

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration of a haunted house at night. A woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a blue, off-the-shoulder, floral-patterned dress, stands in the foreground, looking slightly to her right. The house behind her has several windows with warm, orange light glowing from within. The sky is dark blue with a large, pale moon and several black birds flying. Bare tree branches are visible in the upper left. The overall mood is mysterious and gothic.

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A circular logo for Dragonhead Publishing, featuring a stylized dragon head in profile, facing right, with the words "DRAGONHEAD PUBLISHING" around the perimeter.

ONCE
UPON A
HAUNTED ROMANCE

AN HISTORICAL

ROMANCE COLLECTION

Once Upon a Haunted Romance

An Historical Romance Collection

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



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Once Upon a Haunted Cave

Meara Platt



Chapter One

Cornwall, England
August 1817

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

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

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

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

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

“Dear heaven,” she heard him mutter.

“Your Grace?” She was almost afraid to meet his gaze, for there was something about his dark eyes that had the power to devour her soul. It was ridiculous to feel this way about someone—a duke, no less—she had only known him only two weeks ago. That he even knew her name was a surprise, for he had never spoken to her until just now. But he had been watching her since the morning, and she was a little undone knowing she had his attention.

What did this fierce man want with her?

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

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

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

Well, perhaps he made it a point to know everyone who came around from MacArran Grange. Not that he would have reason to pay her more than a passing glance when the house was filled with guests, several of whom were accomplished young ladies making their Society debuts. She was merely serving as companion to his aunt, Lady Audley. Hence, she was not one of importance.

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

“Yes, Miss Alwyn.”

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

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

There was no prettiness about him, just raw maleness.

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

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

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

Well, good luck to him.

oulders. Not that he would need it.

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

and went The young ladies at this duke's house party did not seem to mind him more than nature, for they fluttered around him like sparkling butterflies hoping to be in his favor.

he was "Why should I not explore the caves, Your Grace?" Heather prodded him when he did not immediately respond.

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

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

ely felt Until now, Heather thought she had been invisible to him. "Dangerous to me? Why?"

ough he "Because you are drawn to them and the song they sing."

r turned "That is true," she said with a nod, "but isn't everyone?"

was she "No. Most people have a healthy fear and avoid them. Nor would people hear their song even if they were standing where you are to walk. I'd like to see you take another step forward. "This is not the first time I've noticed you. Can you not see, Miss Alwyn? The Singing Caves have too strong a pull on you. Keep away from them. I have no desire to find your lifeless body washed out of those rocks when the tide rolls out."

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

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

the party. "Am I forbidden to walk along the beach, too?" She brushed back the stray strands of her hair that had escaped their braid and now whipped in her face because of the gusting wind. She did not mind, for the breeze was warm and struck her cheeks. There was a dampness to it, too. The air was ne

around here because they were so close to the water. “Or is there harm in taking a simple walk? I would like to understand your rules so I do not make him further offense.”

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

She winced. “I don’t mean to.”

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

She stared at the masculine hand.

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

“No.” She looked up at him, wondering why he was holding her hand. “I’m not usually talking to her.”

“In Celtic it means friend of elves. *Blessed* friend of elves. This is a delicate sprite about to fly away.”

Her laughter caught on the breeze and echoed around them. “I was in danger of it. All I meant to do was walk down to the beach. What is so funny with that? Sorry, that last remark sounded petulant even to my own ears.”

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

She did not deny it.

This was her only time off, and she did not wish to spend it indoors. Though MacArran Grange was a beautiful house. The cliffs and beach on this part of Cornwall were also beautiful, and somehow familiar, although nobody could not recall ever being here before. She wanted to explore as much of the area as she could before the house party ended and she had to return to London with the equally dismal Lady Audley.

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

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

He glanced toward the sky.

Heather sighed, wishing he could appreciate the beauty of this glorious day and the magical hues to be seen as the sun began to set. I

in mylavenders and pinks mixed in with fiery oranges that stole one's breath
not give The sky was almost cloudless today, save for a few wispy ten
white floating by on the August breeze. Goshawks and gulls flew o
have azure waters of MacArran Cove in search of fish swimming bene
crystal surface.

He fixed his gaze on the distant waves, appearing to study their r
s hand,fall as the wind swept them to shore. "My other guests will be taking
the terrace by now."

"Other? Do you consider me a guest? I am no more than your
rs in accompanion."

ass, do He shrugged his broad shoulders, his gaze still on the cove. "Yo
cut above a mere companion, I would say. Anyone who can tolerate r
hand oras long as you have done has earned my respect."

"Oh dear." Heather was unable to hold back a light laugh.
is whatconsidered that much of an ogre?"

gown— "You know she is. I'm told you have been with her almost a year
is about six months longer than anyone else has lasted. I marvel
is in nofortitude."

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

s." It was not fortitude so much as desperation. His aunt was an unq
Do youwoman, but Heather's position as her companion was a precious sa
and she dared not say or do anything to put it at risk.

"What do you think of my house, Miss Alwyn?" He now gestured
rs, eventhe magnificent structure built of gray stone that Heather expected
ches instand for another thousand years.

ugh she "It is splendid," she said, following his gaze. "The roses and ivy al
h of thewalls soften it. The shutters are the deep blue of the sea and conn
dismalhouse to its surroundings. I understand it has recently been restore
former grandeur. Did you have a hand in that renovation, other than
supplying the massive funds required?"

he only "Yes." He smiled again, a smile capable of melting her heart if s
ially ontrusted him enough to be caught off her guard.

"It feels like it has your touch, a mix of power and perfection." Sh
not help smiling back at him. "Will you tell me more? The int
oamingdecorated with impeccable taste. I have been in some beautiful hor
Delicatenone to match yours. The exterior is elegant, too. Every bit of its const

away. shows exquisite thought and attention to detail.”

drills of His expression quickly changed, and he now frowned at her. “I
ever theneed your flattery.”

death its “I was merely stating it as fact, Your Grace. You asked my opinio
gave it. I would have been much less effusive if I did not like it.” Th
rise andwas as changeable as the wind, yet she seemed to be warming to him.
; tea onnot understand why. He still looked quite forbidding and was ob
irritated with her.

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

“We? Where are you taking me?”

u are a His dark eyes swallowed her up again. “Do you not trust me
ny auntAlwyn?”

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

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shows exquisite thought and attention to detail.”

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

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

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

“We? Where are you taking me?”

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

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



Chapter Two

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

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

“Has anyone ever told you that you look like an elf?” he said, appearing amused by her appearance as she sank onto the grass beside him. “Especially with those big, fey eyes and pointy little ears of yours. But I think you are as delicate as you look.”

How wrong he was.

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

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

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

She glanced up as a sudden breeze rustled through the silvery leaves of their shade tree. “Your Grace, should you not be getting back? You were missed by your guests.”

He emitted a light chuckle. “Are you that eager to be rid of me? No ladies would be in a swoon over my attention.”

"I know," she said. "I've seen how those lovely debutantes hang on to your every word. Miss Barclay in particular."

He shrugged. "She is merely a neighbor."

"She is fascinated by you."

"Aren't they all?" he said with notable sarcasm. "What about you, Alwyn? Do I fascinate you?"

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

Her face He grinned at her. "Yes, I have noticed."

It was a bad After a moment of silence between them, he plucked a blade of grass and began to twirl it in his roughened fingers. "They think I am going to offend someone and one of them."

He was wondering. "Are you not?" She regarded him in surprise. "Then what is the point of inviting these young ladies and their families here? It is cruel to give them false hope."

Apparently He arched an eyebrow. "Are you admonishing me?"

Especially "I...do not mean to meddle in your affairs."

are not "But you are."

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

From the "And save them from a life of penury such as your own?"

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

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

? Most She sighed. "It is all right, Your Grace."

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

g upon She shook her head. "No, my father died shortly before I was to m
London debut."

That eyebrow of his shot up again.

"Does this shock you?"

u, Miss "Actually, no. You are obviously refined. Much more so than
peahens cluttering my house right now. Gad, they are silly creatures.
oid you not admonish me for saying so. We both know they are."

"Perhaps it is you who are too severe."

His features lightened as he broke into an unguarded smile. "You
ass and resist rebuking me, can you? Point taken. But what happened to you
ffer for Alwyn? Forgive me, I know I am prying."

She decided there was no harm in telling him, since his aunt knew
our purpose and would not hesitate to reveal the ugly details if ever he b
re them to ask. "My father was a baronet. Sir George Alwyn, a kind man
amiable disposition and absolutely no head for business. Hence, my
need to work to support myself."

"Have you no other family? No siblings?"

"Not that I am aware. It was my father and me for most of my life.
g off at mother died years ago, when I was quite young. I carry a miniature po
had to her in my locket. I do not remember her at all, and would not know w
re quite looked like if not for this locket." Heather always wore it hidden bene
ut their bodice of her gown, and now drew it out by the chain to show hi
e under opened the silver heart to reveal the portrait inside.

as from He leaned closer and took the locket in his roughened hand to s
ewhere "Interesting. You resemble her, although she appears quite young. S
the look of a girl from another century. Perhaps it is her expression
style of her hair."

ation of "Perhaps." She gave a wistful sigh as she closed the heart with
snap and then tucked it back in place.

nd quite "I am sorry you lost her so young, Miss Alwyn. And your father?
re been have nothing at all to leave you?"

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

"Would he not take you in?"

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

1 those “Ah, that comes as no surprise.” He tossed aside the blade of gr
And doplaced his hands behind his head, resting his torso against the shade t
closed his eyes as the sun filtered through the leaves and shone on h
“Did his wife arrange for you to become my aunt’s companion?”

cannot “No, Your Grace. That would have required a little thought or k
u, Misson her part. She detested me for trying to steal her husband. He detes
because I would not unlock my door to him. My belongings were pack
v of herI was sent away without so much as a shilling to my name. But that b
otheredthink, should fall upon my father for failing to provide for me. He was
with anirresponsible as his cousin who has now inherited all of his estate.”

present Despite his closed eyes, Heather knew the duke was listening to h
attentively.

“What did you do?” he asked. “How did you make your way to l
ife. Myand my aunt?”

rtrait of “Lady Alwyn did pay for my mail coach ticket, I will give her that.
hat she “To make certain she got you as far away as possible. Did she
eath theyour food and shelter on your journey?”

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

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

Heather’s eyes widened in sudden panic.

Did he *Foolish! Foolish!*

Why had she confided in this dangerous man?

