For your thoughtful gift. I read several of the verses from the book last night.”

Charlotte’s pulse quickened at his acknowledgment. “Did you?”

He nodded. “Your Burns has talent.” His gaze returned to the fire, his arm moving in even circles, the pan steady.

“You like him?” she asked, too much eagerness in her voice. She held her palms up to enjoy the fire’s warmth. “I debated between that and another more traditional book of poetry. Did you discover a particular favorite?”

He swallowed, the glow from the flames burnishing the waves in his hair. Charlotte decided her favorite way to see his features was by firelight. “‘Auld Lang Syne,’” he said at last.

Charlotte smiled. “’Tis one of my favorites too. We Scots sing it often. At weddings and funerals. At Hogmanay. There’s something poignant in the words.”

He nodded. “I agree. I—”

Just then, a *pop, pop!* exploded from within the covered frying pan, loud as gunfire.

Charlotte jerked back, shrieking, on her feet in half a second. Her pulse pounded. She put a hand over her breastbone, easing in a breath, trying to calm her beating heart and recover her wits. At the sound of the Maganns’ laughter, she whirled around to face them.

“I did say you’d see where the ‘pop’ comes from,” Mr. Magann said, still chuckling. “*That* is why we call it popcorn.”

Tavish and Liam had joined in and were laughing as well.

Alec still held the pan, unaffected by the sound of the kernels drumming in a constant flurry of little pops against the pan. But then he turned and looked up at her, and he was smiling. *Smiling.*

His whole face was alight, his eyes dancing with amusement, the lines that usually lent gravity to his expression instead giving shape to the upward curve of his mouth, his straight white teeth a striking contrast against his beard. Charlotte had once thought there was nothing that could compare to a sunny spring day in the Highlands. She’d been wrong.

Alec’s smile was just as unexpected.

Just as breathtaking.

And just as bone-achingly beautiful.

She stilled, basking in the magnificence that was Alec Galloway, her heart settling in an unexpected contentment. It was in that moment that Charlotte knew she'd been fooling herself. She could never be satisfied in merely knowing Alec was happy. She wanted him to be happy with *her*. She wanted him and his smile beside her for the rest of her days.

The realization was so unsettling, so upending, it set her off-balance. Charlotte blindly felt for the sturdy wood mantel behind her, needing something to lean against, desperate for purchase when everything around her had shifted so suddenly.

And still all she could see was Alec's smile.

She was in a world of trouble.

Chapter Twenty-Six

ALEC COULDN'T REMEMBER THE LAST time he'd passed an evening that felt like *this*. It was the easy and comfortable conversation over dinner. The warmth of the fire. And the simple joy of being with people he loved instead of wishing himself elsewhere.

But mostly it was Charlotte.

Her eager curiosity. The hopefulness in her expression as she asked him about the poems he'd read. The thrill she took in the novelty of something as simple as popcorn. Her unexpected reaction to the first popped kernel. He found that though he was laughing alongside everyone else, he couldn't tear his gaze from her.

One of her hands rested over her heart. Where seconds before her expression had held sheer panic, now a soft and hazy smile rested on her face. Wearing a dress of creamy-yellow satin, which lent her skin a soft glow, she was exquisite.

"Popcorn, anyone?" Liam asked.

Alec jolted a little, realizing the popping of the kernels had tapered off. He moved the pan away from the flames and removed the lid, enjoying Charlotte's delight at discovering the kernels were now little white blossoms.

Martin salted the popcorn while Tavish regaled them with several stories about the twins, including the time his brothers had managed to burn down a lambing shed while pretending to be pirates.

All of them huddled around the pan eating popcorn, and Alec gave his best effort to join the conversation. He murmured his agreement when Tavish remarked on the uniqueness of the popcorn's texture. He laughed when Charlotte declared she'd take home a whole trunkful of popcorn kernels to Scotland.

But his mind was miles away. His gaze kept drifting toward her. Tracing over every precious inch of her. The softness of

her face. The merriment in her eyes. The grace in her shoulders.

The way she had of laughing and smiling through life. Of embracing it wholeheartedly.

She was endearing.

She was intoxicating.

She was contagious. He'd be wise to inoculate himself against her, but the truth was he didn't know how. And, even if he did, he wasn't sure he wanted to. In a short time he'd come to care for her far too much.

The realization made his throat tighten. He inhaled through his nose, taking in a long breath and holding it, desperately trying to give his lungs the air they needed. When he saw that only a few bare kernels remained at the bottom of the frying pan, Alec took the opportunity to excuse himself for the evening. His airway continued to tighten.

Uttering a brief goodbye to everyone in the room, he ignored the crestfallen look on Charlotte's face and slipped out of the drawing room, down the hall to the front entry, where he asked a footman to collect his things. He waited impatiently by the front door, trying to get control of his breathing.

Martin came up behind him. "Are you all right?"

Alec breathed in, held it, breathed out. Strangely, with Martin standing beside him, some of the panic that had him in its clutches loosened its grip.

He nodded. The footman appeared and helped Alec into his coat, then handed him his hat and bag. Alec gripped the handle of his bag, its worn leather offering a measure of comfort within the circle of his fingers.

Martin stood, arms folded, waiting. When Alec remained silent, he tried again. "Something has changed in you, Alec. This past week you've been . . . different." He left the observation hanging, allowing Alec to pick up the thread if he was willing.

"Yes," he acknowledged. "I've come back to the land of the

living.” And despite the pains associated with his return, he couldn’t regret it.

Martin smiled, the light from the candle in the wall sconce catching the wrinkles that wreathed his eyes. “That means more to us than you can know. You’ve been missed, son.”

Words failed Alec. For so long, he’d looked over the past with eyes for only what he’d lost. His father, his grandfather. Nellie. But Martin had been here, his presence a constant in an ever-changing world. And Alice. Liam. Vera. How had Alec never thought to be more grateful?

He cleared his throat, flushing with shame. “I don’t deserve the patience you’ve shown me, Martin. Thank you . . . for not giving up on me.”

Martin shook his head. “One day you’ll understand. It isn’t possible to give up on someone you love.”

Alec nodded, his mind racing, wondering if love . . . could truly be a possibility for him. Whether he had the courage for such an undertaking.

“You’ll forgive an old man his curiosity . . .” Martin shifted so he faced Alec fully. “But what changed?”

“It’s impossible to pinpoint, I think. A dozen little things.” He smiled, the muscle memory slowly returning. “And a few bigger ones.” The image of Charlotte shrieking as she jumped back from the frying pan came to mind.

“Am I wrong in believing you care for her?”

Alec cleared his throat. “You aren’t wrong.” Even admitting just that much, he could breathe more deeply.

Martin’s expression grew solemn. “She’s a fine woman. You could do no better.”

Alec nodded. “I’m not certain I . . .” He ran a hand through his hair. “It’s not easy.”

Martin surveyed him, brows drawn over his eyes. “I know it isn’t, Alec. But know this: I’ve been diligently praying for you these last three years.” He reached out and patted Alec’s shoulder. “And I’m not planning to stop now.”

It hit Alec, like a thump to the chest, just how much Martin meant to him. This man had shown him as great a love as any father would have. He'd depended on Martin's love and wisdom all his life, even these past years where he'd isolated himself.

Martin winced a little as he stepped back.

"Are your knees bothering you?"

"A bit," Martin admitted, transferring the brunt of his weight to his cane. "The cold doesn't help."

Alec showed his love for the man in the best way he knew how. "I'll have Vera mix you up some of her herbal remedies for you."

Martin rubbed at his right knee. "I'd be most appreciative. Last time they worked wonders."

Alec placed his hat on his head. "I'd best get myself home before it gets any later. I've some early appointments tomorrow." What he didn't say was that Jambe de Bois would likely be waiting for him, hungry for dinner and anxious to be scratched behind the ears. That the book Charlotte had gifted him waited in his chair near the fire.

Martin lifted a hand in farewell. "Yes, you go. Have a good night's rest."

Alec tipped his hat and let himself out the front door. The true likelihood that he'd get any sleep seemed slim when he had so much to think . . . and pray . . . about.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“IT IS A . . . TRUTH U-NIV-ERS-ERS . . .” Clara glanced up from where her finger marked her spot on the page.

“Universally,” Charlotte prompted. “And the next word is a bit tricky too. Ac-knowl-edged. ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged . . .’”

Clara continued. “That a . . . sin-gle man in pos . . . pos—”

“Possession.”

“*Pos-ses-sion* of a good . . . for-tune . . .” She looked up for approval, and Charlotte nodded. “Must be . . . in . . . want of . . . a wife.”

Charlotte grinned. Clara’s progress these past few weeks had been astounding. She was reading everything she could get her hands on. “Excellent work, Clara. Now I’ll read the next line, and you follow along.” She put her finger underneath the first word and read the line.

The remainder of the hour flew by as they made it through the short first chapter of the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* Charlotte had purchased for Clara. When Charlotte had first placed it in her hands, Clara had looked at the book in awe, holding it gently, as if afraid it might break. Her awe had grown into intrigue when Charlotte had explained that the protagonist, Lizzy Bennet, had four sisters.

Clara had only ever known brothers. *Five* of them.

“But if Mr. Bennet refuses to visit the man with a large fortune, how will one of the daughters meet and marry him as Mrs. Bennet intends?” Clara asked, closing the book with some reluctance.

“The answer to that, I’m afraid, will have to wait.” How Charlotte wished she could meet with Clara and read with her daily. The young woman was hungry for words. For stories.

Seeing her hunger had given Charlotte an idea though. She planned to suggest to Mrs. Borden that someone read aloud to the ladies in the sewing circle. She’d wager those women

would love nothing more than to be whisked away into tales and worlds that would distract them during the long hours of their workdays.

“But,” Charlotte whispered, “if you want to read ahead, by all means, do so. You may go at your own pace. Just be sure to bring it next time so we may continue our reading.”

“I will. And I’ll bring your book of letters back too.”

Charlotte looked Clara in the eye, wanting to be clear. “No, no. I made that for you. It is yours to keep.”

Clara sat forward, a smile peeking out. “I was hoping you’d say that. Truth is, I’ve been using it to teach my little brother Jasper.”

“How wonderful! How old is Jasper?”

“He’s ten.” Clara explained that she used the same technique of having each of them share something personal every time she taught him a new letter. “But he says the wildest things. For *A* he confessed he’d stolen the apple pie that disappeared last year. None of us ever knew what had happened to it. And for *I* he told me he wished to see an iceberg.”

“I’d very much like to meet Jasper,” Charlotte confessed. “I’d like to meet *all* your brothers.”

“I don’t know about that.” Clara frowned. “They can be a right handful at times.”

“I have twin cousins that are the definition of a ‘right handful,’” Charlotte said, laughing. “I promise they’d not overwhelm me.”

“Maybe sometime,” her pupil hedged. “Mama is still recoverin’ from her cough, and I’ve got all I can manage.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean to pressure you.” Charlotte could only imagine the weight this young woman carried, especially with her mother still ill. She straightened the paper they’d used to write out some of the more difficult words in *Pride and Prejudice*.

“Clara,” she started. “I know I am your teacher, your tutor.” She thought carefully, wanting to be understood. “But I hope

you also consider me a friend, for that is how I think of you.”

Clara looked at Charlotte, her expression cautious, thoughtful. “I do consider you a friend, Miss Charlotte. One I’m not likely to forget. I think of kilts every time I see a *K*, you know.” She smiled then, and Charlotte felt the warmth of it all the way to her bones.

This was a friendship she’d take with her, even when she returned home. She’d write to Clara, and now that Clara was learning to write, Charlotte would see that she had the necessary supplies to write back.

“Oh, the time! Mrs. MacGregor will give me an earful! I must go.” Handling the book with care, Clara fetched her shawl from the peg and bade Charlotte farewell.

Charlotte finished tidying up, in no hurry since she’d come alone today. Mrs. Magann had woken this morning with a headache and had sent a note to Mrs. Borden, informing the woman of her intended absence this afternoon.

Charlotte had assured Mrs. Magann she didn’t mind taking the carriage and coming into the city alone. And she hadn’t . . . until she’d realized it meant half an hour of time on the ride into town with nothing to do but think.

As it turned out, all she could think about was Alec’s smile. That glorious smile that had turned her upside down and inside out and still wouldn’t let her be. If Alec was smart, he’d find a way to bottle it up and distribute it like the potent medicine it was.

Such foolishness had forced Charlotte into giving herself a stern talking-to. She was well on her way to falling in love, but caution warned of the necessity of holding a portion of herself back. There was a danger in falling fully, especially given her ties to Scotland, her duty to her family.

She’d spent the remainder of the carriage ride this morning scouring over her interactions with Alec, a sense of desolation overtaking her as she realized he’d never given her any material indication that he was willing to pursue a future with her. It had been over a week since the night they’d made

popcorn together, and ever since he'd remained carefully guarded.

Yes, there was a strong spark of attraction that hovered between them, and yes, she knew he felt it the same as she did. But he had never given her reason to believe he was willing to *act* on that spark.

Discontentment carved its way through her as she bade farewell to the ladies in the sewing circle, gathered her cloak, and slipped out the door into the late-September afternoon.

Was she foolish for wanting something so obviously hopeless? Would it be better to sever her affection before she grew even more attached? Her last Season in London had taught her that she couldn't trust her own judgment.

As she walked down the street to where the carriage waited, Charlotte envisioned the detached way she'd greet Alec the next time they met. "Dr. Galloway," she'd say without any trace of a smile. No, that seemed too harsh. She'd offer him a cool smile and make a polite observation on . . . the weather. And then she'd return her attention to her hymnal or the river or any other blessed thing that might allow her to pretend he wasn't constantly occupying her thoughts.

She repeated the scenario again and tried to convince herself she could execute it when the time came. Deeply embroiled in her thoughts, when she came around the side of the carriage and found Alec standing there, she half-believed he was part of her vivid imaginings.

Yet in her imagination his head had been bare and his profile had been illuminated by firelight. Here and now, standing in the afternoon sun, he wore a hat over his mussed hair and carried his black doctor's bag, the beginnings of a smile edging up the corners of his lips.

Charlotte thought she'd been prepared to see him again.

She'd been wrong.

He greeted her in that low voice of his, his smile deepening.

Her heart thumped painfully. Another glimpse of that smile and she was liable to develop a heart condition.

“I apologize for startling you. I remembered you’d planned to meet Clara today, and I . . . hoped I might persuade you to take a walk with me.”

“A walk? With me?” Suddenly she was incapable of stringing more than two words together at a time.

He nodded. “With you,” he repeated, bemused.

“I’d like that.” There. Three words in a row.

Alec exchanged a few words with the driver and then offered Charlotte his arm, showing none of the hesitation he’d shown before. She exhaled a shaky breath, bringing her hand to rest in the crook of his arm, enjoying the feel of his muscled forearm beneath her gloved fingers.

So unprepared was Charlotte for this turn of events that she couldn’t formulate a single thought. She allowed Alec to lead her down the street, quiet hanging between them. Occasionally he’d point something out or make an observation, but mostly they walked in companionable silence.

If it could be called silence, with Charlotte’s heart hammering furiously within her chest, with her thoughts racing, wondering what Alec might be thinking and what, if anything, it meant for them to be walking here, arm in arm.

He led her out of the bustle of the city, heading north toward Glen Haven, on the road that lined the Allegheny River. The city thinned, giving way to larger swaths of undeveloped land. Trees dotted the landscape, an occasional fence marked a property line, and the river murmured as it slipped by.

Long minutes had gone by without either one of them speaking, and Charlotte grew certain that if she didn’t say something, she’d burst. She lifted her gaze to the man walking beside her. “Was there something last night that upset you, Alec? Is that why you left?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I needed to . . . think.”

“To think?” she prodded. She ran her free hand over the wooden fence beside them.

Still nothing. A bird swooped overhead, crossing the

Allegheny and coming to rest on the opposite bank. Charlotte hissed in a breath at a sudden stinging pain in her middle finger.

Alec stopped as she released his arm. “Sliver?”

She nodded. “I should not have been so careless.” Removing her glove, she could see that a thin shard of wood, not more than a quarter of an inch long, was embedded beneath her skin in the pad of her finger. The skin was already red and beginning to throb. She shook out her hand, trying to ease the pain.

“May I?” He extended his hand, waiting.

She placed her bare hand in his, and he bent over it, tracing his fingers up her palm to her middle finger, exerting the slightest bit of pressure just below the sliver. It was all she could do not to shiver beneath his touch.

“I’ve a pair of tweezers.” Alec released her and knelt and opened his black bag.

Charlotte sagged back against the fence, feeling a bit ridiculous for the fuss she was causing over a simple sliver. Though, when Alec rose and stood beside her, his shoulder brushing hers, she couldn’t bring herself to regret it.

He took her hand again. “I’ll need to pinch your finger to make it easier to remove the sliver.”

She nodded, breathing in his scent, a masculine mix of saddle leather and shaving soap.

With his head bent over, the unruly waves of his hair fell forward, and it required the utmost self-discipline not to smooth them back into place. Alec pinched her finger, raising the red, swollen skin. With the tweezers, he grasped one end of the splinter lodged beneath her skin. One quick tug and the sliver was out, pain gone, save for a slight throb in her finger.

He slipped the tweezers into his pocket. “Better?” he asked, voice low.

“Better,” she whispered.

She expected him to release her hand, to step back. He did

neither.

His thumb continued to trace over the spot where the sliver had been. She'd never known how much feeling existed in a mere fingertip until this moment. Her breath stilled as his thumb widened its path, following the lines in her palm, leaving a blazing trail in its wake.

This, she realized, was no longer the touch of a doctor examining his patient, but the touch of a man making her feel very much like a woman.

A woman who knew her own heart and was ready to bare it.

Before she could stop herself, before she could think, she took his hands in her own and lifted them to her mouth, pressing her lips to the back of his fingers. "All the way out here I waited for you to say something." She was breathless. "But I can wait no longer."

Her gaze remained on the hands that rested in hers. His beautiful doctoring hands. Large and capable, scarred from his years as a blacksmith, steady and certain under crisis.

"Alec, I . . ." Her mind stumbling over what to say, Charlotte allowed her heart to take the lead. "I know what I'm about to say may sound foolish. I'm not blind to the fact that you are still recovering from the loss of your wife." She swallowed. "I'm a mere visitor here, with permanent ties to Scotland. You have a life here, and a profession you are committed to. I know nothing between us makes sense."

She raised her eyes, faltering under the strength of his gaze. Her throat was so tight she wasn't sure she could get the words out, but she refused to walk away from this moment without him knowing the strength of her feelings. "But I love you, Alec."

In the silence that followed lay an ultimatum. Either she would have to give up her future—impossible!—or he would have to give up his. She choked on the pain of it, for how could she ask that of him when—

"Charlotte." His voice was the faintest wisp of a Highland breeze as he covered her hand with one of his. He cleared his

throat. “I don’t . . .” His brows furrowed. “I’m not certain you know—”

Before he could go any further, she pressed a hand to his mouth, quieting him. “Please,” she begged. “You must believe I know my own heart and mind.” She dropped her hand.

His eyes darted over her, examining every detail of her face. “I do believe you, Charlotte.” His throat bobbed. “Which is why what I’m about to say, what I brought you here intending to say, is so difficult. But to be anything short of honest would be unfair of me.”

The gutted, hollow look on his face made Charlotte’s insides squeeze.

He stepped back. “I am still not whole.” His chest rose and fell. “I am still unsure of love. Unsure of myself.”

Something in her nearly broke hearing him speak so.

He ran a hand through his hair and groaned. “What I’m trying to tell you is I am not a good bet. Loving me isn’t wise. Yet even so . . .” The warmth in his eyes made her heart flutter. “Charlotte, you make me want to believe in possibilities I’d long given up on. Your father isn’t here, but if he were—I’d ask his permission to court you.”

It took several long seconds for his words to sink in. But when they did, her doubts dissipated. Hope swelled so deep in Charlotte’s chest that her lungs could hardly manage to take in air. “I’m well past my majority, Alec,” she said on half a laugh. “You can ask *me*.”

Her heart delighted at the sight of his smile. “Very well. Do I have permission to court you, Charlotte?” he asked.

“Yes.” The word came out so breathy that she repeated it, just to make certain he’d heard. “Yes.”

He chuckled at her eagerness, but the curve of his smile quickly disappeared. “Will you be patient with me? I don’t wish to rush this.” He rubbed at his beard, his gaze earnest. “I’d like to go slowly. I *need* to go slowly.”

Charlotte had been desperate to gain some clarity. She’d

revealed her heart to this man, fully expecting rejection. But she'd done it all the same, needing to know whether there was any reason for hope.

And he'd just given it to her.

Eyes blurry with tears, she smiled. "Yes, Alec. We can go slow."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

ALEC HAD FORGOTTEN WHAT HAPPINESS felt like. But he remembered it now, here, with Charlotte in front of him. He cupped her cheek and pressed his lips to her temple, lingering there, breathing in her soft floral scent. Contentment, slow and steady, pulsed through his veins.

With everything in him, he wanted to kiss her. To build up the fire she'd kindled back in his cabin on that rainy morning. But he'd promised himself he'd go slowly. And if he kissed her now, it would be all too easy to forget.

Exercising a self-restraint he hadn't known he possessed, he stepped back. "We'd best get you home before Alice sends out a search party."

Her answering smile, with its accompanying dimple, was so captivating, so utterly precious, that Alec stared at her for several long seconds, unable to look away. When he finally recovered his wits, he returned the pair of tweezers from his pocket to his black bag, helped Charlotte ease her glove back on, and offered her his arm.

They resumed their walk in the same golden afternoon sun as before. Its rays warmed the crisp air, and the leaves continued to flurry down from the trees lining the road, but now everything was different. The second-guessing and indecision that had plagued Alec all morning were gone. Just a quiet sense of rightness with Charlotte walking beside him.

"Will you tell me about Nellie?" she asked, no longer content with silence.

He startled, though he shouldn't have been surprised. With Charlotte's natural curiosity, she likely had a hundred questions ready.

"She'll always be a part of you, Alec. A part I'd like to know."

She was right, of course. And if he truly intended to court this woman, openness and honesty were the only way forward. "Where would you like me to begin?"

“At the beginning, of course. Where did you meet?”

“At a ball on the eve of my graduation. She was the daughter of one of my professors, David Hallewell, the head of surgery.”

As soon as he’d answered, she was ready with another question.

“What was your first impression of her?”

Alec angled his head, considering. “She glittered, truly. It was hard to look away from her. It was rare to see her without a crowd of people gathered around her.”

“She sounds lovely.” Charlotte glanced up at him, biting her lip. “It’s all right if you miss her, Alec.”

He paused mid-step. “You don’t understand.” There was a twinge in his chest. “Ours was not a happy marriage. It’s one of the reasons this . . . *us* . . . is so difficult. What I’m beginning to feel for you is what I should have felt for her.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened. “You didn’t . . . love her?”

He shook his head and waited for reproach. Disappointment.

Instead, he was met with Charlotte’s characteristic frankness. And another question. “Did she love you?”

He exhaled. “No, Nellie didn’t love me.” The admission pained Alec more than he’d expected. He’d been so weighed down by the guilt of not loving Nellie that he’d never fully acknowledged the hurt of not being loved by *her*.

And it did hurt, to have been found wanting by the woman who’d committed to spend a lifetime by his side.

Charlotte didn’t say a word, but compassion filled her expression. “If it pains you, we need not talk of it.”

“No,” he said, surprising himself. “Ask your questions. I want you to know the hard truths about me.” They began walking again.

Charlotte’s brow furrowed. “Very well. How long did you and Nellie know each other before you married?”

“Three months.” Saying the words aloud, Alec realized the boulder of grief that had carved a canyon through his insides was no longer a boulder. A large stone, maybe. But not a boulder.

She thought for a moment. “Do you wish you had courted her for a longer period of time?”

He watched as a maple tree littered the ground up ahead with leaves. “I wish we’d become acquainted under different circumstances. In Philadelphia’s social whirlwind, I was out of my element. It was busy, chaotic. Nellie and I were never truly alone. Soon after our wedding, we discovered there was much about each other we didn’t know. Things we should have talked about but hadn’t.”

She cocked her head. “Such as?”

“She believed my role as a doctor would be more like her father’s position at the university, with regular hours. I hadn’t thought about how hard it would be for her to move away from the only home she’d ever known.”

He glanced down at Charlotte, discovering the full weight of her attention upon him. For someone who enjoyed talking as much as she did, she made an excellent listener. She not only listened but seemed to soak in everything he said. It made it easy to confide in her.

“Nellie was shocked, I think, to discover what a humble background I’d come from. We’d discussed it, of course, but seeing it for herself was an entirely different matter.”

Alec still remembered Nellie’s dismay when she’d discovered the reality of their living situation. A two-bedroom cabin when she was accustomed to a spacious town house with ample staff. He couldn’t forget the tide of inadequacy that had flooded over him as he’d witnessed her disappointment.

Charlotte tightened her grip on his arm, bringing him back to the present, grounding him. It surprised him to realize she was well acquainted with his circumstances—his demanding schedule, his modest cabin, the simplicity of his existence.

And she didn’t seem frightened by it.

“My parents had an arranged marriage,” she said, veering the conversation away from his troubled past. Though Alec had meant what he’d said about wanting to discuss difficult things, he appreciated the way Charlotte had of sensing his limits.

“And is their marriage a happy one?”

She smiled. “Very. Though, I imagine no matter how long or short a couple’s acquaintance, marriage always comes with a set of surprises.”

He looked ahead to the curve in the path as it followed the river. “You’re probably right.”

“Fortunately, some surprises reveal themselves before marriage,” Charlotte said. She swallowed hard. “Did you know I was engaged once? A little over two years ago.”

Why the revelation caught him so off guard, Alec wasn’t sure. Charlotte was a beautiful and titled woman with a depth of character few could match. The only true surprise was how she’d managed to elude marriage thus far. But even still, something like jealousy wedged in his gut. “Will you tell me about it?”

Her gaze grew distant, as if she were remembering another time, another place. “Lord Seymour was handsome and charming, a tease, *and* the heir to one of England’s most powerful earldoms, so you can imagine my surprise when he showed interest in pursuing a courtship with me. I was young and impressionable and, to be honest, flattered. I thought myself the luckiest young woman in the world.”

Alec steeled himself against what was coming.

“One month later he asked me to marry him, and he was so persuasive that I said yes, despite the unsettled feeling I had.” She looked up at Alec, as if worried he’d judge her.

“What happened?” he asked. All he wanted to know was how things had ended between them. And if this Lord Seymour had broken her heart.

“The unsettled feeling persisted. I continued to ignore it, caught up in his charm and flattery.” She frowned. “I chose

instead to indulge in the *ton*'s reassurances that we were the perfect match, uniting his future earldom with the dukedom I'd one day inherit.

“When I finally found the courage to call off our engagement, Philip was furious. He claimed that not only was I breaking his heart but that by ending things between us, I would ruin his reputation and turn Society against him. But within a week he had another young woman on his arm.” Charlotte's laugh carried a bitter undertone. “It was *my* reputation that suffered. The gossip was relentless, the rumors unending.”

Even as his muscles tensed, Alec stayed quiet, letting her continue.

“None of what was said was true, of course. But Philip did nothing to curb the gossip or defend my reputation.”

Guilt reared its head at the things she'd overheard *him* say.

She nodded on an exhale. “In the days after our broken engagement, I learned that Philip had acquired a mistress shortly after proposing to me and that he had heavy gambling debts, ones he'd hoped to discharge with my dowry.”

Anger boiled in Alec at this man who had injured Charlotte. Charlotte, with her gracious, generous heart. She'd forgiven Alec and extended her friendship even though the apology he'd offered had been stilted at best. “I'm sorry,” he said, his voice soft.

“Oh, I'm well enough now.” Her gaze shifted toward him, sadness etched in her eyes. “I consider myself lucky to have avoided marriage to a man such as that.”

Alec stopped, reaching for Charlotte and bringing her around to face him. “No, I'm sorry for the words I spoke the night we met. I hurt you.”

She blinked once, twice.

“I had no right. You reminded me of Nellie in so many ways, and I . . .” There was more, but it wasn't meant for here and now. “I lashed out,” he finished. “I'm sorry for it.”

She swallowed and lowered her gaze. “Thank you.”

He took her arm in his again, wanting her to finish the story. When she said nothing more, he said, “I’m not sure I understand . . . what could people possibly have found to criticize in you? You did nothing wrong.”

Her mouth tightened. “There were rumors that Lord Seymour had used and discarded me. That I hadn’t been woman enough to keep his attention.” She exhaled, looking skyward. “It became so bad that I left London mid-Season and haven’t yet found the courage to return.”

“Indeed,” Alec murmured, fury growing toward a man he’d never met. One whose selfishness had caused a world of pain to the woman at Alec’s side. If ever he *did* happen to cross paths with Lord Seymour, that man would feel the full force of Alec’s years of blacksmithing.

But his anger wouldn’t erase the pain in Charlotte’s eyes. And he very much wanted to erase it. “You have *my* attention, Charlotte,” he said quietly.

Her lips parted as understanding slowly dawned. She blushed, her cheeks turning a soft pink.

In that moment, Alec felt certain of the decision he’d made to court this woman. Charlotte was goodness and light and beauty. She had a way of making him feel whole and accepted, despite his many flaws. And he was determined that when she was with him, she’d never have cause to question whether she was enough.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

CHARLOTTE WALKED IN THE FRONT door and nearly melted onto the floor.

“Do I have permission to court you, Charlotte?”

This morning she'd not have believed it possible to hear such words come from Alec Galloway's mouth. But as she floated up the stairs, her arms tingling with disbelieving joy and her stomach a whirr of happy nerves, she reveled in it.

And she continued to revel. In every single beautiful moment:

On Sunday morning, when he took the seat beside her during church and sought out her hand within the folds of her dress.

On Monday, when he shocked them all by accompanying them to the theater. Though Charlotte couldn't have said which performance they'd attended or what it was about, she could unequivocally say that the production was her favorite of the season thus far.

On Tuesday, when Alec asked Charlotte to join him on a walk and surprised her by bringing the pig, whom he introduced as Jambe de Bois. With its stitches fully healed and its limp less pronounced, the creature had them laughing with its antics as Alec told her the story behind the pig's name.

On Thursday evening, when they'd stolen a moment for themselves after dinner and Alec had invited Charlotte and Harriet to breakfast the following morning so he could introduce them to Vera.

Back in the coziness of his cabin this October morning, Charlotte looked around the space, surprised and pleased to note small changes here and there. Alec's recently smoked pipe lay atop the mantel. The book of music and poetry she'd purchased for him rested on a small table near his wing chair. A worn Bible sat on the corner of his desk. The cabin, though still clean, looked lived in.

Vera greeted them briefly from her position near the stove, mixing batter, frying bacon, and peeling apples. The small table was set with a mismatched set of plates and utensils, a cup filled with wildflowers resting in the center. To Charlotte, the simplistic beauty of it surpassed the elegant place settings found in London's wealthiest homes.

When Vera had a stack of pancakes nearly a foot high, she called everyone to the table. Alec helped each woman into her respective chair and then bowed his head to bless the food. With his hand grasping hers beneath the table and the low rumble of his voice thanking the Lord, a quiet joy filled Charlotte's heart.

To her surprise, Harriet and Vera became fast friends. Harriet grumbled about the goings-on at Glen Haven and Vera soaked up the gossip, making her own contributions to Harriet's pile of complaints. While they talked, Alec stacked Charlotte's plate high with pancakes, adding a pat of butter and giving her a generous portion of maple syrup.

Partly because she knew her curiosity amused him and partly because she *was* curious, Charlotte began asking about the maple syrup and where it came from.

"Try a bite," he urged between questions about the sugaring off.

Charlotte's mouth closed around the fork, and she found it difficult to suppress a moan. The pancake was fluffy, the syrup an unfamiliar sort of sweet, and the bacon added the perfect pinch of savory to balance it out. "Will you pass the syrup, please?" she asked.

Alec handed her the jar, pleased by her obvious enjoyment. "Are you planning to take home an entire trunk of this as well?"

As always, any mention of her return home left her with an unsettled feeling. The two of them had never spoken of it directly, and she feared broaching the topic.

"I just might," she said, trying to keep things light. She suspected she could grow as addicted to maple syrup as she

was growing to Alec's company.