Alwyn, “Your Grace, have I offended her in any way? Is this why you a
e. He istalking to me now? Or have I offended you?” Yes, of course she ha
ours inhim with her loose mouth and ridiculous need to spout unwanted of

“Do you... Does she intend to—”

“No, Miss Alwyn.” He sat up and opened his eyes to stare at her.

problem yourself. Your position is secure. I did not mean to frighten you. I was merely idle curiosity on my part. Forgive me if my question alarmed your interest phrased it badly.”

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

Oh, why had she just blurted that?

Why would he care anything for her feelings?

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

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

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

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

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

“My promise?”

His dark eyes once again pierced her soul.

What did this handsome brute of a man want with her? Certainly not a respectable one, for she knew of his reputation. He was not a rakehell in the strictest sense, not one to spend his nights drinking and gambling. In fact, he was not known to drink, and his aunt had bragged he never lost a London although he was not much of a betting man, either.

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

Protector?

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

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

“Heather, you fool.” She had let down her guard, and this was why. “Calmt. She broke into a run, desperate to get away from him now that

It was realized his intentions.

l you. I Protector, indeed.

He meant to take her on as his mistress.

ected. It Was this not what all depraved men, such as he and her father's
eing on Sir Thomas Alwyn, did?

Why else would he insist on her coming to him?

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

on. His *Those hands.*

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

Come to me if ever you are in need.

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Protector, indeed.

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

Why else would he insist on her coming to him?

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

Those hands.

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

Come to me if ever you are in need.

Would she refuse his offer?



Chapter Three

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

Blast the girl.

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

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

He might look like a frightening beast to the girl, but he would risk her for the world. In truth, he was worried for her safety.

She had seen the ghost.

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

That would have been interesting.

No, he could not tell her about the ghost.

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

Still, he needed to watch her and protect her.

It troubled him that she had seemed to be under the enchantment of the Singing Caves when he came upon her by the cliffs. She had taken no notice of him, and might never have been aware of his presence had she not broken the silence.

Enchantment.

The term suited the girl, for she was beautiful. A quiet beauty, not one to make a grand entrance and dazzle everyone. But for him, her impact was more potent. The sight of her yesterday, her dark gold locks drawn back

fat braid down her back, and her big eyes, as green as meadow grass, back at him, remained vivid in his mind.

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

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

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

The evening's festivities were about to begin.

Not hurt They were in the parlor, the men now joining the ladies after they had imbibed their after-supper brandies and engaged in a hearty political discussion. As the night wore on, they were to be regaled by an opera singer, and afterward would organize into pairs to play cards.

, by the "A moment, Miss Alwyn."

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

She scurried past him.

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

"She isn't lazy, Aunt Lydia. I've seen how attentive she is toward me. She treats you better than you deserve."

Part of the "And how does she treat you, nephew? Quite nicely, I'm sure. Has she ever got her into your bed yet?"

He not "I am warning you, Lydia. I will not hear a disparaging remark about her. If you chase Miss Alwyn away as you did your other companions, I'll cut you off without a pence and discharge your entire staff. I'll warn you, the sort won't last a day fending for yourself."

What was "How dare you threaten me? We are in company and anyone who eavesdrops or overhears your boorish remarks. Do you wish the world to know what you are?"

looking “Everyone thinks it already.” But he said no more, for he approached her to provoke a confrontation. “Tell me what you know of the girl’s father, the former baronet, Sir George Alwyn, and his wife connected to Alwyn.”

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

noon to He slapped his hands on his thighs and rose with a sigh. “Never mind. Why had he bothered with the embittered old crone? She would not understand about the haunted caves or care that Miss Alwyn might be in danger. He was not even certain there was a danger. But he could not ignore those icy tingles running up his spine when he had spotted her yesterday staring down at those caves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It might In his own defense, he had not done it on purpose. He was serious about finding a bride. It was time he married. But none of these ladies would do. Yet instead of making his feelings clear, he had given in to conc

hadn't allowed them to continue fawning over him.

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

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

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

He rose and strode across the room, prepared to bar entry to anyone who would not be seeking a moment alone with him. If they thought to trick him into a compromising position, they would be the ones to suffer.

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

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

His little elf.

"Come in, Miss Alwyn."

He had no qualms about allowing her in.

First of all, she could not trap him into marriage because she was not of his family to insist on his doing the honorable thing. Nor would he surrender to coercion. But this girl did not need to coerce him. If his reputation were ever sullied—a possibility, because his aunt was just the sort of cruel creature to spread such lies—he would not hesitate to marry the girl.

The realization caught him by surprise.

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

He stepped aside to allow her in.

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

"Very well." He rested a hand on the doorjamb as he took a moment to study her appealing smile. "Why are you here?"

"To thank you for what you are doing."

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

Her smile now reached into her eyes and made them sparkle. “I expect none of you to ignore my words, but you haven’t. May I say, your match ought to be excellent. I could not have done a better job of pairing these two of them with their suitable bachelors.”

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

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

“He’s a good fellow.”

She nodded. “He seems very nice.”

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

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

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

“No one would ever mistake you for nice, Your Grace.” Miss Alwyn just threw him an impish smile, her gaze sweet and soft as she looked up at him. “I think it is because you do not dare show anyone this honorable part of yourself.”

But I have seen it and wish to thank you again. I had better return to my aunt.”

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

She paled.

What was wrong with him? His usual prowess with women seemed to be failing him with this girl. “Do not work yourself into a state. I am not here to kiss you, Miss Alwyn. I have no intention of doing anything untoward. I must learn more about you.”

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

“To be perfectly honest, I’m not certain yet. Specifically, I wish to

expected more about your mother's family. Did she ever reside here?"

making "At MacArran Grange? How could she? Has it not been owned by the ladies family for over a century, and much of that time in faded grandeur until it came along and restored it?"

chemes "You seem to know my family history."

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

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

She glanced at her wrist again, for he was still holding on to it. "I am not trying to pay you too much attention. She has noticed and does not like it. I am who I am, and she believes so. I do not wish to laugh at me, Miss Alwyn. There is a connection between you and MacArran Grange. It is a palpable bond, as though a string ties you to my family. I cannot shake the feeling that you belong here...or are in some way important to this house. Am I making any sense?"

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

such as "By heaven, she could lure a man to drowning in those emerald pools." "I do feel it." She released a breath. "I wanted to tell you, but I do not think you would ever believe me. These past two weeks, I thought I was going mad. How can I know this place when I have never been here before?"

The house. The grounds. The Singing Caves. All of it is so familiar. Even the song of those caves. I was humming it before I had ever heard it."

him. "I am not trying to pay you too much attention. She has noticed and does not like it. I am who I am, and she believes so. I do not wish to laugh at me, Miss Alwyn. There is a connection between you and MacArran Grange. It is a palpable bond, as though a string ties you to my family. I cannot shake the feeling that you belong here...or are in some way important to this house. Am I making any sense?"

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

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

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

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

"Yes, that is perfect. Everyone ought to be abed at that hour. I'll be glad to know Your Grace."

He released her wrist and watched as she hurried back inside the party.
He glanced up at the ceiling. "Lord, help me."

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

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

Was it because of the ghost?

No, it was all too far-fetched.

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

What irony?

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

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

Was he?

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

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

He shook his head, irritated by these wayward thoughts, and then turned to the book he had been reading on the history of the MacArran family.

The accounts were written of the infamous Dukes of Arran. He hoped they would reveal information on when the Singing Caves had been given their name. More important, he wanted to know precisely when the haunting began and where the caves had started.

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

Just like Miss Alwyn.

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



Chapter Four

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

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

Assuming it meant Miss Alwyn any harm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I noticed her eyeing the silver earlier," Miss Barclay remarked smugly, with a nasal whine that always grated. "Better keep vigilant that nothing happens."

missing, Your Grace.”

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

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

en how His own aunt’s laughter was as brittle as a witch’s cackle. “Indee Barclay. I have my housekeeper count every piece of my silver nightl certain Miss Alwyn is going to steal it all and run off with a w bounder some day.”

iore. A By heaven, he was going to have it out with his aunt. She ha so long difficult and curt with all her former companions, but he had never see she had dealt with in this venomous fashion.

He was to blame.

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

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

hy had Nor were the MacArrans ever known for their piety. They had ma fortune serving as privateers in the more recent centuries, and as Va moved Guards to the Byzantine emperors in medieval times. His ancestors we more than pirates and mercenary soldiers. Elite, ruthless, and powerfu ong, he martyred cleric or wise philosopher among them.

various Was it any wonder he looked like a brute?

stead of Or that his aunt behaved like a brute?

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

Ruarke retired late to bed.

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

om, but a coarse linen shirt and dark trousers. He was not about to take the dress like a gentleman, perfecting the points on an overly starched c l in her fashioning an elegant knot in a tie.

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

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

As it turned out, he need not have worried about her missing their rendezvous. She was there ahead of him, seated in wait upon a fallen tree in the grove, and smiling as he approached. "Good morning, Your Grace." "Good morning, Miss Alwyn." He settled beside her. "I hope you are not tired. I am sure I did not keep you up too late."

"I managed."

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

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

"No, I think I must insist on giving you a raise in wages," he said. "I am sure you are never in jest. In truth, he was the one who supported his aunt's household and was quite generous in the allowance he provided her monthly to maintain her and all her luxuries."

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

His stomach sank as he realized what else his aunt had done to her. "She hasn't paid you, has she? And you are too afraid to demand your wages."

Fire raged through him.

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

Her cheeks turned the brightest pink.

Oh, blast.

She was now reminded of their earlier conversation and his insistence on protecting her. "Miss Alwyn, it is time we cleared the air about this matter. My impression of you has changed. When I asked for your promise to come to my aid, I was only offering to help you out. I would never be so crude as to tell you that you were a burden."

worried on as my mistress. To be clear about this, you will *never* be my mistress. Not She blushed to her roots, but let out the breath she had been holding to the “Never?”

be done He smothered a smile.

Was that a hint of disappointment in her voice?

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

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

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

and was “I saw her there again this morning.”

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

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

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

“Yes, but surely...” She jumped up and turned to him with her hair all never curled at her sides. “Your Grace? What game are you playing? Do you not secure cannot tell what a ghost looks like? Some frail, wispy emanation versus me cloud of smoke. That girl was healthy and real.”

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

like you “My gowns are all in solid colors.” She glanced at the severe, dark

ss.” muslin she wore.

olding. “Because you dress like an old woman and not a young girl. Oh, be offended. You look lovely. You could wear rags and still look like a princess. But you must admit, there is nothing stylish about your clothes.”

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

ise. All “We are getting off the point.”

vide it. She arched a golden eyebrow. “Which is?”

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

d done “No, Your Grace.”

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

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

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

“No.”

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

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

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

She shook her head. “You must have thought I was the ghost in the Singing Caves when I was in your beloved home.”

w? It is “No, Miss Alwyn. I assure you, I knew you were very real.”