As they conversed, Harriet was surprised and pleased to find that Vera had Welsh roots. Vera told stories about Alec's father and grandfather. And through the whole of it, Charlotte and Alec shared a conversation not of words, but of the tiniest of looks, a hidden smile, a toe tap under the table.

By the time they were on their way home, Charlotte felt as if she might burst, either from too many pancakes or an excess of happiness—she wasn't sure which.

"Harriet?" She paused, hesitant to ask. "What do you . . . do you like Dr. Galloway?"

Harriet pursed her lips. "He's a good man." From her, such words were a glowing endorsement.

Charlotte's jaw dropped a little. "You mean to say you approve of him? Of us?" She couldn't keep the disbelief from her tone. "I thought for certain you'd object, if only on the grounds that he's an American."

"Well, I didn't like your father or his Scottishness at first, but I've come to overlook that deficiency. Besides, Dr. Galloway is an excellent doctor."

"You didn't like my father?" Charlotte couldn't imagine such a thing. Harriet loved Father. She would do *anything* for him. Her presence here in America was proof enough of that.

"I didn't. At first. But that was long ago."

Her comment reminded Charlotte of her father's unfinished journal on her bedside table. Every day had been bustling with activity, every night booked with some event or another, and though her favorites were the quiet evenings when Alec came to dinner, she was enjoying all of it. Even if it meant the journal sat unopened, waiting for an evening when her eyes didn't shut before her head touched the pillow.

The first weeks of October flew by. The blazing leaves began to turn brittle, the days shortened, and the temperature dropped, but Charlotte felt certain that even the most maudlin months of winter would feel like spring with Alec in her life. With him courting her, the simple act of breathing had

somehow become more wonderful. Fuller. Fresher. The air in her lungs imbued with a life and joy that for her had previously not existed.

Charlotte hadn't known it was possible to be this happy.

She hadn't known that a simple act of faith as she'd boarded that ship to cross the Atlantic could lead to *this*. And as the days passed, she grew more and more certain that she'd been meant to come to America.

For the first time in her life, what her parents had felt within reach. A love with tenderness and trust, consideration and certainty. And passion. She felt it swirling within her, and she saw it in the way Alec's eyes sometimes darkened when he looked at her.

Though he still, in all these weeks, hadn't kissed her.

But she didn't push him. Every moment she spent with Alec her love for him expanded, its roots growing deeper. He listened to her talk about Clara's hunger for knowledge and, when Charlotte asked, gave suggestions for how to help her progress. They discussed her newfound passion for women's education and how she could best champion such a cause back home. They debated political issues. They argued over whether having a monarch or a president was superior.

But Alec never made Charlotte feel as though her opinions were unwanted or unwelcome. With him, she never felt as though her thoughts and feelings were too big or too much.

And he made her feel as though being Charlotte, just Charlotte, was enough.

With him, the person she hoped to become didn't seem so far out of reach. The many responsibilities she'd one day inherit didn't feel quite so heavy. And her future as the Duchess of Edinbane didn't seem so daunting. At least, not when she imagined him by her side.

That was what she hoped and longed for.

In the back of her mind remained a feeling of dread as she wondered if he could possibly love her enough to be willing to make a life with her in Scotland. The thought of anything

else . . . threatened to shatter her happiness.

So she chose not to think of it. Instead, she focused on enjoying their every moment together, giving him the time he'd told her he needed. And she hoped and prayed that as their courtship progressed, everything would all come right.

* * *

Alec soaked up his time with Charlotte like a plant long denied water. The brush of her arm against his, the dimple in her cheek assuring him the touch was not accidental. A quiet conversation on the Maganns' sofa in the hours after dinner, discussing everything from British and American laws to her uncertainties in her future role as duchess to the cat she'd had as a child.

Courting her, he experienced the full force of her determination, for she was intent on the two of them sharing everything. She held nothing back and she expected the same of him. It had been hard for him at first. The vast majority of his thirty-four years he had lived alone, accustomed to a self-sufficiency that hadn't lent itself well to companionship.

He had a strange fear of revealing too much of himself, of reaching a point, like he had with Nellie, where Charlotte would learn too much and find him unworthy.

But she asked him about his research, about the recent outbreak in cases of scarlet fever, about the poems he'd read, about his time in medical school and the years after his grandfather's death. She listened to everything he said and paid close attention to what he didn't.

She made Alec feel known in a way he'd never experienced.

As the weeks went by, he found himself telling Charlotte things he'd never shared with anyone. A case that weighed heavily upon him, the devastation he'd felt at his father's death and it being the reason he'd so badly wanted to become a doctor. And Alec experienced the same kind of hunger with Charlotte. He wanted to know everything about her—about her parents and her sister, Iseabel, her love for Scotland, her dreams for the future.

Most of all, he wanted to know if there was a place for him in that future. He struggled with the thought of leaving behind everything he'd ever known. How was he to make such a decision—to break with the place that had shaped and formed him into who he was? To leave behind his cabin, where he'd been raised and where he'd grown into a man? To abandon his ever-growing practice and everyone he held dear?

He dared not initiate such a conversation with Charlotte, fearing he'd raise her hopes only to break her heart. So instead, he sought out Tavish. He learned that because Charlotte would hold the title of duchess *suo jure*, her future husband would have no title, which suited Alec just fine. What he learned about the possibility of continuing his work as a doctor was more disheartening.

"I'll be honest with ye," Tavish told him. "Charlotte's family has a history of peculiarity. Her grandmother was a lowborn Scottish commoner, and her father, rather than snubbing his roots, embraced them. So no, I do nae think Charlotte would ask ye tae give up yer profession if ye married her." His mouth was marred by a faint frown. "But the societal constraints in Britain are much stricter than they are here. And as a woman with a title, Charlotte will be under severe scrutiny. I imagine if ye married her and continued yer work as a doctor as ye do now, it would nae reflect well on her."

Alec's shoulder bunched. He couldn't imagine giving up his profession, the very thing that seemed to make him what he was.

But he couldn't imagine giving up Charlotte either.

"What about my research? Would I have to give that up as well?"

Tavish thought for a moment. "Continuing yer research would be another matter entirely. There are plenty of men in the upper classes who pursue interests in science, mathematics, and logic. I believe because 'tis viewed more as an interest, rather than a profession, it would be perfectly acceptable for ye tae continue on with it."

That certainly hadn't been what Alec had expected. The

tightness in his shoulders eased a bit.

“Have the two of ye not discussed this?” Tavish asked.

Alec shook his head. “It wouldn’t be fair of me to offer such hope when I’m still uncertain. She’s made no secret of how she feels or what she wants.”

Tavish nodded. “Charlotte has long known that the man she married would need tae be someone who would nae feel threatened by her title and position. A man who’d nae be afraid that the strength of her identity would overpower his.”

Alec nodded.

“Though through blood we are only cousins, Charlotte and I are as close as any brother or sister. I love her and I would not see her hurt. And ye are right—she makes no secret of what she wants.” He gave Alec a significant look.

Alec recalled how willingly she’d professed her feelings to him, without any guarantee of their return. He hated that he hadn’t yet been able to reassure her that his feelings matched the strength of her affection. But life had taught him to be cautious. He didn’t know how to be anything else.

Which was why, much as he’d wanted to kiss her these past weeks, Alec had refrained, afraid that such intimacies would cloud his judgment and color his thinking. He wanted—*needed*—to be wise.

“I’ll say only this,” Tavish continued, bringing Alec back to the topic at hand. “Ye must decide what yer future looks like. What matters most. And what—if anything—ye’d be willing tae give up in order tae marry Charlotte.”

Alec swallowed hard. Tavish wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know; he was merely putting a finer point on it.

Tavish rubbed at his eyebrow. “And, unfortunately, ye may have tae decide sooner than ye’d originally thought. As my ventures with Liam have solidified, I may be heading back tae Britain earlier than I’d anticipated. Perhaps as soon as the beginning of November.”

Alec stilled. That was just a few weeks away. “Have you

shared this with Charlotte?”

“Not yet.” Tavish let out a sigh. “I’ll wait tae tell her once things are finalized. Which, if all goes tae plan, won’t be more than a week or two.”

Alec’s mind raced, his pulse thundering as he realized what that meant. He would need to come to a decision. Soon. “Thank you, Tavish. You’ve given me much to think on.”

With that in mind, Alec continued to mull things over as he courted Charlotte, allowing hope to grow between them little by little. But, unexpectedly, the joy Alec felt while he was with Charlotte extended beyond the time spent by her side. When he woke in the mornings, each day held a fresh expectancy, something to look forward to.

He went to lunch with Liam and Tavish at Elliott’s. He enjoyed his visits with his patients, and he experienced a renewed sense of purpose when he worked on his research. He began to take delight in all the things that had become a drudgery in the years since Nellie’s death.

But his work didn’t dominate his life, as it had done before. For so long he’d clung to his black bag, his grip so firm he’d not been able to hold to anything else. He hadn’t *wanted* to hold to anything else.

Until Charlotte.

Now he was figuratively unfurling his fingers from the handle of his doctor’s bag and imagining what it might feel like to hold something . . . or *someone* else. He envisioned coming home in the evening and being greeted by Charlotte instead of an overeager Jambe de Bois. He pictured setting his black bag down and rubbing the strands of Charlotte’s untamed curls between his fingers.

And little by little, he adjusted to the idea of turning his full attention to his cholera research. It still pained him to think of giving up his work as a doctor. But not nearly as much as the thought of giving up Charlotte.

With her in his life, all that had once been an impossibility began to feel tangible and certain. And with each day that

went by, the things he'd believed to be beyond his reach—
love, marriage, family—now seemed . . . not so distant.

Chapter Thirty

HARRIET STEPPED BACK, AND CHARLOTTE surveyed her reflection in the mirror, examining herself from every angle. The light lavender of her evening gown complemented the rich shine of her curls. Her wide-set gray eyes glittered like the thin rope of diamonds around her neck, and the barest dusting of rouge on her cheeks heightened her color.

Not perfect, perhaps, but she was satisfied.

Tonight's formal dinner and ball—which began at midnight—would be hosted aboard the *Liberty*, a brand-new luxury steamboat owned by Mr. Graves. To further heighten the anticipation of his soon-to-launch ship, Mr. Graves had orchestrated a steamboat race between his company's premier captain and that of Mr. Lyle, his rival. The two boats, making their way from St. Louis, would be the pinnacle of the event, and if all went as planned, the two boats would appear upriver not long after sunrise.

Despite the thrill of such novelty, what Charlotte was most looking forward to was a certain doctor's company. Alec met them at the docks. As always, the sight of him was accompanied by an exhilarating swoop within her stomach. His eyes found hers at once, and Charlotte realized she wouldn't mind if the entire event tonight was canceled. She would be just as happy passing a quiet evening at home, tucked beside him on the sofa.

They were ushered aboard the *Liberty*, a three-story vessel that was sleek and well designed. Dozens of candles gleamed against the freshly painted wood, with shiny brass and beautiful glass windows of the finest workmanship. Tables dotted the top deck, covered in black tablecloths and set with fine white china and polished silver. Large braziers were intermittently spaced around the railing to ensure guests remained warm through this cold night in late October. The lanterns on the side of the boat reflected off the water, lighting up the river.

"Impressed?" Alec asked, walking beside her.

“Very.” She glanced around the congested deck and then up at Alec, examining him closely. He preferred more intimate gatherings. “This isn’t too much for you?” She considered flagging down one of the footmen carrying large trays of drinks. “Would a drink help?”

He looked down at her, a soft smile on his face. “I’ll be all right. You’re my shot of whiskey for confidence.”

With him looking at her in such a way, a glow of warmth pulsed in her belly.

After an extensive tour of the steamboat came dinner. Thankfully, the tables were small and their entire party was seated together. With Alec beside her, Charlotte enjoyed the sumptuous meal, with course after course of oysters and crab, salad, turtle soup, parsnips and French beans, custards, fish pie, and roasted fowl.

“Tavish and I have something to announce,” Liam said after they’d each been served a delicate plum cake with almond cream.

Tavish nodded and Charlotte felt a swell of excitement for him.

Liam smiled. “We signed a formal agreement with the bank for a loan. And today, Stewart and Magann Ironworks finalized the purchase of land on the south side of Front Street.”

“Liam, Tavish, that’s wonderful!” Mr. Magann beamed.

Alice looked delighted. “Stewart and Magann Ironworks. I’m so glad you’ll be working together.”

Tavish flushed, but his mouth lifted in a smile.

“With the expansion of the railroads, the future is in iron, ladies and gentlemen,” Liam said, lifting his wineglass. “And Tavish and I are now officially in the business of making it.”

Everyone, including Charlotte, lifted their glasses to toast the happy news. “Congratulations to both of you,” she said, genuinely pleased. But her stomach twisted at the thought of Tavish not coming back to Scotland.

Alec glanced at her briefly, as if he could sense her unease, then turned back to Liam and Tavish. “Do tell. What comes next?”

Tavish set his glass down. “Liam will oversee the initial phases of building the ironworks and furnaces, along with the acquisition of supplies, while I return tae Britain, where I’ll be recruiting workers from the ironworks in Merthyr, Wales.”

“When?” Charlotte asked.

“The first week of November.”

“So soon,” she breathed.

Tavish winced. “I know we’d talked about leaving right after Christmas, but Liam and I are anxious tae get things moving. We hope tae begin production by the beginning of next summer.”

The shortened timeline seemed to grip Charlotte by the throat. If she and Alec didn’t reach an arrangement within a few short weeks, then she’d have no choice but to return with Tavish. She and Harriet couldn’t cross the Atlantic by themselves, unescorted and unprotected.

“I would take ye home first, of course. And from there I’d journey tae Wales.”

Charlotte nodded but didn’t dare look at Alec. He’d wanted to take things slowly. And it wasn’t fair of her to hurry him because her circumstances had changed.

But below the table, a warm palm slid across hers, Alec’s large, calloused hand offering nothing but reassurance. He didn’t look at her, gave no indication as to his thoughts, but his fingers intertwined with hers, a hint of possessiveness in the firmness of his grip.

The thrumming tension seeped out of Charlotte.

Mr. Magann cleared his throat. “That reminds me. Did you ever tell Charlotte the story of your grandfather coming over from Scotland?” After the awkward silence, he was obviously keen to change the subject. “I bet she and Tavish would find it fascinating.”

“He hasn’t,” Charlotte said softly. “Will you tell us, Alec?” She loved the process of discovering Alec’s different pieces. The who, what, and why of him. And this was a piece she hadn’t yet uncovered.

“I’d also be interested,” Tavish said from across the table.

Liam sat forward. “And I’ve not heard the story in an age.”

“Very well. But know this: ’tis not a happy one.” Alec rolled his shoulders, as if wearing such a formal coat made him uncomfortable.

“I want to hear it all the same.” Giving his hand a final squeeze, she released it, not wanting to garner unwanted attention.

Alec adjusted his chair, the legs scraping against the deck. “I’m sure Tavish and Charlotte are more familiar with Scotland’s history than I. But we’ll start a ways back, in the early 1600s, to lay the setting for our story. When England’s Queen Elizabeth I died, unmarried and childless, the crown passed to her cousin, Scotland’s King James VI, of the house of Stuart.” He nodded briefly at Tavish and Charlotte. “His monarchy combined Scotland and England’s thrones through what is known as the Union of the Crowns.”

Charlotte wondered if Alec realized the faintest trace of a Scots accent had crept into his speech. Was it because he’d heard his grandfather tell this story so many times?

“My own ancestors were some of King James VI’s staunchest supporters, fiercely loyal to him and his heirs. Unfortunately, the Stuarts ruled during a time of intense religious debate and radical politics. James’s own son, King Charles I, was executed after a bloody civil war.”

“Beheading may be messy, but it certainly is an effective means by which to rid oneself of a ruler,” Charlotte quipped.

Alec shook his head at her. “I’m sure the French would agree. However, I’m happy to report that we Americans have found a more civilized way of settling matters.”

Liam and Mr. Magann laughed, but Charlotte took his taunt in stride. “And yet before I interrupted, you were telling us the

story of your *Scottish* ancestors.”

“Do I have your permission to continue, then?” Alec asked.

She motioned for him to go ahead. “By all means.”

“After King Charles I’s beheading, the Stuart line was eventually reinstated, but their rule was riddled with upheaval and uncertainty. Then came the Act of Settlement, stating that only Protestants could hold the crown.”