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

k green He silently admonished himself for embarrassing her, but not enough to stop her.

could deny the spark between them. “Why are you able to see this do notWhy do you resemble her? Tell me all you know. Everything you *feel* an elfinit is important.”

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

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

s better “In this house? How is it possible?”

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

put his She shook her head. “I have no idea where my mother was bc to you,raised. Even if she did tell me stories, I was too young to recall them. mehowknow who her parents were because my father would never tell n two asservants might have known, for most were in service before I wa place inHowever, they would never talk to me about her or them. All I ever fo was my mother’s maiden name. It is Evans. Her name was Bella Evans

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

“Bella Ev—”

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

k at my “Why are you looking at me so oddly?”

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

“All I have of my mother is her portrait in the locket I showed y e stairs,father would not even tell me about her as he lay on his deathbed.

know why he deprived me so cruelly. She might have had far Cornwall, but I shall never learn of them now.”

nce you “She did. Your mother grew up here.”

“Why do you say that? I’m sure we’ll find hundreds of women v radingname of Evans in Cornwall, and thousands throughout England. I w know where to start looking. My maternal grandfather could have peer, or gentry, or a common tradesman. A butcher or a blacksmith, t ng herknow.”

“The local church will have records. That is the best place for us i ven heBut I think we must also speak to some of the old folk around here to l

ghost?we can about the origins of this ghost and its connection to your mother.
All of “Why are you insisting there is a connection to my mother?”

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

rkshire. “No.”

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

Miss Alwyn’s legs gave way, and she appeared ready to faint. I
girl butrecovered quickly, and her gaze was now blistering upon him. “I will
forgive you if this is a jest.”

“No jest,” he insisted. “Ask any of my staff or the village locals.
haps innot so far from St. Austell. I will take you there myself, if you w
e. WhatAugustine’s Church is the parish church and also close by. I’ll wager
the birth records for both girls named Bella Evans there. Perhaps
orn andrecords for both as well.”

I don’t She shook her head. “Do you think my mother died here?”

ie. Our “I don’t know, but I’ll wager my entire estate that she was born her
s born.am saying is there are too many coincidences to ignore. Their name
und outfamiliarity with my house. Your resemblance to the ghost who ha
s.” Singing Caves. Your ability to see her.”

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

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

ou. My “But—”

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

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

with the Ruarke saw the pain in her eyes, but he would not relent. “Yo
ouldn’tmeans protecting you.”

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

for all I “Suffering? Or thriving on her murderous anger?”

“She is a child!”

to start. “She *was* a girl of seventeen, hardly a child. She is dead now. We
earn allknow what she is in her ghostly form. I will send you from MacArran

er.” before I ever allow you near her.”

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

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

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

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

ll never This girl shattered his soul.

Why her?

We are He dared not free his heart to love her.

ish. St. And yet it was probably too late.

we find What if he could not protect her from the unknown?

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

re. All I

is, your

intentions

are trying to

keep you near

to me lightly.

He wants

to touch?

Yes, if it

you do not

leave Grange

before I ever allow you near her.”

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

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

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

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

This girl shattered his soul.

Why her?

He dared not free his heart to love her.

And yet it was probably too late.

What if he could not protect her from the unknown?

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



Chapter Five

Is THIS HOW kisses feel when one is in love?

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

Confused?

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

She nodded. "I have just been kissed by a handsome duke. Would girl be all right after that?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Like the smuggler's tunnel you mentioned?"

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

"I'll make a list for you this very morning. There is a painting.

shook her head, wanting to shake loose a memory that remained stubbornly out of her grasp. "Never mind. Perhaps I will look at it again while it is gone. Something about it feels important."

He nodded. "I won't be long."

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

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

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

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

Heather did not.

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

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

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

"Bella! Where are you?"

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

"Bella!"

Silence.

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

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

Dear heaven.

obornly Heather stared into green eyes reminiscent of her own. "I would
you are talk to you. Will you sit beside me on the sand?"

Bella nodded and did a somersault before settling close. "No o
plays with me anymore."

nificent "Who were you playing with when you..." Heather did not want to
she left one to tell the girl she was dead. "Who was with you when you last w
arly yet these caves?"

ould Bella shrugged. "My sister. But then my head hurt so badly,
couldn't get up to find her."

1. It was disconcerting to hear her speak.

related, "What is your sister's name, Bella?"

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

Heather said nothing for the stretch of a minute, but shivers ran t
ast the her as the girl only seemed to grow angrier. "How exactly did she h
rived at Bella?"

3 Caves By hitting her over the head? Leaving her to drown? Was this th
obornly trick Bella spoke of? But who would do such a thing to one's own siste

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

1d. The Heather nodded. "Yes, are you wearing it?"

did not Bella shook her head. "It is my treasure, and I keep it in the
Caves."

ach was "Will you bring it out to show me?"

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

wished "I cannot." Heather drew her hand back when Bella suddenly reac
e could it.

Perhaps coming here had not been too clever. The girl was gettin
again, this time at her. Heather quickly sought to mollify her before sh
a tantrum. "Bella, please understand. I am not allowed in the ca
he next anywhere near them."

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

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

like to “No! James loves me. He gave me the locket. I told you! It was my
Millicent.”

ne ever There, she had accused her sister again.

 But it still seemed implausible to Heather that one sibling could ev
o be the another. No, she wanted to know more about this secret sweetheart of
ent into “Dear...tell me more about this boy who gave you the locket. You s
name was James?”

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

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

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

 “You met his son in secret? James is his son and the one who ga
e mean the pretty locket?”

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

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

 “Oh. Oh dear.”

Singing “What’s wrong, Bella?”

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

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

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

g upset Heather’s heart shot into her throat. She wanted to run, but dared n
e threw this chance with Bella. “Describe it to me. Let me help you find it.”

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

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

Was he “Did you help her?”

Her eyes.

y sister, They were suddenly as dark as storm clouds, turbulent and unearthly.
“No, Bella. You must believe me.” Heather leaped up, realizing she had overstayed her welcome. “The duke will be looking for me. I have to go before I ever hurt Bella.”
Bella tried to pick up a fistful of sand and throw it in Heather’s face, but Bella’s hand howled when her hand simply passed through the grains like air. “You said his bad as my sister! You want to hurt me and trick me!”

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

Dear heaven.

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

Bella nodded, and then scampered to her feet and ran toward the cave. Heather started to chase after her, suddenly finding herself free to move again. But she took only a few steps before she stopped.

ell him *Dear heaven, what am I doing?*

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

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

Then Bella held out her hand.

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

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

not lose That rope...that bond...that tie to his house the duke had spoken of... It was not only to his house but to these caves, as well.

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

The tide was coming in.

A drowning tide.

“Bella, please! You must let me go!”

ly. Her cries caught on the wind and were carried out to sea.
she had The ghost had first appeared to her as a pretty girl of seventeen. I
go.” pretty girl was no longer present, for in her place stood an angry ph
ace, but whose eyes were as black as onyx.

1 are as *Fool! Heather, you fool!*

What had she done?

er legs She stumbled as she was drawn onto the slippery rocks near the ca
at was scraped her knee. Waves crashed all around her. “Please, stop! Bella,
se me.” go!”

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

Do you Her efforts were to no avail. Cold water surrounded her, soak
cket. Isgown and boots. Not that any of it mattered now. Bella held a powerfi
over her and was about to drag her into one of those caves.

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

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

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? There
A wave

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

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

Fool! Heather, you fool!

What had she done?

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

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

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

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

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



Chapter Six

RUARKE HAD JUST ridden out of view of MacArran Grange when overcome by a feeling of dread. Why had he left Heather behind? Did he have as much right to search those records? A greater right, if her mother somehow connected to this ghost.

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

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

“No, Your Grace.”

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

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

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

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

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

“But Your Grace—”

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

He flew down the cliff steps and raced toward the Singing Caves.

as his boots landed on the soft sand. No one else was on the beach, noticed small footprints leading away from the stairs and toward the caves.

Those footprints could only belong to Heather.

Had he not warned her of the dangers?

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

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

“Miss Alwyn!”

Surely she understood the power of the sea.

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

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

Blessed saints.

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

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

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

Anyone who could not swim out would drown.

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

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

He called again, his heart in his throat as he was met with silence. He heard a cough and a hoarse sob within the dank hollows. “Over here, a maid She was obviously exhausted and struggling to claw her way out. Can you carry her until he reached her?”

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

but he deeper in the cave, and Heather was clinging to a jutting rock for de
ives. “Heather, let go of it and put your arms around my neck.”

She hesitated, afraid to lose her grip and be forever swept into the
d those dark maw.

Alwyn! “Do it now, Heather.”

The sun could not penetrate more than a few steps beyond the m
ded the cave. Even now, as closely as he held her, Ruarke could hardly m
of those slender form. If she slipped away from him, he would never f
ie rocks again.

“Heather, trust me.”

She was sobbing and gasping for air.

He was breathing hard himself as he fought against another surging
“Don’t be afraid.”

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

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

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

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

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

m...not They would talk later, save the rebukes and explanations onc
reached safe ground, assuming they made it out alive.

hair and He yanked her away from the jutting rock. “Put your arms arou
ied her, neck and hold your breath. This next wave will fill the cave, and this t
depths. water will not rush out.”

He kept his arms wrapped around her. She felt soft and supple
e. Then him, but he should not have been all that surprised. His body had rea
e.” her from the moment she stepped down from his aunt’s carriage that fi

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

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

re now He tried to protect Heather with his big body, his back and shoulder taking a bruising as he slogged his way off the rocks with her safely arms. They were alive and able to breathe again, and this was the cave's smattered.

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

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

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

ind her It was not a moment too soon.

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

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

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

low her *What in blazes is that?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

icted to "How can I?" She took in sobbing gulps of air. "We almost died. It was my fault."

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

; before The pain of a thousand agonies was etched on her face as her gasped and said, "I am so sorry. I never meant—"

he cave "I do not want to hear another *sorry* out of you," he said with a groan of frustration, still shaken by how close they had come to dying. "Did I not

oulders you to stay away? Now do you believe those Singing Caves are haun
y in his dangerous?”

all that “I always did believe. But I saw her. I saw Bella and spoke to her.”
Blast the girl.

“You spoke to a ghost?” His question came out in another low gro
Her eyes widened. Beautiful eyes of softest green. “Yes. Please, l
nd and away from here and I will tell you everything.”

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

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

ing like “I don’t deserve your kindness.”
What was he to do about her?
Kindness? He was in love with her, and his heart was aching w
he had knowledge he had almost lost her.

ning so But he was also furious.
Her shoulders slumped and she lowered her head, about to cry agai
“Blast it, Heather. What is wrong now?”

unt and “How are we to avoid tongues wagging when we walk in looking l
shipwreck victims?”