“And the Stuarts were Catholic?” Alice asked.

Alec nodded. “Those closest in line for the throne were Catholic, which meant the throne passed from the Stuarts to a more distant relation in the house of Hanover.”

“And here I’d always thought succession a simple matter.” Liam chuckled. “But it sounds more muddled than our presidential elections.”

Alec continued, his tone taking on a more serious note. “There were plenty in Scotland, including my own family, who believed that true succession remained in the Stuart line. Politically savvy, they kept their allegiances quiet while the true heir, James III, bided his time in France. At least, until 1745, when his son, known as Bonnie Prince Charlie, crossed the sea to take back the crown for his father.”

Charlotte tried to read Alec’s expression, but his face gave away nothing.

“When Prince Charlie landed on the West Coast of Scotland, my great-grandfather Arran Galloway, alongside his fourteen-year-old son, Malcolm, my grandfather, joined the Jacobite forces to try to reclaim the Stuart throne. They had great success at first, with several key victories.”

“Until the Battle of Culloden,” Charlotte said quietly.

“Until the Battle of Culloden,” he confirmed, “in which my great-grandfather was gravely wounded. As the battle drew to a close, the defeat of the Jacobites certain, everyone knew retaliation would be swift and harsh. Arran made his son promise to run, to find a way out of Scotland before his allegiances saw him killed.

“Malcolm swore he would and started running, but guilt dogged his steps. Before he’d gone far, he turned back, certain he’d made the wrong choice.” His voice lowered. “He hid under one of the supply wagons, watching, waiting for an opportunity to help his wounded father escape.”

The table had gone silent. Even the fire in the brazier behind them was quiet, the last logs having mostly burned themselves out. Charlotte’s pulse thudded in her ears, and she wished it were loud enough to drown out the last part of the story.

“From fifty feet away, my grandfather watched as his wounded father was shot point-blank by a British soldier. They killed all the wounded.” Alec swallowed hard. “Every last man.”

Charlotte could feel the blood leeching from her face. She’d heard the stories of Culloden, of course. Every Highlander had, even all these years later. But it had been a romanticized version of the tale, one that didn’t include a massacre of wounded, defenseless men. One in which she didn’t have to imagine her own ancestors playing such a villainous role.

Alec cleared his throat, his voice gruff. “It was then that my grandfather ran, straight to the coast, where he signed on as an indentured servant to pay for his passage to America.”

A hired footman added several logs to the brazier behind them, and the flames grew, dancing against the raven sky. Charlotte felt sick.

Tavish pushed his glasses up his nose, frowning. “I’m sorry for what yer family suffered.” He pursed his lips. “But glad that yer grandfather was able tae make a life for himself here.”

“As am I,” Alec said. He was looking at Charlotte closely, and she couldn’t bear his scrutiny.

Dinner was ending. Guests were getting to their feet, wandering over to the other side of the steamboat, where the dancing would soon begin.

“As I said, it’s quite a tale.” Mr. Magann got to his feet and helped Alice out of her chair. “Alice and I need to go find Mr. and Mrs. Graves and congratulate them on a beautiful evening

and an impressive addition to their steamboat line.”

Liam and Tavish exchanged a look. “We should also excuse ourselves,” Tavish said. “We have a few things tae discuss before our meetings at the bank tomorrow.” They withdrew as well, talking in low tones.

Charlotte got to her feet.

“Charlotte?” Alec asked.

But she’d already turned, looking for the stairs they’d come up. If Alec insisted on speaking with her, she certainly didn’t want to do it where they would be overheard. She hurried down the stairs and found the middle deck mostly empty. Darker, too, with fewer lanterns and candles. She stepped to the railing.

Alec came and stood beside her. “Charlotte, are you unwell?”

Heaving in a breath, she looked out at the lights reflecting over the water. Her throat was raw. “That’s why you said those things that first night, isn’t it?”

Alec leaned forward, his arms braced on the railing, staring at his hands.

“Your father fought against the British too.” She gave a huff of a laugh to avoid bursting into tears. “It’s no surprise that when we met, you deemed me an enemy.”

Alec’s voice was quiet but certain. “We aren’t enemies, Charlotte.” He straightened his back and turned to face her.

She twisted, meeting his gaze, misery pulling down the corners of her mouth. “Aren’t we? Did you know my great-grandfather also fought at the Battle of Culloden, on the British side? And for his great cruelty he was rewarded with a dukedom. The very one I’m set to inherit.” Swallowing hard, she turned her gaze back to the river, her throat tight.

He stiffened. Her revelation had jolted him.

Alec leaned forward, his mouth just inches from her ear. “If what you said is true, then I can only believe it is more than coincidence that brought you here to Pittsburgh. To me. Your

presence here, the peace you and I have forged—it's nothing short of a miracle.”

She dropped her eyes. After what she'd just confessed, he was speaking of miracles? “Alec, did you hear what I said? It might have been my great-grandfather who—”

“I care little for the past, Charlotte, when my future is standing right here in front of me.” His gaze was earnest.

Charlotte had been tugged up and down, her hopes raised and lowered too many times these past months to make sense of what he was saying.

Alec's hand covered hers on the railing. “You're right, you know. I took up arms the moment we met.”

She blinked, slowly raising her gaze until she could see the depths of Alec's eyes reflected in the light of a hanging lantern.

“Do you know why?” The tension in his jaw softened. “I think it was because I instinctively knew you possessed the power to bring me to my knees. That if I didn't fight you, I'd find myself surrendering to you. Like I am now.”

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, he lifted his hand. His fingers shook as he touched them to her cheek. She'd seen his hands carefully wipe Harriet's brow and take her pulse. She'd seen him perform surgery, his hands sure and steady.

But for her, he was trembling.

“Char,” he whispered. The loveliness of it cut through her.

His other hand traced a line up her arm, his palm coming to rest where her shoulder curved up to her neck. She shut her eyes, basking in the sensation of his hands on her. His touch was strength and surety, a refuge.

The warmth of his breath stirred against her cheek, and her stomach tightened with longing.

He touched his lips to hers.

It had been *weeks* since their first kiss. She'd relived that moment a thousand times, the heat of his mouth against hers,

her lips coaxing, breathing life back into him. But this . . . was different.

Now *he* kissed *her*.

Fully alive.

Fully aware.

Fully claiming. With no intention of pulling back.

He was surrendering. To her.

Alec poured himself, his heart and soul, into every endeavor. His profession, his research. His grief and guilt. And now she knew what it felt like for him to pour himself into her.

With his lips on hers, Charlotte did her own surrendering. She allowed Alec's lips to brush her jaw, the skin just beneath her ear. She sighed as he whispered kisses across her eyelids, her temple.

And when he returned to her lips, his mouth was gentle. He savored her with slow sips that spread heat through her core. But she wanted more. She went up on her toes and deepened the kiss, lips half-parted on a sigh. In response he pressed her against the ship's railing and kissed her like she was in danger of sailing away.

With every touch of his lips she melted, her limbs becoming liquid. Her hands gripped his jacket just to hold herself up. Without breaking their kiss, Alec set his hands on her waist and lifted her onto the railing. With the strength of his arms around her, she had no fear of falling. She held to him and let him kiss her into oblivion, allowing herself to indulge in every hope and dream she'd ever imagined.

And soon it was no longer him kissing her or her kissing him. It was the Monongahela and the Allegheny joining to become the Ohio, no longer separate and distinct, but something new. Two twined together as one.

Their kisses continued in the quiet of the night, becoming languid and tender, hearts beating together, souls brushing, until without either of them speaking a word, their breathing slowed. Foreheads touching, Alec held her for a long while,

and she savored the breadth of him, the muscled wall of his chest a haven from the world. He pressed several last lingering kisses to her lips before he finally pulled back and lifted Charlotte down from the railing. Hands resting on her waist, he stared at her in the dim candlelight and smiled that beautiful, heartrending smile. “I love you, Char.”

Alec’s kisses had left Charlotte with a heady feeling. And such a declaration made her giddy, her heart soaring. “If you plan to keep kissing me like that, you’d better.”

He laughed, the sound rumbling through his chest and buzzing through Charlotte, every bit as potent as the wine from dinner. His hands moved from her waist to her cheeks, framing her face, his eyes tracing over her as intently as if she were a constellation in the night sky. “Why did you come, Charlotte?” he asked. “What brought you all the way to Pittsburgh?”

She could only stare back at him, memorizing every one of his dear features, from the tiniest scar on the bridge of his nose to the lines that bracketed his mouth. “Though I prayed over my decision and felt as though I should come, in truth, I think I was running away,” she confessed, letting out a breath. “From my title. From my fears. From my future. But now . . . I’m not running any longer.” A watery smile pushed up the corners of her mouth as certainty washed over her. “I think, Alec . . . I think I came for you.”

He held her gaze, quiet. “Truly?” he asked finally.

She swallowed hard. “Truly.” Earlier he’d spoken of a miracle. But now, staring into his eyes, remembering every step along the way that had brought them to this moment . . . she believed it. “Do you believe it, Alec? Do you believe me?”

His thumbs rubbed over her cheeks, the softest and tenderest caress. “I’m beginning to,” he said, and his voice held a hint of wonder.

Chapter Thirty-One

ALEC HELD CHARLOTTE WITHIN THE circle of his arms in their place by the steamboat railing, her cheek pressed to his chest, his chin resting atop her head. A lone lantern lit the area, and he watched as the flame flickered in the light breeze. That was what Charlotte was to him. A light.

For so long he had lived in darkness, but Charlotte had cast light both forward and back, vanquishing the shadows of his past and showing him a future that was full of possibility. And Alec loved her for it.

Several nights past, Alec had taken out the gold ring his father had given him, considering his future and what he wanted. Tonight, if he'd had it with him, he might have proposed. But he couldn't regret waiting. He didn't want Charlotte to believe he was proposing merely because Tavish and Liam's plans had changed. When Alec asked Charlotte to marry him, he wanted her to know that it was because he loved her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, not because he'd been pressured into it upon learning of her imminent departure.

Reluctant as he was to release her, Alec pulled back. "We should go back upstairs." He would have been happy to throw caution to the wind and spend the rest of the night here with Charlotte in his arms, but he'd not allow her reputation to come to harm. So with her arm in his, Alec escorted her upstairs.

On the top deck, the quartet continued to play for dancing couples on one side, while on the other, guests sat or stood in small circles, talking and laughing, footmen with flutes of champagne ensuring everyone had a drink in their hand. Freshly laid tables boasted all sorts of delicacies, as if guests might already be hungry again. According to the clock on the foredeck it was nearly five o'clock in the morning.

Alec scanned the crowd, looking to rejoin the Maganns. Part of him wanted Charlotte and him to keep to themselves a little longer. With her beaming lips and flushed cheeks, a glow of

happiness in her smile, it might be wise.

“Dr. Galloway? May I have a word?”

A man Alec didn't recognize approached. He was tall and thin, with dark hair and an equally dark mustache.

The man bowed. “You'll forgive me for being so forward, but without having the luxury of waiting for someone to introduce us, I'll introduce myself.” He extended his hand. “Dr. Josiah Banks, from Boston.”

Alec shook hands with the man, his own interest roused. “A pleasure to meet you, Dr. Banks. Although it seems I need no introduction, allow me to introduce you to Lady Charlotte Darrington, Marchioness of Rowand, who hails from Scotland.”

Charlotte curtsied.

“A pleasure to meet you.” Dr. Banks inclined his head. He traced the line of his mustache with a finger. “I'm in town visiting the Pecks, though with Mrs. Peck's confinement soon upon them, they opted not to come tonight. But Mr. Peck mentioned you are heavily involved in cholera research?”

Alec nodded. “I am.”

“I've something of interest I wish to discuss with you. Much as I hate to monopolize your time this evening . . .” He shot Charlotte an apologetic look. “I'm only in town until tomorrow.”

Alec looked to Charlotte, her face still aglow. He didn't want to leave her. But this sounded promising.

Charlotte released Alec's arm and turned to face him, smiling. “You go ahead. I need to find Tavish. I'm afraid I didn't give him the wholehearted enthusiasm his new endeavor deserves.” As if sensing his hesitancy, she touched his arm. “I'll be all right, really. Tavish is just over there.” She glanced over Alec's shoulder.

Why was he so reluctant to let her out of his sight? “If you are certain.”

She nodded.

Alec had no idea what Dr. Banks wished to discuss or how long it would take. “I’ll find you when I’ve finished up here. If nothing else, meet me on the north side of the main deck, near the bow, at sunrise for the best view of the steamboat race.” He released her hand.

Charlotte nodded, her dimple peeking out of a radiant smile. “I wouldn’t miss it.” She whispered a goodbye, and the sleeve of her dress brushed his jacket as she passed by.

Alec, no doubt, looked like a besotted fool, staring after her as she walked away.

“I’m sorry to have interrupted what was clearly better company.” Dr. Banks smiled, the gesture softening his features. “But I hope you’ll find what I have to say promising.”

Alec followed the man to the stern of the ship, where it was darker and a bit quieter. They each took a chair, and Dr. Banks immediately began inquiring about Alec’s background, when he’d graduated, what had prompted his research, specifically, in cholera.

It took Alec a moment to bring his mind to the question at hand. “I saw many deaths during the epidemic of 1832. I’m as anxious as any doctor to discover its cause, and a cure, if possible,” Alec said, allowing not a trace of emotion into his voice. “But cholera killed my wife, so my quest is personal as well.” He still felt a little stab of sadness as he thought about Nellie, but his regret and guilt were no longer dark shadows that hovered over him, barring his chance at happiness.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Dr. Galloway.”

Dr. Banks went on to ask about his methods, if he’d studied only cases in Pittsburgh, how long he’d been collecting information. Within a few short minutes, Alec was convinced of the man’s acumen. He tugged on the threads of Alec’s research, pressing him for information on what he’d seen in Pittsburgh and what his collaboration with doctors in Philadelphia had revealed. Alec sat forward, reciprocating with questions of his own about the epidemic in Boston and Dr. Banks’s own findings.

Finding someone who was as passionate about cholera as Alec was invigorating. The two of them lost track of time discussing the symptoms that made cholera diagnosable, the latest theories that held sway, possible cures, and the likelihood of another epidemic.

The sky was just beginning to lighten. The murmur of guests, along with a growing crowd along the dock, alerted Alec to the time. He needed to go find Charlotte. A man's shout confirmed the sighting of the first of the two racing steamboats coming upriver.

Oblivious to Alec's distraction, Dr. Banks asked, "Have you heard of John Snow?"

Alec tried to think if he'd heard the name before. He shook his head.

"He's young but brilliant. From England. I met him there two years ago. He worked in the Killingworth Colliery during the cholera outbreak of 1832. I think his observations have promise. He's a skeptic of the miasma theory."

Alec nodded. "As am I."

The crowd began shouting as the second steamboat appeared. Alec stole a glance at it coming to the head of the Ohio River, steam whistling furiously as it approached their own boat, the *Liberty*, to make the turn up the Allegheny. Despite its speed, it had little chance of reaching the dock before the first.

Dr. Banks followed Alec's gaze. "I've taken up too much of your time, but I thought, given your interest in cholera, you might wish to correspond with him. I could write you an introduction, and the two of you could exchange letters, share knowledge."

Alec had all kinds of questions. Where was this John Snow working now? When had he received his MD? Did he have a definite theory?

"Why don't you compile some of your findings into a succinct letter that you can send to me. I'll enclose your letter with my introduction."

Alec nodded. “That would be most appreciated. I’d be curious—”

The boom of what sounded like a heavy cannon exploded. A wave of hot air blasted over them, and wood splintered, red and orange flames bursting into the air. The high-pitched shriek of steam assaulted Alec’s ears and smoke billowed upward. The *Liberty* rocked, and Alec spread his feet, trying to stay upright.

The passengers around them began screaming.

Alec hurried to the railing, Dr. Banks right behind him, trying to assess the situation. The other steamboat’s overstrained boilers had exploded, blasting the top of the ship in two. Bodies littered the water, thrown overboard by the force of the blast. Passengers who hadn’t been killed on impact jumped to escape the fast-growing flames eating through what remained of the decks.

Alec’s stomach roiled as he examined the damage to their own boat. The north side of the *Liberty*’s bow had been blown away by the impact of the explosion.

Right where he’d told Charlotte to meet him.

His chest felt as if it had been torn open with a piece of shrapnel, the horrors of the past washing over him. Finding Nellie, dead. Her skin tinted blue, her eyes glassy.

Panic gripped him, making his muscles clench, his limbs seize.

He had to find Charlotte. He *had* to.

He turned to the stairs, but they were pandemonium, people pressing and pushing, yelling and crying. Dr. Banks shouted for Alec, feet already on the rungs of a hidden ladder that led down to the other decks.

Once they’d reached the main deck, Alec began searching the crowd, seeing and hearing only panic and terror. People were in danger of being trampled on the gangway that led off the *Liberty*.

Charlotte. Where was she?

He felt helpless without his bag in his hand. He *needed* it. Needed it as badly as he needed to breathe.

“Alec!” Alice’s voice rang out above the din of people pushing and pressing, the crying hysterics of frightened guests.

He pivoted. “Alice!” he shouted, searching and scanning. Did she know where Charlotte was?

A waving hand had him forcing his way through the crowd. He saw Alice first, and then Charlotte, just over her shoulder. Charlotte’s hair was disheveled, her face darkened with soot. A small scrape scored one cheek, and her dress was torn, a piece of the hem dragging, but from the looks of her, the damage was from the crush of people and not from the explosion.

All he’d wanted was to see her safe. And somehow, she was.

Charlotte threw herself into his arms, her entire body trembling.

“Thank heaven,” he breathed, cradling her against him.

But the knowledge that she was safe and whole, unharmed, didn’t fill him with the expected relief. Instead, with her in his arms, he felt as if he were being crushed from the inside out.

He accompanied Alice and Charlotte off the boat, making sure they weren’t harmed by the pushing crowds anxious to reach the safety of land. He caught sight of Martin, Liam, and Tavish a little way behind them.

And then he ran. Toward the chaise and his black bag. Toward the cries and screams for help. It was the long hours under a preceptor in the Philadelphia Hospital and those summer months of little sleep as cholera had ravaged Pittsburgh that kept him going, his body trained to work through the worst states of exhaustion, through heartache and loss.

He met Dr. Banks on the shoreline, where the injured were being brought. Makeshift litters carried those who’d been wounded by shrapnel. Burn victims cried out as their clothing was cut away. People were being pulled from the water, half-drowned.

Panic threatened to choke him when his thoughts dared stray to Charlotte. He forced himself not to think of her.

Opening his bag, Alec got to work immediately with the limited supplies he had, cleaning wounds and wrapping bandages, treating burns and plastering cuts. He lost himself in it. The cries of the wounded and the wailing of their loved ones. The stanching of blood, the snipping of scissors.

He wanted to sit. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to cry.

But there was no time to do any of those things with the chaos unraveling around him. So just as he'd done for the past three years, he worked through his pain. Until he couldn't remember, couldn't think beyond the medicine here and now.

Couldn't feel.

Chapter Thirty-Two

CHARLOTTE FOUND ALEC HOURS LATER, sitting on the grass, head braced between his knees. His jacket and waistcoat were long gone, his shirt bloodied. His shoulders were hunched in weariness.

All the patients from this morning's tragedy had been moved from the grassy area that had served as a makeshift hospital. The river was still being dragged for bodies. Piles of wood and steel littered the bank, the remnants of what had once been a powerful steamboat.

Charlotte's own memories of this morning's explosion remained sharp, her limbs still trembling. She'd been trying to push through the crowd toward the railing for a better view of the race when the other steamboat had exploded. The force of the explosion had rocked the *Liberty*, blasting away the bow, splintering the railing. Charlotte had been thrown sideways but had been far back enough to avoid the worst, while those who'd been closer to the front had been injured and pitched into the water.

Eyes burning from the thick smoke released in the explosion, Charlotte hadn't been able to get to her feet. As people had tripped over her in the ensuing panic, her dress had been torn and she'd sustained several bruises, but that was nothing. She was alive when so many people were not.

And Alec too. The relief she'd felt as he'd appeared through the panicked crowd was indescribable. And he'd felt the same, taking her into his arms and holding her against him. But after he'd escorted them off the ship, he hadn't even spared her a glance before he'd run for his doctor's bag. A frisson of unease had skittered down her back as she'd watched him go.

Which was absurd. He was under duress, his skills indispensable during such need. Charlotte couldn't even imagine the horrors Alec had seen. So many wounded. So many dead. It pained her to think of all he'd endured.

She knelt beside him now, putting down the basket she carried, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder. "Alec?"

He jerked up, recoiling from her touch. His eyes were bloodshot.

“You must be hungry,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “You should eat.” She opened the basket, pulling out a thick slice of bread and an apple.

“I don’t need to eat.”

“Do you want—”

“No.” His voice was rough. “Charlotte, I’m sorry. But I can’t.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “You can’t what?” He looked ill. She was tempted to set a hand to his brow to see if he was feverish.

“I can’t . . . do this. Do us.”

The hopelessness in his voice knifed through her. He was usually stoic and calm under duress. To see him so rattled unnerved her. His hands were shaking, his expression bleak. Best not to talk now, when he was suffering from exhaustion and sights so horrific, they would likely remain with him for years. “Shh. There’s no reason to discuss it now.”

“I’m sorry for the hurt I’ve caused you, but there’s nothing more to discuss.”

“Alec, help me understand—”

“You want to understand?” Bitterness tinged his words. “Today, as I worked, everything became clear. I’m a doctor. And I’ve lived my entire life in Pittsburgh. You are a future duchess.” His jaw was tense, not an ounce of give in his expression. “For a time, I thought perhaps . . . but I was wrong. I belong here.”

There was an awful finality in his words. “What about last night, Alec? You said—you said you loved me.”

“I know what I said. And I meant it. I do care for you. And I almost let myself get carried away in those feelings. But . . . I don’t—”

“You don’t love me enough,” she finished for him. She

wanted to shout, to cry.

His mouth was a thin line. “I can’t leave all of this, all that I am. Not even for you.”

“You can’t give up on us, Alec. You can’t. I won’t let you.” A tear leaked out of her eye, and she batted it away. “I love you.”

“You’ll go back to Scotland,” he said, voice hoarse, “and find someone worthy of loving you. Because that man is not me.” His words were so cold and unfeeling, they sent a chill through her.

“We can find a way through this.” She was desperate for even a scrap of hope. “Perhaps if I stayed—”

Alec gave a vicious shake of his head.

“Please,” she whispered, her eyes burning with unshed tears. “Won’t you fight for us?”

“Forgive me,” he returned, his gaze straight ahead. He wouldn’t even look at her.

Charlotte felt as if her heart were made of paper being torn into a hundred pieces. The ripped-up pieces were messy and jagged, and as she sat there, she grew numb, the pieces scattering in the wind and floating away.

She tried to stand. Her limbs were awkward and clumsy, and she tripped on the ripped hem of her dress, the grass cold beneath her palms as she threw out her hands to catch herself.

Alec didn’t try to help her, and when she rose, he didn’t try to stop her.

The only thing that kept her moving, rather than curling into a ball of despair, was a sense of disbelief. Nothing that had happened today felt real. The explosion. The chaos and pandemonium. And, least of all, Alec’s goodbye. He couldn’t be letting her go.

Not when the declaration of his love still echoed in her heart.

He was tired and in pain. He needed some time alone, some

rest. Then, perhaps, he would be able to see clearly. Then he'd realize that, despite what it might cost them both, they'd found something worth holding on to.

* * *

Alec sat with his back to the door, where he'd collapsed the moment he'd stepped inside his cabin. He was still trying to calm his thundering heart and pry himself free from the jangle of nerves that had him by the throat. He didn't feel hunger or thirst. He wasn't thinking about the aftermath of the explosion—the thick smoke, the pleas of the wounded, or the smell of burning flesh.

He was thinking of Charlotte.

Remembering the all-consuming fear that had coursed through him when he'd thought something might have happened to her. The feeling that he'd been underwater, his limbs weighted and slow, as he'd tried to reach her.

It didn't matter that he'd found her unharmed. Didn't matter that she was safe.

Because of her, Alec's heart was anything *but* safe.

He hadn't loved Nellie, yet her death had sent him into three years of wretched despair.

But Charlotte, whom he loved with a terrifying fierceness . . .

Losing her would destroy him.

Staring that down this morning had been enough to metaphorically send him running out the back door. To end things with Charlotte even as it broke him in two.

He'd told her it was because he couldn't bear to leave his life here—his doctoring, his patients, his home. That was a lie. For her, he'd been willing to give it all up.

But this morning had brought an all too painful clarity.

She couldn't be his.

Not now. Not in the future.

Like the ringing strike of an anvil, this morning had made that clear. In opening himself up to love, he had opened himself up to loss.

And he couldn't do it.

It was one thing to come to terms with Nellie's death. It was quite another to hurl oneself back into a lifelong relationship where the only question to be determined about the loss of one's companion was *when*.

All day long while he'd treated burns, cleaned and sutured and bandaged wounds, watched patients die, he'd been reliving the darkest truth of Nellie's death. The part he'd never told anyone.

How Nellie had asked him, right after the cholera cases had begun mounting, if she could go back to Philadelphia for a visit. She hadn't liked being alone when he was gone for long periods of time, out seeing patient after patient. He'd put her off. Told her they'd discuss it in a few days.

In a few days, she'd been dead. He should have let her go and he hadn't.

Now he was doing the next best thing . . . letting Charlotte go.

Alec hadn't even been able to look at Charlotte this afternoon, for fear he'd fall into her arms and let her to soothe away his deepest fears and darkest memories. He couldn't allow that. Not when he was a hair's breadth away from crumbling.

Not when what he truly needed was distance. Distance from the woman who had the power to break him all over again.

How much easier it had been when he'd been a dispassionate observer of the theater of life, instead of an onstage actor.

Hours passed. His legs lost feeling. But the thought of moving, of *living* without her was too much. Exhaustion had welded him to the floor.

If it weren't for Jambe de Bois's indignant grunts and

nudges, Alec might not have moved the whole night. But at the pig's blasted insistence, he got to his feet, his limbs as heavy as sacks of grain. Scraping together what little food he could find, he let the pig eat from his hand while he sat at the table and stared at the wall, wondering what one of his medical texts would say about how to mend a Charlotte-sized hole in his heart.

Chapter Thirty-Three

WITH EVERYTHING IN HER, CHARLOTTE wanted to protest.

She wanted to run to Alec's cabin and pound on the door. She wanted to rail against the unfairness of it all. She wanted to yell and scream at him for breaking her heart. She'd go hoarse if only it would convince him to change his mind. To change his heart.

But something held her back.

Deep down she knew his heart wasn't hers for the changing.

No matter how badly she wanted a future with Alec or how badly she wanted him to choose her, that choice belonged to him.

One day passed into two.

She prayed. With no other recourse, she poured out her soul, pleading for the wounded in the steamboat explosion, for the families who had lost loved ones. She prayed for Father, Mother, and Iseabel, back in Scotland. She prayed for Alec.

And she prayed over the shattered pieces of her heart.

She thought she'd known heartache in London, but it was nothing compared to the endless void that stretched before her, with no hope, no promise of relief.

Her heart felt empty, the joyous weeks with Alec that had once filled its chambers long gone, a fleeting and distant memory. Like a hollow seashell on the beach, with only the echo of the ocean inside it.

If she couldn't have Alec, she wanted home. She longed for it. But since it was still a full week before they'd leave for Scotland, Charlotte picked up her father's journal.

She recalled what Harriet had said a few weeks before. "*You might read things in your father's journal that surprise you.*" The warning didn't frighten her; if anything, she welcomed pain. Anything to distract her from this seemingly eternal emptiness.

When she opened to where she'd left off, she found the next page loose, its edges jagged. And there were fold marks creasing it as well, making her think it had been taken out and then tucked back in.

September 16, 1812

Today Katie and I stood in the kirk and spoke vows together. We are wed.

There are parts I'd like to forget. Katie's sadness at not having her grandfather with her. My overbearing father and the way he insulted the quaich Blair and Alene gifted us.

But there is much more I want to remember. Dear neighbors and friends wishing us joy. Olivia giving Katie a bouquet. The wedding scramble. And the night we spent together.

Katie is an enthralling mix of sweetness and spice. She brandished her hairbrush at me like a weapon but willingly let me take her in my arms, allowing my kisses and offering her own. I write these words with her sleeping beside me, and I am undone.

I believe there is hope for a joyous future.

Tears pricked Charlotte's eyes at the beauty of her father's words, the beginning of a love story that spanned decades. Her heart ached for the same. It ached with the loss of something she'd thought was hers.

The next entry was dated roughly a month after her parents' wedding.

October 17, 1812

When I arrived in Edinburgh today, I inquired about the first outgoing ship. The Warwick departs tomorrow morning, bound for Barbados. I booked my passage without a second thought. As long as I can be anywhere but Scotland, I will be content.

Charlotte examined the dates carefully. There must be some mistake. No mention of her mother. And Father *loved* Scotland

—why would he be so anxious to leave? There were no further explanations. The next entry made mention of Father’s terrible seasickness. She examined the binding, wondering if some other pages had been lost, but it didn’t appear so.

Heart beginning to pound, she kept reading, though some of the writing was so sloppy it became difficult to decipher. There’d been a terrible storm a few weeks into his journey, making her father introspective.

November 1, 1812

... somehow, someway, we have made it through thus far. Only God knows if our good fortune will continue.

It is moments like these that force a man to search his soul. If I’d done something different, would I be here now? Was there no other way? And yet every time I question, I see the strings my father held, bending me to his will like a puppet on a string.

Words don’t feel adequate to describe the hatred that has anchored itself in my heart for my sire. Father feels too intimate, too cherished a word to use. If I believed it would do any good, I would have the ship’s surgeon bleed me and once and for all rid myself of any of his blood that runs in my veins.

If I’d stayed, I would have forever been that puppet, bending this way and that. So I cut the strings. Cut every attachment to him—my mother, my uncle and his family, Scotland. My wife.

Everything.

That is what I had to give up in order to break free of his control. The cost was high, but I cannot regret it, for I am finally my own man. And yet I know I am not. It is not merely my blood that has been tainted by my sire but my very soul. It has become a twisted, crippled thing, incapable of love, and I doubt there is anyone capable of making it whole.

I care for my mother. I care for my uncle and his

family. I worry over Katie's welfare. But love? No. The only love I have known is a weapon wielded by my father—to control and manipulate. And I'll never allow it to hold such power over me again.

Charlotte was fully crying now, tears coursing down her cheeks, as the truth became plain. Her father had left her mother. Left and not looked back because of a rift with Grandfather, his pain so great, he'd wounded everyone around him.

She could feel the broad gulf of her mother's hurt, as wide and deep as her own.

Her stomach churned. She wanted to keep reading and find out she'd been wrong. That none of it was true. She knew how the story ended, but she could hardly fathom this.

November 3, 1812

I dreamt of Katie again last night. Sometimes, in moments of weakness, I allow myself to consider what might have been . . . what would have happened had I met her in a London ballroom. I have no doubt I would have wanted an introduction, and once I had it, I'd have asked for her supper set. And the very next day I'd have sent a bouquet of flowers to be delivered, or maybe I'd have taken them myself.

If we'd not been forced to wed under the weightiness of my father's machinations, might she have been the wife in my hazy imaginings—might we have created that happy family that grows more and more out of reach every day?

Charlotte couldn't help but look at the dates. They told her what she'd already suspected. That her mother had been pregnant when her father had left. And he hadn't known.

He hadn't known about *Charlotte*.

She sobbed then. At what her father had walked away from. At the love her mother had been denied. At the wretched look in Alec's eyes that had told her he was giving up on him and her.

Even with a headache born of her tears, her throat sore, Charlotte continued reading. Late into the night she was still turning pages, trying to understand the man her father had been and the choice he had made.

She skimmed through entries that were full of his work. Ships and cargo. His business partner. Details of a hurricane. His faithful servants, Abisai and Carina. And interspersed through it all, brief mentions of Katie—her mother. He'd sent her letters, ones she'd never responded to. He'd given her a monthly allowance, making sure she was taken care of financially. But he'd stayed in Barbados.

Charlotte's eyes burned, her lids so heavy that each time she blinked it took tremendous effort to lift them back up. But she needed to know how and when and why her father had returned to his family.