He did not know and did not care. He could walk into his hom
needed naked while talking gibberish and all would be overlooked because h
duke. But Heather’s reputation would be lost, he supposed. Especial
It is all her gown clinging to her every luscious curve.

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

ize met She was slender and delicate, and obviously too drained from he
death escape to make it up the stairs. They had not climbed more th
rowl of steps before she faltered.

ot warn “Heather,” he grumbled, and hoisted her over his shoulder as a

ns were you my word.”

ough he “And you expect me to trust it now? Oh, hell. Do not start crying a

“I never meant to break my promise.”

“But you did.”

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

ier. “Of “Heather, do not start—”

“No! Do not cut me off. This is too important. Her sister was wit
think she hit Bella over the head and left her there to drown. Do w
to each what happened to the sister? Maybe this is why Bella haunts the
e. I am Caves, because no one realizes she was there with Bella and got aw
at weremurder. I think she stole her necklace, too.”

lot five “Stop talking, will you?”

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

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

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

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

ther not “Perhaps you scared her off.”

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

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

ou.” Ruarke understood the reason. Was there any doubt now? Her fat
afraid this ghost would try to claim Heather, as it had tried years a
almost succeeded in doing a few minutes ago. It was the only thing tha
, I gave sense. He wanted to protect the daughter he loved.

gain.” The girl Ruarke now loved.
Blessed saints.

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

“Your Grace, I am in imminent danger of being seen with you and nothing my reputation put in tatters.”

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

Singing “How? By ruining me and giving me no choice but to become
ay with mistress?”

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The girl Ruarke now loved.

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

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

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

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



Chapter Seven

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His shirt was pasted to his body, revealing every exquisitely carved bulge of muscle and sinew. His hair was slicked back and his expression as granite-hard as his incredible muscles.

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

"No! That is outrageous. And now everyone will know I am in here with you and believe all manner of sordid activities are going on because

bolted the door.”

“Are you berating me?”

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

“You are still berating me.”

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

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

“You don’t mind having me with you at St. Augustine’s? I understand how you can stand to look at me after what I’ve done. We are all grateful, even if you only want me there because you do not trust me.”

“I do trust you, but I haven’t calmed down yet over that *thing* who roached and drowned you,” he said.

“Bella isn’t a *thing*. We must find out all we can about her and her detailed and their connection to my mother.”

“Run up and change. I’ll meet you in the entry hall in a few minutes.”

“Your Grace, what about my reputation?” she asked. “I know your wish to discuss it, but I cannot be seen leaving with you.”

“I’ve assured you that you won’t be seen. Only my cousin is awake and he will not breathe a word.”

“And what of our return? Everyone will talk when we walk in together. You’ve already a disaster that your scullery maids saw us. And it was very foolish of you to threaten them.”

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

"You don't? But they do not know this and must be cowering in fear of the water." "That's right, as they ought to be. I want them to believe I am not sure I can keep them. How else will they keep silent? It is no one's business what I do or how big a wet company I keep."

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

"Do you think I care?"

"Well, obviously, you don't. But it is my good name at stake, so I care about you very much. Women drop at your feet or, more accurately, fall into your trap because you have to do is nod in their direction and they come running. This is not a lie. "You they'll think I have done. Who will hire me then? And what good will my sight recommendation be? They'll all think you gave it because I was your friend. Most of know."

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

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

"I had no such thing in mind."

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

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

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

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

ne and He emitted a deliciously soft laugh. “An idiot, is he?”
f this is She nodded. “Utter and complete. Not even *I* would marry me if gi
chance.”

ar.” “Heather, you are priceless,” he said with a glint of mirth in hi
serious. “Come to church with me.”

whose “And be ruined?”

“Do not be dense.” He ran his knuckles lightly along her cheek
one willachingly sweet caress. “To arrange for the banns to be read. What if
give methe one to marry you?”

ise you She stopped breathing.

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

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

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

ed. All She nodded, for one should be able to tell if a cold, dead thing had
is whaton yours.

ill your He drew her out of the chair and wrapped his arms around her.
ir...youGrace, I—”

“Be quiet, Heather.” His beautifully shaped mouth closed over he
have aunexpected heat and a possessive hunger.

Her bones turned liquid, which was appropriate, since they we
able forsoaked to the skin. There was something scorching and shocking abo
ped thewet bodies pressed together.

uld not *Sweet mercy!*

What was she thinking?

She pushed out of his arms with a sob.

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

family “Then you are serious?”

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

As his words sank in, every moment of strain and fear since her
ointlessdeath suddenly poured out of her. She flung herself in his arms and b
re theirshed tears in earnest. She hadn’t dared cry since the day her father pas
ier ownshe learned he had left her with nothing.

She still loved her father.

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

The duke kissed her brow. "No more tears, for I have you now, even the one will ever hurt you again."

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

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

"As long as you are among them," he said with a chuckle. "I think this time you called me Ruarke."

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

"Heather," he said with a soft laugh, "I don't know whether to let you go or all the more or feel insulted."

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

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

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g her so

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Chapter Eight

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ruarke drew in a breath. “This is why it drew your attention. You noticed what he was holding in his hand. I thought it was a watch fob, but it is her locket.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you prefer to wait?"

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

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

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

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

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

He laughed. "Is this how I appear to you?"

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

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

"A wedding," Ruarke said, placing Heather's arm in his. "Miss Heather and I are officially betrothed and would like to have the banns read here on this Sunday."

"What joyous news! Come into my study and we shall make the necessary arrangements." Orman waved them on, gesturing for them to follow.

and through the church. It was a typical house of worship for these parts, big, but well maintained, and had beautiful stained-glass windows throwing in light of many colors onto the pews. "So, you have decided to marry her." It was Ruarke nodded. "Yes."

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

"Quite in order. Nothing to be done but marry Miss Alwyn." Ruarke ignored Heather's light pinch to his arm. She was irritated with him making their betrothal seem official when no contract had been drawn for her to sign. She would howl when he took her to the bank and opened an account for her.

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

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

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

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

Ruarke turned to Heather once the vicar had rushed off to find his lovely. "Pinch me again, my little elf," he said with a grin, "and I will marry you here and now."

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

"I am not, I assure you."

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

"You have a nurturing heart."

not too “And?”

that cast “What more need I say?”

re?” “I don’t know. Should there not be something more?”

“Not for me.” He cupped her face in his hands and gave her a soft peck on the lips. “Everyone believes I have led a charmed life, but my early years were brutal and filled with beatings. My father was not a kind man, and my stepmother was at best indifferent. Lady Audley is my father’s sister and we have had the same abusive cloth. Is it any wonder she treats you as she does? I am always glad she has not beaten you.”

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

“For whatever insane reason, my father believed he was beating himself up for my sake. I made myself a vow never to permit anyone to raise a hand against my children. I promised myself that they would be loved as I never was. I need my wife to be a dazzling showpiece who has no compassion for the suffering of another. I want someone who is kind to the spirit and whose instincts are to help and nurture. Who cannot bring herself to be cruel.”

I saw those traits in you immediately.”

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

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

“It does not feel like enough reason to marry me.”

“Because you think I can get away with less? Is this all you want, my mistress?”

“No!”

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

“I’m not. I am merely trying to make sense of my good fortune before I hear the vicar returning.”

Ruarke understood her hesitancy.

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

“I am not. I am merely trying to make sense of my good fortune before I hear the vicar returning.”

Ruarke understood her hesitancy.

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

She would soon understand how deeply he cared for her.

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

and my He had only ever loved Bella.

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

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

Having completed the marriage arrangements, Ruarke now began to ask strength questions about the ghost.

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

l do not "Yes, on the beach. She was coming out of the Singing Caves. Where would you tell us about her?"

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

ing the He scurried off again.

"He looked ready to pass out when we mentioned the ghost," I remarked with a smile.

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

They did not have long to wait before the vicar returned with his wife. To be an elderly man who looked somewhere around fifty or sixty and whose wife was Simon Cornwake. The vicar's wife rolled in the tea cart and offered them a cup of tea and raisin cake. "How lovely," Heather said, and she looked at the woman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Years after that, Bella was born. They were the magistrate's only children. Two girls about six years apart in age."

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

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

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

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

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

"I am only saying what is true."

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

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

l do my
most of
parents,interjected. “She claimed Millicent was terribly jealous of Bella. A
younger sister died, Millicent was the only child, and her father doted
e curateMiss Alwyn, I see you are frowning.”

“Is it possible Millicent was with Bella when she drowned? W
v Bella,your grandmother tell you of that day?”

l lovely He shook his head. “She always thought it odd that Bella lost her
gistratethose caves. Bella was an adventurous girl, but understood the

Everyone in these parts did, for anyone raised near the sea learns e
was herrespect its power. That’s what always troubled my grandmother. Bella
never have gone to the Singing Caves at high tide. No, Your Gra
er. “Wegrandmother was adamant about that.”

mother “Was there an investigation conducted?” Ruarke asked.

“Yes, but nothing ever came of it. An inquest was held, led by th
w whatof Arran, your very own great-grandfather, but he determined her deat
accidental. The girl slipped and hit her head, that was the ruling
. “Thegrandmother never believed it. She had seen Millicent walking to the
nt. Shewith Bella that afternoon.”

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

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

t speak “What of the other Bella Evans, Miss Alwyn’s mother?” Ruarke as

The curate shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t know anything abo
She could have lived here, but I was sent off to school as a boy, an
e samecontinued my studies at Oxford. There are gaps in my knowledge of o
corner of Cornwall.”

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

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

e a fuss He and the curate piled four massive books upon the vicar’s des
left Ruarke and Heather to their reading. It did not take Ruarke long

the birth record of Heather's mother, and to his surprise, the record showed a marriage to one Sir George Alwyn, baronet. "Heather, here it is. After including the names of your maternal grandparents, Joseph and Sarah, on her. See, it is right here."

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

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

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

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

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

"Why did my father never tell me about them? And why would my grandparents never mention me or my mother to Mrs. Orman?" She frowned as she continued to look at him. "It feels as though they would have hidden all connection to me."

"To protect you, Heather. I'm sure they loved you. But what if you had been raised here as a child and saw the ghost? Or were somehow drawn into the caves. Well, the caves and almost lost your life? It would have frightened them. Look, in this entry. Bella and Millicent Evans' father had a brother. A brother had a son, who must have been your grandfather, Joseph Evans." She looked over his shoulder as he traced through the Evans family history.

"Here's more, Heather. Your grandfather then had a daughter he named Bella, no doubt in honor of his drowned cousin. Then Bella married a baronet." He looked up at her, trying to make sense of it all. "But she must have died in Yorkshire, because her death is not recorded here. Let's see, then we can find anything about you."

"Was I born here? Does it say?"

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

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

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

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

must be She nodded.

of your “He would not have cut off his own wife’s family without good rea

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

uld my “We may never know, but it is possible my ancestor gave it 1 rrowed mother because she shared Bella’s name. A token, perhaps as he lay dy

nted to “Ruarke, I think I know how to break the haunting,” Heather said.

are two lockets. One your ancestor kept close to his heart and felt so s u came about that he included it in the painting hanging in your entry hall. The Singing locket I now wear, and mistook the girl in it to be my mother. Bu here...described another locket to me, the one he had given her that h nd that portrait.”

s.” “We don’t have that one.”

family “Millicent stole it after she struck down Bella.”

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

ied the Heather began to nibble her lip. “What if we need both to free poo ie must Do you think this is what keeps her bound to the caves? This is where s see if of them secretly met. I’ll wager James used to sneak out of the house t

that secret tunnel you recently sealed up, so he would not be seen. Bu now needs to reclaim the locket that contains his portrait. We must d

was in what happened to it.”

“How? It is an impossible task. We wouldn’t know where to look for it, summer or winter, assuming it hasn’t been discarded or destroyed long since. But perhaps the locket may not be the only way to free Bella. You are an Evans, Heather, and I am a MacArran. I think it is significant that an Evans loves a MacArran. I think our marriage will be enough?”

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

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

He smiled. “Seems so, doesn’t it?”

“I am.”

“I love you?”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“There is something strongly wrong with me, and it is the only way to save Bella.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you?”

”

“I love you?”

“I love you?”

“I love you?”

“I love you?”

“I love you?”

what happened to it.”

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

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

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

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

He smiled. “Seems so, doesn’t it?”



Chapter Nine

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

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

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

“No.” Her cheeks immediately turned a bright pink. “We are married.”

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

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

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

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

“Church? Banns?”

“That’s right. Be quiet, or you shall be the one sent packing. I had to do this more gracefully, but it seems there is no point. Miss Alwyn are betrothed.”

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

suit.”

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

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

Several guests now came forward to congratulate Ruarke and Heather. Some appeared disappointed, but his aunt’s look was venomous. “Well, I would not have had out an ascheming little—” She immediately broke off, no doubt realizing they’ll be would soon be his wife and hold sway over his purse strings. “Well, I am shocked,” she stammered, now reconsidering and hastily attempting to make amends. “Of course, you shall be welcome into our family if this is in accordance with your nephew’s wish.”

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

Ruarke frowned. “Your necklace?”

“Yes, Your Grace. I saw that it was gone this morning and came here to report it. I noticed Miss Alwyn by my door last night. I thought Ruarke’s come up to retire to bed and thought it odd at the time. Now, I must inquire if my room be searched.”

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

Ruarke placed a comforting arm around her shoulders. “Hush, my dear. I know you are no thief.” He summoned his housekeeper. “Mrs. Pool, for you, go up to Miss Alwyn’s room and search for an expensive-looking necklace. Be read a sure you will find it in an obvious spot. Miss Barclay, would you tell me exactly where Mrs. Pool might find it?”

“How would I know?” Miss Barclay asked.

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

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

“This should be interesting,” Ruarke’s cousin said, following her

Heather into his study along with Miss Barclay and her maiden aunt. The Audley followed as well, no doubt considering whose side to take. But his mind to her comfortable style of living was dependent on his good graces, he expected her to sit quietly and only jump in once the outcome was obvious. He turned to his other guests and held up a hand to keep them from following him in. "Please help yourself to the lavish repast awaiting in the dining room. We shall not be long."

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

"As you wish." Ruarke shrugged. "The truth will out."

Mrs. Pool returned with a locket in hand. "Is this the one? I am sure it is my Miss Alwyn. I know you did not take it. You were downstairs with her that time. A dozen of His Grace's servants also saw you with me. You should be cleared of this."

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

"Hah! Now she is claiming to have one just like it." Miss Barclay looked at Heather. "But it is mine."

"Indeed," her priggish aunt said. "It has been passed down through generations from mother to daughter since Millicent Barclay's day."

"Is that so?" Ruarke exchanged a look with Heather. He could not understand what the woman had just said. Did Heather understand the significance of the girl. I mean, now he glanced heavenward, for miracles did happen.

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

But the locket would prove Millicent was at the caves with Bella. The girl had stolen it off her neck after knocking the poor girl unconscious.

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

Miss Barclay glanced at it uncertainly. "There is nothing inside."

Ruarke frowned. "Are you certain?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

er own had ignored his earlier request to leave them to their private dinner. Apparently, a lavish meal set out for them in the dining room was a temptation when there was a scandal about to erupt. Miss Barclay foolishly insisted they remain, thinking she was about to humiliate F.

Instead, she had done herself in. The onlookers were now whispering excitedly among themselves.

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

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

“Good riddance,” Ruarke muttered.

Heather’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “They are wrong.”

t of the Bella being trapped. This locket was never Millicent's to give away. ecklacereturn it to its rightful owner." She withdrew her own locket, a perfect mpty, as the one in Ruarke's hand, and showed the others who were with then room. "This one belonged to my mother. I always thought it was a po her, but it is Bella."

s hands "Merciful heaven," Mrs. Pool muttered.

Heather nodded. "This is what Bella has been waiting for, the re ened it, her locket. But I think I must give her mine as well. Two hearts reu rtrait it love."

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

ait of a Heather would not hear of it. "Bella won't hurt me now. I kn ket into won't. You have to let me go to her. I must be there. Truly, how else i e. Bella understand what we are doing?"

d it and "No, Heather—"

h Bella "Who else can see her or speak to her? You cannot do this p without me. Besides, I know I cannot come to harm when I have ras now protect me."

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

s well? She placed a hand lightly on his arm. "I know I shall always be sa Bella's you."

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

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

was no

ay had

leather.

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

o full of Heather held both lockets in her hand.

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

g about



I shall Ruarke's houseguests also came along, for this would be quite a
twin totell when they returned to London.

n in the The vicar led the onlookers in prayer.

rtrait of Ruarke was never one to pray, but perhaps tonight would change h

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

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

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

ow she He had brought a lantern along, and now lit it. "Here we go. Do no
s she toof my hand."

They entered the cave where Bella had drowned.

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

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

They waited a moment to see if their ghost would respond, but w
cousinwith silence.

Ruarke dared not remain inside any longer, even though there w
mation,time before the tide came in. But he did not like the idea of l
remaining in the cave another moment. "Let's go, love."

He led her back out.

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

ere was Heather gasped. "She's seen the necklaces."

"Good, now let's get you away from here," Ruarke muttered, a
quickly rejoined the onlookers at the other end of the beach.

out the He handed the lantern off to his cousin and wrapped his arms
ndance.Heather. Despite being certain they were doing the right thing, he wo
s besidemanage a calming breath until Bella was gone.

Heather did not appear concerned and insisted they would soon
sign. He had no idea what it might be. A dove flying overhead? A t

story tonight from inside the cave? A ghostly aura floating upward to heaven, nothing at all?

What if they were wrong and the return of the lockets did not work in my favor? Heather grabbed hold of his hand and squeezed it. "It is happening now."

He sucked in a breath. "What do you see?"

"They are both on the rocks, waving to us."

"Both?"

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

"They are not us, Heather. I fell in love with *you*, not her," Ruarke said. She looked at him with her eyes wide and glittering. "You called me out before in the cave. And now, are you... I thought... I..."

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

"Love at first sight?" She nodded. "This is how it was for me, too. I suppose you had to be cautious, considering you are the Duke of Arran and I could have been a scheming fortune hunter."

"I quickly saw that you were not."

"Look at that brilliant light," his cousin called out.

Ruarke turned his gaze heavenward.

Everyone was looking up now to *oooh* and *aaah* as a fiery light showed in the darkening sky. "I think we must name it the MacArran-Evans comet," Heather said in jest.

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

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

She looked up at him in wonder. "I would do the same for you." He pulled her and nestled in his arms, her back against his chest as they watched the sparkle of light. "I love you, Ruarke."

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

True to his word, Ruarke obtained the license and they married.

en? Or Augustine's Church the following morning, each of them vowing to love
other to the end of their days and beyond.

“? They held true to their vows.
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The End

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Augustine's Church the following morning, each of them vowing to love the other to the end of their days and beyond.

They held true to their vows.

The End

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About Meara Platt

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Once Upon a Haunted Garden

Chasity Bowlin

Once Upon a Haunted Garden

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Chapter One

August 28th, 1832

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

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

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

He placed the letters back on the inlaid top of the desk. "You've never thought me kind for very long, Miss Jones. Despite your excellent references, I'm afraid you have wasted your journey here."

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

He folded the papers all together, then bundled them back into their portfolio before shoving them across the surface of the desk toward her. "I'm terribly sorry that you've come all this way. You'll be compensated for your

time and expense, and I shall arrange lodging for you at the local inn and transportation back to London can be obtained.”

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

“I’m afraid my man of affairs, Mr. Hatton, was a bit presumptuous. I am afraid alas . . . we would not suit, Miss Jones,” he answered firmly.

“Isn’t it more important that your aunt and I suit one another?” she demanded. Her tone was no longer polite. There was a decided snap to her voice. It couldn’t be helped. The sting of humiliation, to be summarily dismissed without even offering her a chance, was unbearable. Under the circumstances, she found her control of her behavior with such a calm and collected composure quite impressive.

His dark eyebrows lifted with incredulity. “My aunt?”

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

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

The words were bitten out, his jaw clenched tightly. “There appears to be some miscommunication, Miss Jones. I am not seeking a companion at the moment.”

“Then what is the position, Mr. Blackwell?”

He stared at her for a moment without speaking. He’d once been a school teacher. He schooled his face into a mask of impassivity, and whatever he was thinking or feeling was simply unknown to her, hidden in the depths of that dark sea.

The silence, however, was grim. At long last, he ground out the words. “I will not marry, Miss Jones. Mr. Hatton was to find me a suitable candidate for a wife, marriage.”