It wasn't until December of 1816, when he'd received word of Grandfather's apoplexy, that her father had sailed back to England in search of her mother, determined to take his place as the acting Duke of Edinbane.

Four and a half years that her mother had been alone.

And nearly four years that Charlotte had been without a father.

Chapter Thirty-Four

IT WAS LATE WHEN ALEC trudged up the hill to his cabin, wanting nothing more than his bed. It had been a long day, though not so long as the two before it. The worst of the burn victims had reached a degree of stability, and though they needed to be watched constantly for signs of infection, he'd handed the bulk of the responsibility over to another doctor, a man recently arrived from Virginia who was looking to start up a practice here. The timing was providential.

Tonight Alec would sleep. If nothing else, sleeping would be a reprieve from thinking of Charlotte.

But when his cabin came into view under the light of the full moon, he was surprised to find Martin sitting on the steps. The aging man offered a subtle smile. "I hoped to have a word."

Alec stiffened. "How long have you been waiting?"

"Half an hour or so."

Alec sank down beside Martin, his back against the railing. He took in a deep breath, allowing the cool night air to wash away the fatigue of the day.

"You're exhausted. No doubt you've worked long hours, so I'll get right to the point." He turned to face Alec, the silver of his hair almost white in the moonlight. "Charlotte is hurting, son." Martin paused, meeting Alec's eyes. "And I don't think I'm wrong in assuming you are as well."

Alec had been using every ounce of his strength *not* to think of Charlotte. To rebuild the wall that had kept him safe until she'd walked into his life. But with a single sentence, Martin had annihilated the entirety of his defenses.

Without Charlotte there was a huge, gaping emptiness inside him. He'd been lonely before; he was no stranger to a single, solitary existence.

So why did this feel so different?

This loneliness clawed at him, its talons razor-sharp.

Martin shifted, rubbing at his arthritic knee. "Perhaps you'll

allow me to tell you about my first marriage.”

Alec’s head turned sharply. “You were married before? Before Alice?”

“Before Alice,” Martin confirmed, nodding.

Mind whirring, Alec could only give his murmured assent.

Martin tapped the top of his walking stick. “Right before your father and I joined the militia together, I married my childhood sweetheart, Beth McDonald. We’d known each other all our lives, and I’d been in love with her for as long as I could remember.

“The war years were hard—long months of separation, erratic communication, her constant fear for my safety. But by the time I returned home for good, we had two children: Annabelle, who was three, and Collin, who was still a baby.”

The reality of what must be coming made Alec’s gut tighten.

“We had a good life. A blessed life. Until all four of us were struck down with typhus. It hit me first. I, who’d avoided the disease during my years in the army, brought low. And then Annabelle grew sick. And Collin. And finally, nursing us all to the point of exhaustion, Beth.”

Alec squeezed his eyes closed.

Martin cleared his throat, the softness of his words scraping at Alec. “I was the only one who survived.”

Silence pulsed in the quiet night air.

“Why haven’t you told me before now?” Alec finally asked, his voice brittle. “You should have told me.” All he could think was how selfish he’d been, how insignificant his own pain seemed in comparison with what Martin must have endured.

“Why?” Martin shook his head, a sad smile on his face. “Would it have changed how you felt after losing Nellie? Would knowing I’d lost my wife and two children have lessened your pain?”

“No, but—”

“Each man is called to bear his own cross, Alec. We must each learn to survive and carry on.”

“How did you?” Alec whispered. “Survive such a thing?”

“With time. With the help of God.” He tapped his cane again. “And finally—with Alice. I had many regrets from my first marriage,” Martin said, looking down at his lap. “I was a young man, hungry to succeed, far too focused on my business endeavors. When my family was taken from me, I mourned every moment I’d missed with them. I convinced myself God had taken them away because I was unworthy of them.”

Martin? Unworthy? It was beyond imagining. Alec had lived in the lonely cage of his own guilt for so long, he couldn’t fathom the thought of anyone else inhabiting such an existence, Martin least of all.

“It took long years before I allowed God to heal all that was broken in me. And even then, even when He sent me Alice, I faltered.” Martin frowned, the wrinkles on his face growing more pronounced.

How had Alec never seen, never guessed, that the lines around Martin’s eyes had been formed not only by joy but by his own years of grief?

“I was at a crossroads, not far from where you are now, when clarity came.” Martin sat forward. “I could not go back and change the things I hadn’t gotten right. And neither can you. But God . . . has never expected us to be perfect. He knew we wouldn’t be.”

Alec dropped his own gaze, remembering the sense of forgiveness and acceptance that had washed over him a few weeks before. The soft lap of waves against his aching heart.

“But if, in His mercy,” Martin continued, his voice thick with compassion, “He sees fit to give us another chance at love . . . do we turn away from such a precious gift?” He paused, letting out a soft breath. “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. I’m sitting here before you as a man who knows what it is to have the Lord take. But, Alec, I also know what it is to have the Lord *give*. He is the giver of the best

gifts. And when He gives, we can only hope and pray we are prepared to love more, to love *better*, when that chance comes.”

Alec’s eyes burned. He closed his eyes, seeing the faintest glimpse of a future.

Charlotte’s hand in his, her face turned up to him.

Alec, looking down at her, great love swelling within him.

And a prayer, uttered from the bottom of his soul, lifted from his heart, that he could find the courage to love. That with this chance . . . he could love more, could love better.

Such love could be his—if he chose it. He could choose love over loss. Healing over heartache. Faith over fear.

But it was a choice. One he would need to make hour after hour, day after day, year after year. For better or for worse. In joy and in sorrow. In sickness and in health.

He gulped, heart racing, and lifted his gaze to the pinpricks of starlight in the night, a smattering of beauty flung across heavenly skies. “I’m lucky to count you as a friend, Martin. You are a wise man.”

“Or perhaps I just like to hear myself talk,” Martin quipped with that characteristic twinkle in his eyes. With the help of his cane, he got to his feet. “Good night, Alec.”

Alec’s heart was still racing, joy spreading through his veins at the thought of making things right with Charlotte. Of making her his. “I’ll be over first thing tomorrow.”

Martin chuckled. “I’ve no doubt. But I think we both know it won’t be me you are coming to see.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

CHARLOTTE WOKE AS THE SUN rose the next morning. Her eyes felt gritty, her mouth like cotton. She'd fallen asleep sometime after three in the morning, or at least that was the last time she remembered seeing the clock.

Her father's journal lay open beside her.

The last entry she'd read last night had been the day her father had shown up to Rosemont Cottage, where her mother had lived in the years after he'd left Scotland. He'd discovered a wife full of bitterness and hurt. And a daughter. A nearly four-year-old daughter he hadn't known existed until that day.

Charlotte didn't remember any of it, of course.

She tried to. She pulled out the painting of the little girl swinging in front of a quaint cottage and tried to recall her time there. She concentrated, working to summon a remembrance of meeting her father for the first time, but it was no use. She couldn't recall a time he hadn't been part of her memories.

What finally made sense was her accent. She'd always wondered why she'd not developed more of a Scottish brogue, but knowing she'd spent the first four years of her life in England, things became clearer.

What she still didn't understand was why her parents hadn't told her. She picked the journal back up.

She had no memory of living in England, of her father appearing out of nowhere. Or her mother, wary and untrusting. She didn't remember the difficult choice her mother had made to return to Scotland, a place embedded with old wounds and deep scars, with the husband who'd abandoned her.

All Charlotte could think was . . . *how?*

How had her mother found the strength to forgive the man who had done such an unforgivable thing? And not only forgive him but open herself to love him? It was beyond understanding.

Charlotte kept reading. About moments big and small. A carriage ride to Scotland with her cat, Cleo, in tow. Charlotte meeting her grandmother for the first time. Father's promise to let her watch a lamb be born. Breakfasting together and fighting dragons beneath the dining room table. And, through it all, Father's quiet and steady determination to earn her mother's love.

She swallowed, her throat aching.

Loss and love. Angst and agony. The anguish of secrets kept and revealed.

When she read, in her father's handwriting, of the twin brother Charlotte had never known, buried in Suffolk, England, she cried.

And she wept as she saw loss turn to love. Hopelessness turn to healing. And the beginnings of a bond that was stronger for all it had endured.

The entries ended a few months after Charlotte's fourth birthday, though there was no finality, no ending . . . the last page of Father's journal was not the last of the story. It had continued on—years and years of a love grown stronger.

But near the back of the journal, Charlotte found a folded letter, the paper still crisp, with her name written across the front. It was in Mother's writing. She must have slipped it in while Charlotte had been packing her trunks.

My Dearest Charlotte,

I worry what you've thought as you've read these pages of your father's journal. I worry you'll question our choice in not reminding you of the truth as you slowly forgot your father's absence, our newfound family, and the beginning of a new life together. We did what we thought was best.

What I hope you realize, as you learn of our past, is that each love story is different.

For months after you returned from that dreadful Season in London, I wept for you and your heartache. All I've ever wanted for you is the kind of love and

happiness I have with your father. As you go to America, I pray you will be guided. That you'll find what your heart has been searching for.

It can be tempting to look for love on the highest summits and on the edge of sweeping vistas. But know this, Charlotte, my darling: true love, lasting love, is forged in the deepest valleys and over the rockiest terrain. It is in the crevasses of uncertainty, on the steepest, most winding trails, that our hearts are bent, broken, and reshaped into something capable of great love. And when we've proven ourselves capable of enduring such, the vistas come.

All my love,

Mother

Charlotte folded the letter, now tearstained from her own silent weeping, and let out a quiet breath. She thought of Alec, of his struggles and sorrows. Of the doubt she'd felt as she'd reached out to him, her faith tentative. Nothing with Alec had been easy. Not one step on the tenuous path they'd trod had come without effort.

But she couldn't regret it.

When we've proven ourselves capable of enduring such, the vistas come.

Charlotte felt that certainty beating within her. She wanted those vistas with Alec—her whole soul wrenched with the force of that desire. She wouldn't lose hope. She would trust in that quiet feeling that assured her that the Lord had led her to Alec. That they had forged something solid, something strong enough to withstand the weight of Alec's fears, the despair of old wounds, the heartache of past loss.

Even if Alec was in one of those crevasses of uncertainty for now.

She placed her mother's letter carefully within the pages of the journal before sitting up and swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. Her head was spinning, and no wonder. She'd hardly slept these past few nights. Touching a hand to her

temple, she steadied herself.

Harriet came in to help her dress, looking her over with a critical eye. If she suspected Charlotte was feeling poorly, she'd order her back to bed. But Charlotte was in desperate need of some fresh air, so she kept a smile fixed in place and a steady stream of chatter, even though it grated against her already sore throat.

By the time she made it downstairs, she was well and truly exhausted. It took every ounce of her reserves to sit through breakfast and make polite conversation.

“Have they discovered the cause of the boiler explosion?” Charlotte asked.

Mr. Magann cleared his throat and set aside his newspaper. “The investigation showed the safety valves on the boat had been closed in order to increase speed. The pressure proved too great.”

“I see.” Her stomach writhed at such needless loss. She looked around the table. “And the death count?”

Liam answered gravely. “One hundred and twelve, as of this morning, though it's possible that number will continue to climb.”

Charlotte couldn't help but wonder about Alec, how busy his last few days had been, whether he'd been given any reprieve at all.

A footman approached her. “Excuse me for interrupting, Lady Rowand, but you have a visitor. Dr. Alec Galloway. He says he can wait until you've finished.”

Her pulse pounded a frenzied rhythm, hope beating like a caged bird within her chest.

“Go ahead, dear,” Alice said, exchanging a meaningful look with her husband.

Tavish and Liam grinned at her.

Charlotte excused herself as composedly as she could, feeling a little light-headed. When she stepped through the doorway to the drawing room, she wasn't sure what to expect.

But there, hands gripping the back of the chair that rested near the fireplace, stood Alec. Deep shadows rested beneath his eyes, as if he'd not slept since she'd last seen him. Dressed in his finest jacket, his beard freshly trimmed and hair still damp from his morning ablutions, he was unaccountably handsome.

Surely, him standing here could mean only one thing.

“Charlotte.” His voice was deep and rough. So very Alec.

Her heart stuttered.

A strangled cry came from her throat, and she covered her mouth with the back of her hand, trying to keep from bursting into tears. A strange warmth buzzed through her chest, so all-encompassing that she felt as though she might float away. She took a step toward him, knees wobbling. The world spun, the light dimmed, and then she collapsed into darkness.

* * *

Alec crossed the room in two large strides, barely managing to get his arms under Charlotte before she hit the floor.

Cheeks flushed, she felt warm all over. He knelt, still cradling her head, and pressed his fingers to the lymph nodes in her neck. Badly swollen.

Alec had to clench his teeth against rising panic.

He slid his other arm beneath Charlotte's knees and lifted her into his arms. She was as limp as a rag doll. He crossed the room, easing sideways as he went through the doorway and called for a footman to summon help.

Within a minute Alice appeared, no doubt having followed Charlotte to hear what she'd believed would be a happy reunion. But Alec couldn't think about that. Not now.

“Has she been eating? Sleeping?” he asked, his tone abrupt. He kept walking, heading toward the stairs and up to Charlotte's room, where he'd tended Harriet during her bout of malaria.

“The last few days have been difficult, of course. She seemed tired this morning, but I just assumed—” She cut herself off, struggling to keep up with his pace.

There'd been plenty of illness this month, which always happened with the turn in the weather. Charlotte might have been exposed to anything. His gut made him suspect scarlet fever, which had been especially bad this fall. And while the worst cases were usually seen in young children, adults were susceptible as well. Especially if they were worn down from a lack of sleep.

He lumbered up the stairs as quickly as he could, Alice on his heels. The door to Charlotte's room was ajar, and Alec used his back to push it fully open. He laid her atop the counterpane, resting her head gently on a pillow.

Easing her mouth open, he examined her tongue. A light coating of white fuzz lined the middle, the sides a dark red, which narrowed it down to diphtheria or scarlet fever. It was all he could do to keep his features even and not give rise to alarm in Alice.

"Help me, would you?" Charlotte's dress was high-necked and long-sleeved, and he needed to see her neck, arms, and chest. A rash would be telling.

He turned her to her side while Alice worked frantically at the row of tiny buttons that went from Charlotte's neck to her waist. His impatience was like a coming wave, waiting to break.

When at last Alice had managed enough buttons, together they eased Charlotte's dress down over her shoulders. No rash—at least, not yet.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Have someone fetch my bag, will you?" He needed a moment alone. "I left it with your footman at the front door."

She gave him a worried glance. "Of course. I'll be right back."

Alec took the chair from the dressing table and set it beside the bed. He studied the high color in Charlotte's cheeks, the deep purple color of her eyelids, the slight whimpering sound she made when he touched a hand to her swollen glands again.

Under normal circumstances, he would be calm. Staying

calm under pressure was one of the things that made him good at what he did. He tried to remain rational. He still wasn't certain Charlotte had scarlet fever, but even if she did, it could prove to be a mild case, as many were. The severity of the disease had a broad range of variation, manifesting itself differently in every patient.

Yet that knowledge didn't stop the tingle of worry that pricked at him. Alec's instincts were usually quite good. And instinct told him to fear.

The echoes of a past conversation they'd had in this very room only made things worse.

"I hope, Lady Rowand, never to have you as a patient."

"Not more, I assure you, than I hope never to be one."

Alec put his head in his hands and thought through everything he knew about diphtheria and scarlet fever—symptoms, treatment, how to alleviate discomfort.

"Your bag," Alice said, holding it out to him.

He hadn't even heard her come in. Alec opened it, removed his stethoscope, and listened to Charlotte's feeble pulse.

Her fever continued to rise. By late afternoon an angry rash of tiny red bumps had appeared on her neck, arms, chest, and stomach, confirming his suspicions of scarlet fever.

Alec kept down his rising desperation as he worked with Harriet, who insisted on helping, answered Tavish's questions, and kept the Maganns informed of her condition. But as she worsened, he felt helpless. The irony at having Charlotte come through the steamboat explosion unscathed only to fall desperately ill seemed a cruel turn of fate.

One he wasn't certain he was strong enough to weather.

Chapter Thirty-Six

A BURNING HEAT BRANDED CHARLOTTE one moment, and the next, she was an icicle, her entire body quaking. Everything had a hazy, ethereal feel. Where was she? Not home. Her room at home wasn't the color of heather. It wasn't her mother's voice that soothed her, nor wiped her brow.