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

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

She didn’t flinch. Even if everything inside her recoiled at that slight

in until knew better than to allow any outward display of her misery. It was she wanted to marry him. He was practically a Bedlamite, it seemed Louisa rather, his immediate dismissal of her, as if she didn't even know how consideration, was a reminder of all the many times in her life when. "My around her found her lacking.

on was Oblivious, he continued, "Please wait here while I speak to Mr. and get to the bottom of this." Then he rose from his desk and stormed out, but Alone, Louisa deflated in the chair. Her posture was no longer straight as befitted the comportment of a graduate of the Darrow "r?" she Instead, she slumped, her shoulders rounding with defeat and h it. But dropping to her chest dejectedly. But that only lasted for a moment. She up and going back to London with her proverbial tail tucked between her legs der the that didn't mean she would simply sulk like a spoiled child because charged didn't get her way. Instead, she rose. With no need to worry about the impression she was making, she gave free rein to her curiosity. Getting she strode toward the shelves and began to examine the ancient composition displayed there. Since she wasn't getting the job, there was no real worry about what he might think of her.

man's One item in particular piqued her interest. It was a bronze dagger. Her seen it, she marveled at the weight of it as she turned it over and over in her

It was a lovely piece, not Roman or Greek, but Norse, she imagined, but rs to be the carvings.

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

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

her gaze.

ls, "My

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"A COMPANION?" DOUGLAS demanded as he paced the drawing room. "I can't help but bewhat you told this poor girl who has traveled so far from her home?"

Mr. Hatton held up his hands in mock supplication. "I could hardly advertise an advertisement or contact an agency and ask them to send prospective brides to interview for the position of Mrs. Blackwell, could I? And I might, she

it as if doesn't have a home. Not really. She's a graduate of the Darrow School. But resides there until such time as she can obtain suitable employment warrant another proper situation."

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

Of that sort He'd lived his entire life with caution, with an awareness that waiting up, men of the Blackwell family allowed their emotions to hold sway. Disaster and tragedy would follow. He could not afford any reason to entanglement, even an honorable one, with a woman who so thoroughly entranced him.

Lifting "Hatton, you know why I insisted on a plain and unassuming spinster hand. A bride! I will not damn some innocent young woman to the terrible fate passed on so many women meet when they have the misfortune to marry in my family!"

A mere The older man's face flushed and he looked away, unable to meet Douglas's gaze. "That is superstitious nonsense, sir. You are not like my uncle. Not at all."

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

Hatton shook his head. "You haven't the time to be choosy. You have only one year from the date of your uncle's death to take a wife or forfeit the title."

With only a few short weeks remaining, finding another prospective wife will not be easy. In fact, it might well be impossible!"

Prospective Douglas paced the length of the drawing room. "There are local women here, the girl—"

"Who know the history of this family and this place, or think the

ool and it,” Hatton pointed out. “They would never consent.”

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

Hatton had said. “She is made of much sterner stuff than you imagine, sir. Miss Jones is a woman of milk and water society. That young woman has a spine of forged iron, a wife, and a character that is just as firm,” Mr. Hatton stated. “Take a chance with her, it’s your only option, really.”

Douglas watched the older man walk away, victorious in his triumph over his own feelings. With the weight of the world on his shoulders, he turned and went on his way back to his library where Miss Jones was no longer simply a patient. Instead, she was holding an ancient bronze dagger, part of her uncle’s extensive collection of antiquities, examining it as though she were the expert curator of a museum rather than a young woman trapped by the expectations of the serving and upper class.

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

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

She looked back at him, startled. “I wasn’t aware I had a future here at Rosehaven Manor, sir. You had made that abundantly clear.”

“What I made clear was that you would not be my aunt’s companion. You know! That remains true. But the other position, the more permanent one, will not be a reflection. It seems to be the best course of action. I realize you can’t expect to be hired as a companion, but I’d very much like to ask if you would remain at Rosehaven . . . as my wife.”

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Chapter Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"On that point I must beg to differ. No woman, Miss Jones, who I am serious about is ever without prospects."

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

"But what sort of arrangement?"

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

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

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

Louisa lies. At the very minimum, what he'd offered was certainly nothing more than a half truth. "And you think I would cause you *emotional upheavals*?"

"Not intentionally. The faulting lies entirely with me, Miss Jones. I am a well aware of how peculiar all of this is. But my time is limited. And if you do not meet the parameters I set forth for Mr. Hatton, I would suggest you use it as you see fit. It could mean a life without being in service to anyone else."

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

"There will be no children. The marriage will be consummated so that no one can challenge its legitimacy, but precautions will be taken." He elaborated, and she hadn't the nerve to ask. So he continued, "In return for my services, you will have a life of comfort and security. No more of the uncertainties of the world."

Imagine, your sacrifices, you would have financial security, an elevated position in society, and a kind of independence few married ladies—or unmarried women—enjoyed. For that matter—enjoy. I will have a room prepared for you, Miss Jones, who will remain here for the night and you may consider the offer. If you agree to accept it, I will obtain a common license and we shall wed immediately. If you elect to disdain this offer, I will arrange for your transportation to London and see that you are well compensated for your time.”

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

What am I going to do? It was insanity to even consider it. But why? Why offered her something that she had craved throughout her life. Not independence or security—but independence *with* security. To have financial security without having to work for others was a fantasy for most women of her class. She could hardly imagine what it would be like to live her life with no threat of being sacked at the whim of a capricious employer. No fighting off unwanted advances. No bowing and scraping in the face of better unreasonable demands. She could have her dignity and her pride as well as a roof over her head. And all she’d have to sacrifice was the possibility of things she might never have anyway—or worse, things that never lasted while only led to bitterness and heartache.

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your sacrifices, you would have financial security, an elevated position in society, and a kind of independence few married ladies—or unmarried ladies, for that matter—enjoy. I will have a room prepared for you, Miss Jones. You will remain here for the night and you may consider the offer. If you choose to accept it, I will obtain a common license and we shall wed immediately. If you elect to disdain this offer, I will arrange for your transportation back to London and see that you are well compensated for your time.”

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Chapter Three

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

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

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

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

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

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

However much she might have weighed it, measured it, and turned it over and over in her mind for dozens of times that day, she was still convinced by it all. Each time, she had come up with the same answer. It was the best opportunity she'd ever be presented with in her life. And she wasn't a girl who would let a drafty house and an overactive imagination get the better of her.

When she'd come to Kent seeking employment, she'd never imagined that the course of her future might be altered so dramatically. While it was something every girl dreamed of, it was something that a girl such as Louisa—*one who had known the misery of true poverty*—could not ignore.

it wasn't in the normal way of things, it was still beyond anything she could have imagined for her future. But it wasn't the wealth, the position, or even the very enigmatic man to whom she'd found herself betrothed. Instead, it was that indefinable feeling which she sometimes had, an intuition of something that led her down the paths she was supposed to go. It was that same feeling she had when presented with the option to attend the Darrow School on a charitable nature. She'd known it was the right thing to do instantly, and it had been the same with the proposal. Rational arguments aside, she'd heard a voice inside her urging her in that direction.

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

Rolling from her side and onto her back, she stared up at the ceiling of the bed. She was wrestling as much with the decision she had made as with the prospect of informing Effie what she had done. And she was wrestling with the realities of being married to a man she knew nothing about. In the end, the mystery of whatever the problem was that required such a drastic solution pricked at her mind in a way that left her decidedly unsettled. Too unsettled to even think of sleep.

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

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

e might “It is a mere trick of the light,” she whispered to herself. “Nothing or evenThere are no phantoms here . . . nor anywhere else.” And yet, even d it wasbacked away from the window and retreated to the confines of her b rts thatwas not fully convinced of that fact. Certainly not as convinced as sh g she’dto have been.

Effie’s A cold chill snaked over her skin, despite the oppressive heat. An . It hadwas different from the cold sensation she’d experienced before. Thi ard thatfrom within. A warning from her own intuition. It was accompanie sense of foreboding. There were ominous goings-on afoot—not ghos ave forominous—at Rosehaven Manor. What they might mean for her futu d of thewas as yet unknown.

usband, “Please let me know if I have made a terrible mistake,” she whisp ing withnearly silent prayer against her pillow. “Let this not be the first ti dsome,intuition leads me astray.”

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ting an

ife gotIT WAS MID-MORNING when he returned. He’d left at first light to make ive likenecessary arrangements. Now, Douglas bore the common license inside his coat as he led his mount up the graveled drive and tow anopiedhulking shape of Rosehaven Manor. But he hadn’t reached the house v d madedrew up short. There was a lone figure walking along the lane. No ph he wasbut a flesh and blood woman who was poking and prodding at the g of. with a stick. *His betrothed*. Miss Louisa Jones.

l such a “Did you lose something?” he asked, as he neared her.

settled. She looked back at him, wide eyed. There was a leaf stuck in h

“No, I . . . well, I was just admiring the foliage.”

indow. *Lie*. That was immediately apparent. Why? And then it simply c , and ashim. Had she heard the stories of the White Lady of Rosehaven? Or l olinked,seen her? “Foliage,” he mused. “Or perhaps some remnant of a whit trapped in the brush?”

inst the Her guilty flush was confirmation. With a heavy sigh, I es in adismounted and approached her. “Did you see Rosehaven’s in steps. Itphantom, Miss Jones?”

here it “I saw something,” she countered. “I do not believe in phantoms.”



g more. Her reasonable response was not unexpected, but it was very welcome. As she was also not entirely convincing. But Rosehaven was no place for her. She had given to hysterics. "Perhaps I can aid you in your search, or answer the questions you may have about what you saw."

"What I *thought* I saw," she stressed. "It was very late, or very early, depending upon one's perspective. It was very warm last night, so I mistook the window for a breeze. There was someone walking through the garden and then along the lane here. Wearing white."

"Someone. Not something?"

Her lips firmed into a thin hard line, her expression revealing just a touch of dubious she found that option. "I realize that many people are given to fancy and succumb to superstitious notions. I am not one of those."

"Indeed, I can see that you are not. I would caution you, Miss Jones, about asking too many questions to servants or to those in the village assuming they would speak with you at all," he said. "The Blackwells are not thought very kindly of here. You will find that out soon enough."

"You make it sound as if they see you as some sort of villain," she protested.

"Not me, Miss Jones. All the Blackwells, but specifically any who have been in Rosehaven. Our history with the village is not a pleasant one, and it is not for nothing that we are entitled to view us as such. You will not receive a warm welcome here," he said.

"My lord, I am the illegitimate child of the disgraced daughter of a baronet. My mother's family has refused to acknowledge me, and my own family is entirely unknown to me. I have not been warmly welcomed anywhere. I daresay that I will survive their snubs," she answered.

Her tone was matter-of-fact, her delivery of that sad statement revealing the pragmatism that was likely responsible for her decision to agree to the proposal. "Yet you have thrived, Miss Jones. Where most would have crumbled, you have risen above your humble origins."

"They are less than humble. Some would even call them ignoble," he pointed out. "Most people in the upper classes tend to frown upon the lower classes rising above anything."

It wasn't an accusation, but simply an observation. And it was an observation he could not refute. "Perhaps my years in the army, seeing

ome. It of the world than simply what exists here, has given me a more ega
anyone view of things.”

ver any “Perhaps it has,” she mused. “So who is this phantom people speak

“Her name is unknown,” he replied. “But for the last century, the
y early been tales of her wandering the grounds here and even being seen
oved to village. The White Lady of Rosehaven is presumed to be the tragic
ugh the one of my ancestors . . . a woman who paid the ultimate price for
unwisely.”

“Or the guise of a phantom affords young women an opportunity t
ist how about at night without anyone being the wiser,” she countered.

o flights A smile tugged at Douglas’s lips. “You are very suspicious of yo
people, sex.”

“I’ve lived in a school with other girls for the past decade. . .
; Jones, precisely how sneaky we can be. I also know we have no choice but
llage—sneaky because so many limitations are placed on us by society,” she
family out. “Such ruses are not unheard of.”

” “No, they are not. But do not be so certain it’s a ruse that yo
n!” she yourself to the dangers it might present. Many think that seeing h

harbinger of tragedy to come,” he warned. “And on that note, I h
o resid license. I’ve spoken with the vicar at the local church, and he’s ag
hey are perform the ceremony tomorrow morning at nine. Mr. Hatton and the
re, I am wife will act as witnesses. If you have no objections, of course?”

“No. I have no objections.”

er of a Douglas nodded. “Mr. Hatton will meet with you later today to
father’s the terms of our arrangement and the support that will be afforded
l come once you leave Rosehaven.” And imagining that she would leave Ros

in a year, that for an entire year, he would face the temptation of her
vealing both of those things were a source of unease. “I shall see you at dinne
e to his Jones. Do not wander too far. The ground is uneven, and the rain
d have pockets of mud that are quite treacherous.”

e,” she

hose in



LOUISA WATCHED HIM walk away, leaving her standing in the middle
was an lane. Alone. And as puzzled as ever. This man who was to be her h
ig more

Utilitarian was a mystery to her—a puzzle that demanded solving.

“My own curiosity will be the very death of me,” she murmured. “What if I die of it?” even as she continued her exploration of the gardens and the surrounding grounds, she was mindful of his warning.

When she reached the back of the house, where the formal and decorative gardens gave way to the more functional herb and vegetable gardens and the kitchen, she caught sight of a maid sneaking a rest. Leaning against the side of the house, well away from the windows and the prying eyes of the housekeeper or cook, the girl’s face paled when she caught sight of her.

But Louisa offered a reassuring smile to the young woman. Instantly the girl’s expression changed. It became closed, guarded—perhaps even hostile.

They all knew, Louisa realized. Everyone in the house would know what she had entered into. *That she was not there to stay.* And that meant she would have little authority there. He, her betrothed, could possibly understand the dynamics at play. But she’d known there were problems of that sort. The servants would not respect her. In truth, she wondered if she would still be able to respect herself.

She was one of them—one of the serving class, and she’d dared to rise above her station, but not for any reason so noble as love. It was a mere agreement, and they would all know. The next year would be the vicar’s indeed.

Retreating to the house once more, she made her way to her chamber. She would wait there until her meeting with Mr. Hatton. But eventually, she knew, the issue would have to be addressed.

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They all knew, Louisa realized. Everyone in the house would know what sort of marriage she had entered into. *That she was not there to stay.* And that meant she would have little authority there. He, her betrothed, couldn’t possibly understand the dynamics at play. But she’d known there would be problems of that sort. The servants would not respect her. In truth, she wondered if she would still be able to respect herself.

She was one of them—one of the serving class, and she’d dared to rise above her station, but not for any reason so noble as love. It was a mercenary agreement, and they would all know. The next year would be interesting, indeed.

Retreating to the house once more, she made her way to her chamber. She would wait there until her meeting with Mr. Hatton. But eventually, she knew the issue would have to be addressed.



Chapter Four

“IT’S TOO MUCH. I couldn’t possibly accept such a generous settlement,” Louisa protested. The amount of funds that Mr. Hatton had named was more than she could even imagine. The number was positively astronomical.

“Miss Jones, Mr. Blackwell is aware that you are sacrificing a great deal to enter into this . . . arrangement with him. Trust me when I say that he has considered the settlement he offered very carefully and has reached a figure far greater than reasonable,” Mr. Hatton offered in a placating tone. “The offer, Miss Jones. Accept it. You may renegotiate the terms with Mr. Blackwell at the time you part—if you still feel that you need to do so.

Need to part or renegotiate? Hatton’s meaning was not clear, and it left the impression that it was intentional. Surely the thin, bespectacled little man was not attempting to play matchmaker! But if he was, if he had some idea of there being a happily ever after for them, he was at least an ally. *A* woman needed one.

“There is one thing, Mr. Hatton . . . the servants.”

“Yes, Miss Jones.”

“This is an unusual marriage, and regardless of any attempts to keep it private business just that, they will know. And they will gossip. . . . themselves or with people outside this house. Those sorts of rumors can be quite damning.”

He frowned. “Indeed. You are quite right. I’ve heard veiled statements already.”

“I need to have authority over the household staff. Complete authority as long as I live here.”

Mr. Hatton nodded. “I had not considered that your position here might be complicated by your former status as a . . . a . . .”

“Servant? Yes, while I held an elevated position within the household where I worked, I was still an employee. But those positions are never

Mr. Hatton, as you know. You cannot sit with the servants around the dinner table, but you are not always welcome in the family dining room. We are very much trapped between worlds. They will not accept me easily.

Hatton nodded. "Indeed, we are, Miss Jones, and you are quite right. My lordship may not be aware of the difficult position you will be in when residing here, but upon reflection, I can certainly understand it. It might be a situation best handled not by Mr. Blackwell at all but by Miss Mary. I have yet to meet her, but I think it is high time."

In truth, she'd all but forgotten about the doddy aunt. The very reason she had agreed to come to Rosehaven, and the woman had slipped her mind entirely. Louisa flushed. "Certainly, Mr. Hatton."

"No fear, Miss Jones. Show her no fear. She is a bit like an animal. When she senses that she has the upper hand, she will use it."

With that warning echoing in her mind, Mr. Hatton rose and rang the bell. Within seconds, a maid entered the room. "Miss Jones wishes to see Miss Mary."

The maid's only immediate response was to blink rapidly in shock. She composed herself. "I will see when the mistress is available."

"You mistake my meaning, girl," Mr. Hatton stated flatly. "Miss Jones will see Miss Mary. Your task is to inform Miss Mary that she should come to us in the drawing room."

When the maid was gone, Louisa immediately scolded the man. "Hatton! I cannot believe you would be so high-handed." Of course, she had arranged her presence there through nothing less than subterfuge and manipulation. Was it truly a surprise? "She will be predisposed to disobey you."

"My dear girl, she dislikes everyone," he warned. "Trust me when I say that it is best to seize the higher ground and to do so immediately. Strategy is vital."

It was perhaps ten minutes, but no more, when the drawing room door opened once more and an elderly woman entered draped in a gown that would be at least three decades out of date. Despite that, it was flattering to her slim figure. Her hair might have been blonde in her youth, but it had turned a perfect snowy white, perhaps aided by powder. She moved with an effortless grace of one much younger. Like a dancer.

Immediately, Louisa thought of the wraith-like figure she'd seen th

id theirbefore. Was it possible that she had found the very corporeal source
om. Weghostly vision?

.” “It is quite impertinent to issue a summons when you are a guest
ght. Hishouse, Miss Jones,” the woman intoned disapprovingly.

1 while She was a bit like Mrs. Wheaton, Louisa realized. The wom
ght be awrapped herself in authority to shield herself from the slings and arr
y. Youothers. Mr. Hatton’s words made much more sense to her in that light.

also quite impertinent to have a guest under roof for more than a day
son shebothering to greet them.”

r mind “No quibbling about whether or not you are a guest?” Miss Mary

“You came here thinking to be employed and find yourself prepared
l. If sheup the role of chatelaine.”

“You are correct. I am not a guest, at all. I am betrothed to your
the belland will become mistress of Rosehaven tomorrow,” Louisa replied.
shes anwould not have enmity between us. I understand that it is your positio
house has been your domain—”

k. Then “For too bloody long,” the woman snapped. “It’s about time somec
saw to the running of this place. It’s exhausting, Miss Jones. I will be
s Jonesto turn those reins over to you.”

l attend Her tone would have shocked some gently bred young lady. But
had grown up in the rookeries, after all, where fishwives shout
n. “Mr.prostitutes called out their wares with equal profanity and enthusias
he hadthat case, I should think you would have been eager to welcome me he
ge and Miss Mary’s chin lifted, and she eyed Louisa with something tha
like mehabe been approval. “Leave us, Hatton. I can’t abide your hove
promise not to gobble the girl up. After all, she’ll be easing my l
n I saysignificantly.”

ategy is When they were alone, Louisa braced herself for what was to c
could be anything. The woman was impossible to predict. But Miss M
m doornot begin castigating her for her impertinence. Instead, she walked
hat wasLouisa and simply picked up her hand. She turned it palm side up anc
er still-to examine it with great interest.

ad now “You’ve had an interesting life, Miss Jones,” Miss Mary ob
with the delicately tracing lines on Louisa’s palm. “This is your life line. Fo
people, it will fork once. Yours has forked twice. Based on where thes
ie nightpresent along the line, that represents a significant change—once wh

of that were a child and once as an adult. Then it remains strong and steady. V
you think that means?"

in this "I could not begin to guess, ma'am," Louisa answered. "I've neve
much credence to palm reading or any other sort of divination. B
an had observant person with a basic understanding of human nature allow
rows of who would call themselves soothsayers to feed people what they v
"It was hear."

without Miss Mary's head lifted, her chin jutting forward in challenge. "I
those of us who do not care what they want to hear?"

r asked. "I meant no offense. But I prefer to put my faith in more rational t
to take Louisa insisted.

Miss Mary dropped her hand. "You will humor me, Miss Jones. C
nephew the table here, by the window."

"But I Louisa rose, following Miss Mary to the spot she had indicated.
n. This pocket concealed within the folds of her skirt, the older woman with
deck of cards. Tarot. Louisa had seen them before, used by a fortune t
one else a fair. She put no faith in such things, but if humoring Miss Mary wou
e happy her way at Rosehaven, she'd tolerate it.

"Choose three cards," Miss Mary instructed.

Louisa Louisa did as she was bid. Miss Mary spread those cards in a l
ed and then turned over seven more cards, forming a cross with them. I
sm. "In longest moment, she simply stared at the cards, studying them one
re." then drawing back to take in the full array.

t might "There is darkness ahead of you," Miss Mary said, her voice lac
ering. I warning. "But not without hope. You have the strength to overcome it
our dens do you have the will?"