Some voices were familiar. Harriet's. Tavish's. Others were distant and unrecognizable. Her thoughts were scattered, fractured under the all-consuming heat that had her in its grasp. The sheets were damp and tangled, and Charlotte felt as if she were broiling, her body melting into a hot steam that wafted away into nothing.

Bile stung the back of her throat, the burning irritation so unbearable she clawed at her neck, trying to relieve the pain. Large hands kept her still as she tried to fight.

"Be still, Char. Be still."

The voice was soothing, so full of love, that she calmed.

She was forced to drink broth. To take cool sips of watered wine. Her head ached, the bright light making it almost impossible to open her eyes. She saw red behind her eyelids. "Close it, please. *Please.*" But her throat was swollen, her voice as raw as sandpaper. She wasn't sure anyone could understand.

"Shut the drapes," a firm voice said. "The light is hurting her eyes." The soft lilt of his voice . . . her father?

But no, she was in London. There were whispers. Rumors. Another woman on Philip's arm. Tears leaked out her eyes. She was alone. *Alone.*

She didn't want to be alone. Didn't want to stay in this scorching darkness where there was no reprieve. She tossed and turned, trying to free herself. She cried out for relief.

And then she just cried, her tears sizzling against the heat of her cheeks.

Darkness beckoned. How easy it would be to follow. The

darkness promised a cool release, an end to her suffering.

Why should she stay and keep fighting this eternal fire?

Someone squeezed her hand. “Stay, *mo ghràidh*. Please stay.”

* * *

“Stay, *mo ghràidh*. Please stay.”

Alec held Charlotte’s hand, his palm firm against hers, trying, desperate to keep her with him.

It was a little after two in the morning. The disease’s symptoms always worsened at night, and tonight was the worst yet. Charlotte’s fever continued to climb, her delirium became more pronounced, her pain harder to ease.

Over the past four days and nights, Alec had done everything he’d been trained to do as a doctor. He’d administered emetics. Bathed Charlotte in cool spring water to bring down her temperature. Fumigated the room with a nitrous acid vapor. Spoon-fed her carbonate of ammonia dissolved in water.

And when there was nothing else for him to do as a doctor, he’d done what he could as the man who loved her. He’d murmured soft words of comfort. Adjusted her pillow. Brushed her hair back from her forehead. Sponged away the perspiration from her hairline.

And still she remained delirious, her fever dangerously high, her skin hot to the touch. He had nothing left, nothing save the strength of his desperation to keep her here beside him. So he’d held her hand and asked her to stay, the words *mo ghràidh* rolling from his tongue, the term he’d so often heard his grandfather use when referring to his late wife.

Alec had prayed unceasingly these past four days. Enough prayers to make up for his years of silence. He bowed his head over the edge of the coverlet, tears threatening to undo him.

But his instinct was still to battle. To somehow turn the tide of the disease with his own force of will. Even with his own strength flagging, Alec hadn’t yet managed to let go of his

need for control.

He thought back, considering the *why* behind his every action, and realized he'd come to believe he could do it all on his own. When complications from his father's amputation had threatened his health, Alec had wanted, with everything in him, to fix it. And since he hadn't been able to, he'd done what he could—worked harder, been more obedient, tried to find ways to ease his father's burden.

When his father had died, he had taken on more. The role of provider for his ailing grandfather. An air of stubborn self-sufficiency so people wouldn't think them needy.

And then his grandfather had died, and Alec had been alone. Every burden had been his to carry. Every trial his own to endure.

As a blacksmith, it was up to him, and him alone, to forge the path to becoming a doctor.

And as a doctor, he'd borne the ultimate responsibility for his patients, the burden and blame of every death solely his.

For three years he'd tried to hold up the weight of cholera on his own. After Nellie's death, he'd fought the disease, studied it, researched. But he was just one man.

Despair tore through him as Charlotte struggled against the disease. But no matter how badly he wanted to, Alec didn't have the power to cast it out. And even if he could, the future loomed. He couldn't protect her from every illness, every danger, every peril in this fallen world.

He sat beside Charlotte's bed, face-to-face with his own fallibility. He'd never, not once, been in control. He'd never, not once, been strong enough.

He'd been trained as a doctor and yet had been incapable of healing his own wounds.

He had the strength of a blacksmith, but he hadn't been strong enough to unburden himself.

So why did he still believe if he worked hard enough, tried his best, gave enough effort, he could heal Charlotte through

sheer force of will?

He couldn't.

Only God could.

And it was that realization that finally allowed Alec, heart trembling inside him, to push off the crushing weight of a boulder—the erroneous belief that everything depended on *him*—that he'd struggled with for far too long.

He heaved out a sigh, lungs expanding and heart surging. A profound sense of relief coursed through him. And without that crushing weight of self-expectation, there was finally space for his fledgling faith.

The understanding that all he could do, ultimately, was believe in God's power. Believe that God was the giver of good gifts. Believe in His ability, even when Alec's own abilities failed him.

Alec prayed. Finally, truly prayed that God would heal Charlotte.

Prayed that no matter the answer, he could bear it.

And he wept, liberated, as he finally gave it all to God.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

THE ROOM WAS QUIET. TOO quiet. Alec tried to rouse himself, but the pull of sleep was strong. And he was so very tired. A gentle hand lay atop his head, soft fingers working through the strands of his hair.

Something made him lift his head and blink, a swell of joy breaking over him at the sight of the tired smile on Charlotte's face. The deep flush on her cheeks was gone, and though her eyes were heavy-lidded, her gaze was clear.

"Alec," she whispered, her voice rough.

To his ears, it was the sweet strain of a violin.

He took her hand and kissed it, unashamed of the tears that escaped, dampening his beard. "I'm here, mo ghràidh. I'm here."

"You've more—" She winced, touching her throat.

Alec reached for the water on her bedside table and held it to her lips, helping her take slow sips. Her hands trembled, weak from the illness that had ravaged her body.

His eyes roved over her, taking in her features, examining every freckle, the slight wrinkle of her brow. He looked at her as if she were the coming dawn after a long night.

Because to him she was.

When she'd finished, he returned the cup to the table and helped adjust her head back on the pillow.

She bit her lip. "You've more . . . Scottish in you than you let on."

A painful sort of joy bubbled up in Alec. "A bit from my grandfather. But more American."

"That's regrettable. I'm inclined to believe Scotsmen superior." A faint smile touched her mouth.

"Ah well. For you, lass, I can be Scottish." He chuckled, trying for a Scottish brogue. "Ye ken, I prefer Scottish women with English accents and a propensity tae insult Americans."

She smiled, but it soon gave way to a more solemn expression. “Then, I am *do ghràidh*.” She blinked, her gray eyes shining. “Your love.”

“You are,” he said throatily. From his pocket, he removed the ring he’d put there the morning he’d come to the Maganns’ fully intending to ask Charlotte to marry him. “After the steamboat explosion, I told you I wasn’t willing to give up Pittsburgh or my doctoring for you.” He exhaled, taking her hand in his. “I lied, Charlotte. I pushed you away because I was afraid of losing you. I was afraid of what losing you would do to me.”

Since then Alec had faced the broad chasm of his fears. He’d stared them down and, with little other choice, had climbed up and through the doubt that had plagued him.

A tear tracked a path down her cheek.

“I’m a different man now, Char. I don’t want to live in fear any longer.” He traced over every inch of her lovely face—her dark lashes, the curve of her cheek, the fullness of her lower lip.

He held out the ring his father had given him along with a lesson. “*I want ye tae remember how much coal we had tae feed the fire in order tae purify the gold tae make this wee ring. Like gold, all the most precious things in life require plenty of effort, Alec. Don’t forget that.*”

“I still fear, Charlotte. I fear disease. I fear you crossing the ocean. I fear you birthing our children.” He took a deep breath. “But I’m offering myself, a man willing to put off his fear in order to love you, pledging to cherish you to the end of your days. However short or, Lord willing, long those days may be. Will you marry me, Char?”

Another tear leaked from the corner of her eye, tracing down the curve of her smiling cheek. “Are you sure you can be happy in Scotland? Giving up your life here?”

He gave a brief but certain nod. “I know I could. I know I *will*. If you’ll have me.”

“Then, yes, Alec Galloway. I’ll marry you.”

Two more tears slipped from Charlotte's eyes as he slid the ring over her finger. And there it would remain, a constant reminder of the way marriage, and this woman he loved, would need to be nurtured. With soft words. Time together. Deep conversation. Tender kisses. He wanted to give her all those things and more.

Though she was still weak, her tiredness did nothing to dim the joy in her eyes. "And I'll take you back home and make you fully a Scot."

* * *

Hours later Alec stood at the window, watching the sun set over the winding Allegheny River. Behind him, Charlotte lay asleep in her bed, her body still recovering from the long days and nights of fighting scarlet fever.

To his surprise, he wasn't plagued by the recurring fear Charlotte's illness had evoked. He wasn't thinking of the future. He just stood, contentedly, in this moment of the present, his head bowed in silent gratitude.

The joy Tavish, Harriet, and each of the Maganns had felt at Charlotte's recovery, though great, had no hope of eclipsing his own, but he hadn't begrudged them the time they'd spent with her. Not when Charlotte had agreed to spend the remainder of her life by his side.

Though she showed marked improvement, she'd likely overtaxed herself today. Tavish and Harriet had insisted on seeing Charlotte as soon as they'd learned she was awake and coherent. When she'd shared the news of her engagement to Alec, there'd been an undisputable look of joy on Tavish's face. "'Tis time," he'd said with a smile. "I've been waiting a good long while for this news."

Harriet had grumbled something about not making such important decisions from one's sickbed, but she'd had to swallow past the lump in her throat to say it.

Liam, Alice, and Martin had been equally thrilled. Alice had squealed, Liam had given him a knowing look, and Martin—Martin had just patted him on the shoulder in quiet approval.

“You deserve to be happy, Alec,” he’d whispered.

Clara had come for a visit later in the afternoon, and they’d both wept at the news of Charlotte’s upcoming departure. And then, Charlotte’s voice spent, Clara had spent nearly an hour reading *Pride and Prejudice* to her. She’d only needed help with six words.

All that remained was to tell Vera, but Alec could already imagine her delight. She’d long wanted him to have another chance at happiness, but the fact that he was marrying a Scottish duchess? That was just the type of gossip she lived for.

Arms slid around Alec from behind, banding around his chest, Charlotte’s cheek coming to rest against his back. He’d thought himself happy a moment before, but it seemed his joy knew no bounds, his heart pounding at the way it felt to be wrapped in her embrace.

“I’ve a question, Alec,” she said softly.

He chuckled. “Of course you do.” With Charlotte there would *always* be questions.

“What you said earlier . . . about giving up your doctoring? I wouldn’t want that. Wouldn’t want you to be anything other than the man you are right now.”

Alec cleared his throat. “It’s not a rash decision I’m making,” he said, his voice firm. “I’ve considered it for a long while. I’m well aware of the difficulties it would present for you if I continued in my current profession, which is why I’ve decided to turn my full-time attention to my research. Dr. Banks—the one we met aboard the *Liberty*—you remember?” He felt her nod against his back. “He’s offered to introduce me to a John Snow, who lives in London, and shares my passion for researching cholera.”

“Really?” A note of joy infused her voice. “Alec, that’s wonderful.” She squeezed him tighter.

He took a deep breath, contentment washing over him. “I find I’m looking forward to having uninterrupted time to dedicate to my research.”

“If you truly plan to give up doctoring, you’ll most certainly have more time for your research,” she acknowledged. “I cannot, however, guarantee you will be *completely* uninterrupted.”

“Hmm,” Alec mused, suspecting Charlotte’s interruptions would be more than welcome.

“And I hope you’ll not give up doctoring completely,” Charlotte went on. “Now that I’ve been your patient, I believe I would be quite unsatisfied with any doctor but you, Alec Galloway.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

“On that note . . . you should still be abed,” he scolded, but he covered her hands with his, selfishly wanting her right where she was.

“You’ve been saying that practically from the moment we first met, if you recall.” Charlotte said, a hint of teasing in her tone. “Your concerns have been noted. And dismissed.’ Or something like that.”

He laughed, low and deep. “Will you always be so intractable?”

“You can depend upon it,” she said. He could hear the smile in her voice. “Are you having second thoughts?”

He pulled free of Charlotte’s hold and turned to face her, one hand resting on her shoulder, the other framing her cheek. She wore the same pale-green dressing gown as she had that morning he’d come to attend to Harriet, and just like then, her curls tumbled fetchingly over one shoulder.

“Never,” he promised. “As long as I can do this.” He kissed the curls resting on her temple. “And this.” He pressed his lips to her cheek, his kiss brushing down toward the edge of her mouth. “And this.” He fitted his mouth to hers, tasting the silky sweetness of her lips, enjoying the way she drew him nearer, fisting the lapel of his jacket in her hand.

She tilted her head back, smiling, breathless. “And I’ve a

feeling the more you do that, the less intractable you'll find me." And she went up on tiptoe and claimed his lips again.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

THEY MARRIED ABOARD THE SHIP that would return them to Scotland, right before they set sail. Tavish and Harriet were there, of course. Vera and the Maganns had accompanied them to Philadelphia and had come aboard for the ceremony. On deck, the ship's captain, a resolute soul of few words, had seen the vows spoken in a matter of moments. But the sparseness of the wedding ceremony did nothing to detract from the happiness swelling within Charlotte as she stood beside the man she loved.

With hugs and tears and promises of future visits, Vera and the Maganns disembarked, the crew weighed anchor, and the ship left the harbor. Tavish took Harriet belowdecks to see her settled. The other passengers milled about, waving at the distant shore. Charlotte stood at the railing with Alec's arms about her, looking out over the vast ocean of water and whitecapped waves that stretched between them and Scotland.

When she'd left home all those months ago, she could not have imagined what lay in store. And she could not have imagined the happiness she knew now.

This was one of the vistas from her mother's letter.

While still recovering from scarlet fever, she'd dashed off a letter to her parents, letting them know of her sooner-than-planned departure . . . and of the husband she'd be bringing home.

She only hoped she'd adequately conveyed her deep love for the man standing behind her. *Especially* since the first letter she'd written home about Alec had not been quite so . . . complimentary.

Charlotte's curls whipped in the bracing wind. "It's too late to change your mind now, Alec," she said, raising her voice to be heard.

He lowered his head and said softly, "I'll not be changing my mind, Char."

Her stomach swooped at the low sound of his voice in her

ear, the assurance within his words. She turned her head to see him smiling down at her, that smile that had the power to melt away every worry for the future. He captured her mouth, stroking the nape of her neck with his thumb, tender promises embedded in his kiss.

Tears sprang to Charlotte's eyes as Alec tucked her head beneath his chin and held her against him. The tremulous ocean covered them in a light mist, and the ship bobbed up and down, a motion she was all too familiar with.

But how different it was going back than it had been coming. How sure she felt. Of herself. Of her future with Alec. Of what she wanted and what she could do.

Edinbane had once been where she'd taken sanctuary after heartbreak. And then a place she'd tried to escape when life seemed to be caving in on her. Now the Highlands beckoned her home, a haven where faith, not fear, could flourish.

A home where she could build a future with Alec.

That was what she wanted. Alec had been alone for so long, and Charlotte was determined not only to make her family his but to make a family that was all their own. A dozen children, if she had anything to do with it.

And with the way he was looking at her, she did.

So while everyone else came up on deck to watch the last specks of land disappear, she followed Alec below to the quaint cabin they'd share for the next two months. Her giant of a husband pushed the door open, taking in the tiny room. "It's a good thing your trunks full of maple syrup and popcorn are down in the hold. Not to mention Jambe de Bois." He motioned for her to go in first.

"He'll be lonely down there, without you." Eyes laughing, she turned back to look at him as she passed through the doorway. "Not that I'm complaining. I still can't believe you agreed to let him come."

Their pig, as it turned out, had belonged to Vera. When Alec had demanded why she hadn't said something sooner, Vera had merely cackled. "You needed the pig, and the pig needed

you. Consider it a wedding present.”

Alec ducked beneath the lintel. “If it weren’t for Jambe de Bois and your insistence on bringing him slops, we might not be here.”

Charlotte turned back around, coming face-to-face with him. “I was never there for the pig, Alec.”

He swallowed, his hazel eyes darkening. With one step he’d eliminated any remaining space between them. His hands went around her waist, and he laid his forehead against hers. Before her sigh of contentment escaped, Alec’s lips were on hers, a satisfying reminder of the vows they’d made on deck. She reached her hands behind his neck, drawing him down to her, sliding her fingers through his hair. The delicious friction of his beard brought a smile to her lips. “Perhaps we should shut the door,” she whispered, her breath mingling with his.

Alec turned to close the door and banged his head on the low ceiling.

Charlotte laughed aloud, raising her hand and gingerly touching the slight welt rising on his forehead. “Should I fetch your doctor’s bag?”

He put his hands on her arms, holding her in place, a soft smile tugging at his mouth. “I don’t need my bag,” he said.

With the door shut, her heart began to beat erratically. “You should be careful,” she breathed. “With your head. It might be safer like this.” Charlotte traced the line of his jaw with her finger, curled her wrist around the back of his neck, and pulled him down toward her again.

He kissed her softly at first, his lips like a glowing coal, warming her from the inside out. “Yes, much safer,” he agreed and fingered the necklace resting in the hollow of her throat. She swallowed, throat dry. His lips traced over her cheek, edging toward her ear, where he whispered soft words of love and adoration.

He set a hand on her waist, another on the small of her back, as if to eliminate even the smallest space between them. But something stilled him, and he held her there, cradled against

his chest, the steady beating of his heart in her ear.

“Alec?” she whispered after a long moment. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” came his low voice. “Everything is perfectly right.” Several seconds later, he loosened his hold on her and took her face in his hands. His next kiss was so soft, so unhurried, that Charlotte melted into him.

She pulled back only briefly to say, “I cannot wait for the next chapter of our lives to start. In Scotland, with you.”

Alec tenderly touched one of her curls. “But our story *began* in America.” He teased the corner of her mouth with his lips.

“I suppose marrying aboard this ship was for the best, then,” she said with a sigh.

“What do you mean?” His hazel eyes were curious.

“Because we became husband and wife . . . not in America, not in Scotland.” She cocked her head, smiling. “But in neutral waters.”

And with that they were kissing again, forging a truce that neither minded at all.

Epilogue

Edinbane, Scotland

January 30, 1836

THE CLIMB OF THE CARRIAGE grew more pronounced, the twists in the road sharper. Charlotte had to force back the urge to put a hand over her mouth. She was half-tempted to ask someone to prop the window open and let in some fresh air, but a January Highland wind would freeze them all. Charlotte drew a breath through her nose and swallowed hard.

“Nervous?” Alec asked quietly, slipping his arm around her, though it should be *her* asking *him*. He was mere hours away from the beginning of the new life he’d agreed to by marrying her.

“A bit,” she lied. In truth, she felt so queasy there was no room for nerves. She gave him a wide smile, hoping the dim light in the carriage would mask the sickly tint of her face. For the past few weeks she’d both hoped and suspected she was with child, and the past few days back on land had confirmed it. Her nausea hadn’t abated, and though she’d lost the contents of her stomach only twice, she’d been careful to hide the evidence from Alec.

The secret bubbled within her, a joy waiting to be shared, but not now. Not yet. Not when Alec was about to meet the entirety of her family. She intended to let him recover from the fervor of their attention and have a few days to get settled before informing him she’d be making him a father before the year was out.

A part of her hated seeing their trip come to an end. These past two months had been dreamlike: the two of them cocooned in their tiny cabin aboard the ship, with little need, save for the few times when Alec’s skills as a doctor had been called upon, to engage with the outside world.

Those cold months, now behind them, were full of memories she’d always treasure. Meals shared together. Long nights where they held one another beneath the comforting

warmth of a quilt, too immersed in conversation to sleep. Games of chess where they'd tested one another's strategies. Heated discussions over the superiority of Britain versus America and the laughter and passionate kisses that inevitably brought an end to such debates. Stargazing at midnight with Alec's arms around her. Learning the most intimate details of a husband she'd only grown to love more and more.

"Are you worried they'll dislike me?" Alec asked low, a hint of teasing in his voice.

Charlotte turned to face him and set a hand on his knee. "Alec, they'll love you. Just as I do."

He drew her hand from his knee and kissed her knuckles, the heat of his mouth seeping through her gloves, the look in his eyes making her forget her nausea.

Harriet eyed them from across the carriage.

Charlotte turned to look out the window, trying to hide the blush rising on her cheeks. She already missed the privacy of the cabin room they'd shared aboard the ship. The majestic Cairngorms rose in the distance. "How much longer?" she asked, fighting back a yawn.

Tavish looked up from the book he was reading. "Two hours, I think. If the roads are good."

She drew in a breath, her fingertips pulsing. Perhaps there *was* room for a few nerves. As if sensing her unease, Alec pulled her against him, heedless of Harriet's disapproval, bracing Charlotte against the sway of the carriage. How easy it would be to fall asleep like this. She'd been so tired of late.

"Sleep," he whispered into her ear.

With his encouragement, she allowed her eyelids to drift shut. But before giving in to sleep, she breathed in the masculine scent of leather and pipe smoke, the feeling of security she felt within Alec's arms, and prayed he'd come to love Scotland and her family as much as she did.

* * *

Charlotte's breathing deepened, and her hand dropped into her

lap. Alec was grateful she'd get a little rest before their arrival. He turned to stare out the window, taking in the landscape of a wintry Scotland, lost in thought. He knew Charlotte was anxious to be reunited with her family, but Alec couldn't help but regret that their wedding trip was drawing to a close.

Crossing the Atlantic had been a secluded, private time during which he and Charlotte had grown into one another. Days and nights he'd spent exploring everything about her, coming to adore her more than he'd thought possible as they'd discovered piece by piece each other's deepest yearnings and long-held dreams. She teased him and taught him how to laugh again, yet willingly embraced his old scars and the pockets of grief that occasionally surfaced.

Though Charlotte was, by nature, an early riser, together they'd kept such late hours that eventually she'd adopted the habit of sleeping in, and Alec awoke each morning, content just to hold her in his arms as she slept, studying the woman who'd become a part of him. His love for her knew no bounds, expanding daily as he came to know her in ways only a husband could.

An hour drifted by, then another.

Charlotte's head lolled forward a bit, and he eased her against his chest, frowning at the sickly pallor of her skin. Though she'd tried to hide her bouts of nausea from him, Alec had likely known she was pregnant before she herself had suspected it. He found her efforts to hide it endearing. Whatever her reasons for keeping it to herself, he was happy to let her share the news in her own time.

The thought of Charlotte growing round with their child, the two of them becoming three and starting the family he'd always longed for, had steadied him amidst the thought of so much change. It made him feel needed, anchored in a way he never had been before.

The carriage jolted over the rutted road and Charlotte's head jerked up. She bit back a yawn. "Are we close?" She was lovely in the dim light, her wide gray eyes blinking awake.

"About a quarter of an hour more," Tavish replied from

across the way.

Charlotte glanced up at Alec. “What?” she demanded, her voice still husky from sleep.

He’d been staring at her, he realized, with a besotted smile on his face. More than two months in almost constant company together and her effect on him hadn’t lessened any.

She patted her hair. “I look a mess, don’t I?” Before he could answer she turned to Harriet, as if he couldn’t be trusted to give an unbiased opinion. “Don’t I?”

“Your curls have seen better days,” Harriet replied unapologetically.

Charlotte adjusted a few of her hairpins, rearranging her front curls. Without warning, she twisted, gasping and pointing out the carriage window. “Coos! Alec, look! See for yourself.”

He nearly laughed aloud at her enthusiasm, turning his gaze to the furry, horned creatures that grazed in the hills, rooting for grass through a light dusting of snow. No wonder she found American cows so hideous.

“Well?” She looked on expectantly, clearly awaiting his acknowledgment of their superiority.

He kept his expression stoic. “I’m still not sure I’d stop if one had a broken leg. Especially in this weather.”

She embedded her elbow in his ribs, though it didn’t hurt quite like she’d intended it to. Alec smiled. To save himself from further attack, he took her hand in his.

Charlotte peered out the window again. “Once we come around that bend, you’ll be able to see it.” She glanced up at him, a troubled look on her face. “Are you ready?”

“As ready as I can be,” he replied, though his apprehension had been growing these past few days. What would Charlotte’s parents think about her marrying a man they’d never met, and an American one at that?

“There it is,” Tavish said, pointing. An uncharacteristic boyish excitement had crept into his tone. “Castleton Manor.”

“About time,” Harriet grumbled, the corner of her lips curving upward.

Alec’s attention was riveted on the stately white manor that Charlotte had described to him in detail. Assuming the note they’d sent ahead from the inn they’d stayed at last night had arrived, her family would be expecting them. He thought their two and a half months of travel had prepared him for this moment, but with the way his pulse was beating in his ears, perhaps not.

At last they rolled to a stop. Tavish sat forward. Harriet straightened her bonnet. Charlotte released Alec’s hand, and he flexed his fingers, trying to get his blood circulating again.

The carriage door opened and he nodded at Charlotte. “You first, Mrs. Galloway.”

“They really will love you,” she whispered and then moved toward the door. He set a hand on the small of her back as she stepped down.

“Charlotte!” A chorus of voices called out her name.

Harriet stepped down next, and then Tavish motioned for Alec to go. His palms were sweating more than when he’d performed his first surgery. But before he managed to alight, a stockier version of Tavish—one of Tavish’s brothers, he’d guess—blocked the door to the carriage. “It’s true!” he called, grinning. “Charlotte really *did* bring home a husband.”

“This is Bram,” Tavish said to Alec. “As ye can see, he possesses little tact.”

Bram’s twin brother appeared at the door, the grin he leveled at Tavish even broader. “And ye didn’t think tae bring home a wife?” He waggled his eyebrows up and down.

“*Graeme.*” An edge of warning entered Tavish’s voice, softened by the hint of a smile that played on his lips. He turned to Alec. “If possible, he possesses even less.” He directed his attention back to the twins. “Now, move aside so we can make proper introductions.”

Tavish and Alec both alighted, Alec searching for Charlotte amid the small crowd. Tavish began scolding his brothers. “I

see yer time on the Continent did nothing for ye at all.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, exactly,” Graeme replied. “We—”

At that moment, Charlotte turned back amid the sea of faces and extended her hand, drawing Alec toward the two people who stood right in front of her. Alec recognized her parents at once. Her father was tall and striking and had the same penetrating gray eyes and wide smile as Charlotte. And her mother . . . her mother seemed to have given her nearly everything else. Alec felt as if he were being given a glimpse of what Charlotte would look like twenty years in the future, and it made his throat constrict. His hand tightened around Charlotte’s, wanting that future with her, wanting with everything in him to grow old with her, watching as each line and wrinkle appeared in her face, the marks of a life well lived.

She began in a tentative voice. “Mother, Father, this is my husband.” She went on, her voice snagging with emotion. “Alec Galloway. Alec, this is my mother and—”

Before she could finish the introduction, Charlotte’s mother stepped forward, encompassing Alec in a hug, her arms tight about him. She pulled back after a long moment, her eyes bright with tears. “We look forward to knowing you and loving you as Charlotte does.”

Alec’s eyes stung. He hadn’t expected to be so warmly welcomed into a family he’d never met. He reached for Charlotte’s hand again, hoping he could convey, without words, the love he already felt for them.

Charlotte smiled up at him. “And this is my father,” she finished.

Alec could feel the weight of Charlotte’s father’s gaze upon him. Swallowing, Alec stepped forward and extended his hand.

Charlotte’s father didn’t return the gesture but stood unmoving, his gaze implacable as it moved between his daughter and Alec. Finally, he broke into a smile. “Welcome tae Scotland, son,” he said, taking his hand. With his other

hand, he patted Alec on the back. “And welcome tae our family.”

Author's Note

WHERE TO START? I KNOW some of my readers will be disappointed that the majority of this story isn't set in Scotland. Trust me, I *wanted* it to be set in Scotland. I went to Scotland last summer and found a piece of my soul there. But as I wrote the epilogue to *Heart in the Highlands* from Charlotte's point of view and this story sparked in my mind and heart, I could see it clearly. I could see Alec clearly. And Alec was in America.

So Charlotte had to go and find him.

Originally, I'd thought about setting the story in a larger city, like Philadelphia (where I'd lived for three years and already knew a ton of the history). But for so many reasons, this story had to take place in Pittsburgh. Though it might be hard to believe now, Pittsburgh was *the* up-and-coming city of the time. In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, Pittsburgh would become the center of industry and wealth in the United States, but in the 1830s it was still a rather rough town, a land of opportunity, just beginning to develop into what it would one day become.

Steamboats were pivotal to a city like Pittsburgh that was surrounded by rivers. The railroad was not yet what it would later become, and cities on the water had a natural advantage as steamboats carried passengers and goods up and down the waterways. Steamboat travel, even in the safest of circumstances, were quite dangerous. Steamboat races were common, despite the many, many risks they posed. Though the one I described is fictional, there were many incidents and accidents that took lives, including the most devastating—the explosion and sinking of the *Sultana* on the Mississippi River in 1865, killing 1,169 passengers (though tallies vary, some as high as 1,500).

Many of you will have questions about Charlotte's title. Yes, women in Scotland can hold titles. Just like back then, it is still the exception rather than the rule, but it does happen. As explained in my book, certain peerages were created to devolve upon "heirs general," which meant a daughter could

inherit the title if there were no sons. In Charlotte's case, this meant she held her title *suo jure*—in her own right—so she alone held the title even once she married; the husband of a peeress in her own right would not be granted the use of the title for himself. However, despite these allowances, women who held titles were not allowed a seat in the House of Lords. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that these outdated rules were finally overturned and women were allowed their rightful place in the upper house.

Writing a historically accurate doctor is always a difficult endeavor. We so want our doctors to wash their hands and clean everything thoroughly and, for heaven's sake, not to use the dreaded leeches! Our modern sensibilities are horrified by the medical practices of the early 1800s. I tried to be as true to the time period as I could be, using only a few variations—Alec liked washing his hands because he likes things pristine and organized in order to help him feel in control. Another example was his lack of use of leeches, which I attributed to the fact that he saw his dying father continuously bled. Unfortunately, back then this was far too common, ill patients growing worse as they were slowly bled to death (including, as many historians believe, George Washington).

The cholera epidemic first came to North American shores in 1832. In large cities, 8 to 10 percent of their populations died. Doctors were clueless as to what caused the disease or how to treat it, and many of the theories I presented in the book held sway at the time. It wasn't until 1855 that John Snow was able to prove in his published work *On the Mode of Communication of Cholera* that cholera is usually transmitted through contaminated drinking water and cities began doing a better job of protecting the public water supply. All sorts of other diseases were prevalent in the 1800s, including typhus and scarlet fever, which were often difficult to distinguish.

Writing in this period is difficult because so much bias and racism existed that we eschew. In my efforts to maintain historical accuracy, you'll note that my characters use the word *Indians*, even though the appropriate term is *Indigenous peoples*. The terms *slavery* and *slaves* were also commonly used, even though we now endeavor to use more humanizing

language such as *enslaved people*.

A brief note on the Battle of Culloden. While its mention in my story is brief, the horrors that took place in the aftermath are real. There was no mercy shown. The wounded left on the battlefield were killed. It's a part of Scotland's story that is often skipped over.

As for ether . . . it has an interesting history. Ether has been around since the 1500s, but in the 1830s "ether frolics" became popular events. Part of what made ether so popular was the speed at which it takes effect—much faster than alcohol. Thus, at ether frolics, people commonly drank or inhaled ether, which led to euphoria or a stupor or unconsciousness. While it wasn't used specifically as an anesthetic until the 1840s, Dr. Galloway's knowledge and use of ether to try to calm the pig is within the realm of believability.

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About the Author



AT A YOUNG AGE HEIDI perfected the art of hiding out so she could read instead of do chores. One husband and four children later, not much has changed. She has an abiding love for Peanut Butter M&Ms, all things autumn, and any book that can make her forget she is supposed to be keeping her children alive.

She currently lives in a charming old town just north of Boston, in southern New Hampshire.

Heidi loves to stay in touch with her readers! For authorly insights, fun giveaways, and sneak peeks, you can keep up with her on social media and by signing up for her newsletter.

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