It was nonsense. Vague statements that could be interpreted in do
ome. It ways depending upon what she wanted to believe. Louisa tapped he
lary did on one of those cards. "What does this card mean?"

over to Miss Mary smiled much like the cat who'd gotten the cream. "Tha
l began be the lovers, Miss Jones."

If she'd needed proof that Miss Mary's reading was nonsense, tha
served, Mr. Blackwell wanted nothing to do with her, at least not for very long
or most "Do you know why Mr. Blackwell wishes to marry me?"

se forks Miss Mary shrugged. "I know why he refused you at first. You
en you pretty, Miss Jones, for a man like my nephew to resist."

What do “A man like your nephew?”

“One who struggles with his inner nature, one who fights to find himself given between passion and reason. You tempt him, and that is what he seeks being unavoidable at all costs. But time is running out, and now he has to play the cards that fate—and Mr. Hatton—have dealt him.”

want to “You are mistaken, madame!”

Miss Mary tapped one long, elegant finger against the card in question. “Not I, Miss Jones. I merely relay what the cards tell me, even when fate sends us down one path, we must choose whether to stick to our things,” or change course. You will find your own way. And perhaps he will see you at dinner, Miss Jones. And felicitations on your forthcoming nuptials.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

From a distance, “Good afternoon, Miss Jones—Louisa. I shall call you Louisa. To draw a veil over this Miss Jones and Miss Mary and ma’am business. I will be Aunt Louisa to you,” the woman declared. “After tomorrow, of course.”

And with that, she breezed from the drawing room, leaving Louisa shaken. Like one might be in the wake of a powerful storm.

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“A man like your nephew?”

“One who struggles with his inner nature, one who fights to find balance between passion and reason. You tempt him, and that is what he seeks to avoid at all costs. But time is running out, and now he has to play the hand that fate—and Mr. Hatton—have dealt him.”

“You are mistaken, madame!”

Miss Mary tapped one long, elegant finger against the card in question. *The Lovers*. “Not I, Miss Jones. I merely relay what the cards tell me. But even when fate sends us down one path, we must choose whether to stay on it or change course. You will find your own way. And perhaps he will too. I will see you at dinner, Miss Jones. And felicitations on your pending nuptials.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Jones—Louisa. I shall call you Louisa. Too much of this Miss Jones and Miss Mary and ma’am business. I will be Aunt Mary to you,” the woman declared. “After tomorrow, of course.”

And with that, she breezed from the drawing room, leaving Louisa shaken. Like one might be in the wake of a powerful storm.



Chapter Five

IT WAS A shockingly brief and perfunctory service. There was no celebratory breakfast awaiting them when they returned to Rosehaven. In truth, the only word was spoken in the carriage on the way home.

Douglas spared a glance at Miss Jones—Mrs. Louisa Blackwell corrected—and noted the tension that had settled over her pretty features. He wanted to dispel it, to offer some assurance that they hadn't just made a terrible mistake. But how could he? For him, it had been the right choice, the only choice. But for her, she'd given up any hope of having a family of her own. The twinge of guilt that thought created within him was decidedly uncomfortable.

Of course, stealing glances at her had other unfortunate effects. She was so alluring. In a way that was completely effortless, she commanded attention. How many times during the previous day had he halted his work, or what he was doing when thoughts of her and their situation intruded? Countless, he admitted. Proximity only made his growing obsession with her more acute. It also underscored his decision to keep their relationship as brief as his uncle's will would allow. He could not afford to indulge his preoccupation with her. *She could not afford for him to do so.* One year, and he would have to let her walk out of his life forever. If he'd endured the hell of various marriages for nearly a decade, surely he could achieve that.

Douglas hadn't told her the entire truth. Certainly, he did like an intelligent woman, and emotional upheaval was something he had worked very hard to avoid. But he hadn't told her why. He hadn't dared to disclose to her the terrible fate that so many women met when they had the misfortune to become entangled with a Blackwell man. Jealous. Possessive. Irrational. Whether it was love or something much darker, Blackwell men could not be trusted when it came to the safety of the women in their lives.

When the carriage finally drew to a stop, he breathed a sigh of relief.

needed distance between them—a reprieve from his own thoughts. But he was not on his side. The moment he stepped down from the carriage, he heard the sound of hoofbeats. A lone rider was coming up the drive.

It was all Douglas could do not to curse bitterly. As if, he thought, weren't enough complications in his life already, his cousin had arrived.

"Ho, Douglas! Felicitations," Terrence Blackwell called out as he approached his horse. With one graceful motion, he dismounted, his boots clattering and crunching on the gravel. "I've arrived just in time to celebrate your nuptials. The words rang hollowly, no doubt as they'd been intended for the occasion. The marriage to Louisa meant that Terrence was no longer the contingent beneficiary. Had Douglas failed to meet his late uncle's conditions in the time allotted, the family fortune would have been Terrence's for the taking, so long as he had managed to get himself married. It could not be coincidence that he showed up now.

"Terrence," Douglas acknowledged. "I wasn't aware you'd planned to visit."

His cousin's answering smile did not reach his eyes. His gaze remained cold and sharp. "I wasn't aware that I had to inform you, cousin. I inherited this family home, after all. You are merely its caretaker for this generation. What do you think of that, how Uncle James stated it in his will?"

It was, and now he was trapped by his uncle's last wishes. "Of course, Terrence. We will have the servants ready your usual room."

"And in the meantime, you may introduce me to your charming bride."

Douglas gritted his teeth. "Of course." Turning back to the carriage, he caught the worried gaze of his bride. She stared at him with concern. *As if she knew something was amiss.* Forcing himself to offer a reassuring smile,

he offered her his hand and helped her alight from the vehicle. "Louisa, allow me to introduce my cousin, Mr. Terrence Blackwell. Terrence, meet Louisa."

Terrence stepped forward, taking her hand and bowing low over it, pressing a kiss to it. "It is an honor to meet you, Cousin Louisa."

"Likewise, Mr. Blackwell," she murmured softly.

Douglas found himself watching her closely, gauging her reaction. Terrence was handsome and charming. He had no qualms about seducing married women. And he didn't seem overly concerned about the family and what it might do to any woman he entangled himself with. But

but luckseemed immune to his charm. She didn't blush or stammer in his presence, heInstead she leveled an assessing stare at him and kept close to Douglas.

He should not have been grateful for that, but he was. "Let us adjourn it, thereand enjoy some refreshment. I do believe a storm is coming in."

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optials." LOUISA TRIED TO contain her shudder. Terrence Blackwell was not a man to. Histrusted. Based on the tension she could feel emanating from her husband heir.was well aware of the fact. What was the source of the enmity between them, theDid it have something to do with the inheritance that had prompted his marriage? And, if so, did that mean Terrence also posed a threat to her? He had had far more questions than answers, but it had been that way since his arrival at Rosehaven.

med to ill at ease, she placed her hand on Douglas's arm and allowed him to lead her into the house. Douglas. Only the day before, he'd been Mr. Blackwell. The day before that, he'd been a complete stranger. Then Louisa realized that it is theshe'd have to write to Effie. She would be expecting word, and if she didn't receive it, the Duchess of Clarendon would descend upon them in her impressive fury.

course, The butler, with cool disapproval apparent in his tone, informed them that a meal of cold meats and cheese had been laid in the breakfast room for their convenience. "Miss Mary was awaiting them there."

age, he "Did you stay in the village last night?" Douglas asked his cousin.

as if she "No, I'm just down from London this morning. Left at first light and a long drive home, he heard all the way," Terrence replied.

ly, allow Lies. Louisa didn't even need her intuition to know that. His horse had been fresh and rested when he arrived. There was no way that horse had been ridden all the way from London just that morning. A glance at her husband before who was facing away from his cousin, showed that his jaw had tightened considerably, tension and anger transforming his features. He knew. He knew that Terrence was lying. But what a thing to lie about. What purpose would it serve?

educing With her hand still on his arm, Louisa squeezed gently. He glanced at her, but the look that passed between them was one of understanding. Louisa

presence. “Terrence, what in heaven’s name are you doing here?” Aunt Mary’s side asked. “After the last time, I would have thought you too ashamed to show your face here. I certainly would have been.”

Louisa glanced over her shoulder at Terrence. There was an imperceptible tightening of his features and a hardness in his gaze, but his cool smile never left his face.

“I’ve always had a quick temper, Aunt Mary,” the man answered. “I came here to be a shock, of course, to discover the terms of Uncle James’s will and to find out how I had essentially been all but disinherited unless Douglas failed to do as he was told. But then, Douglas always does what he is told, doesn’t he?”

There was no disguising the bitterness that infused his words. But Louisa didn’t say anything. “Alas, I wouldn’t be here if I could be in London. I’ve got a little piece here a bit of a bind with one of the gaming halls, scoundrel that I am. I’ll be able to show my face in London until the next annuity from the estate is deposited.”

Not a lie, Louisa decided, but most definitely a half truth.

“Well, it is the family home, and to our eternal dismay, you are forbidden to return here,” Aunt Mary conceded.

The animosity between everyone in that room was palpable. “I find I’m not very hungry, but with the excitement of the day, I’m a bit tired. I think I’ll lie down for a bit.”

“Let me show you to your new room,” Douglas offered.

New room? She’d be moving into the master suite with her husband. While theirs wasn’t to be a lasting marriage, it was to be a real one for the duration of the year.

“Thank you, I confess to still being a bit lost here,” she replied with a smile that belied her nerves. Then they exited the room, leaving Mary and Terrence to verbally swipe at one another.

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“Well, it is the family home, and to our eternal dismay, you are family,” Aunt Mary conceded.

The animosity between everyone in that room was palpable. It was exhausting. “I find I’m not very hungry, but with the excitement of the day, I am a bit tired. I think I’ll lie down for a bit.”

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Chapter Six

AS THEY ENTERED the master suite, Douglas was furious. He'd kept a wide distance between them. He'd wanted to ensure that he was as far from temptation as possible. Yes, their marriage would have been consummated regardless, but they were practically strangers. It had never been his intention to pounce on her the very day of their wedding without the benefit of knowing one another better. But Terrence's arrival had changed everything in an instant. Louisa would no longer be in her chamber down the hall until she was comfortable, but moved into the master suite with him until such time as Terrence left. And given what he'd said about not being able to return to London, that would not be for some time.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I hadn't intended that we should share chambers . . . yet."

"I'm aware. I'm also very aware of why the plans must change. My cousin is not to be trusted."

He laughed bitterly. "You have no idea just how true that is. It's so dangerous, Louisa. Whatever you do, do not let yourself be caught alone with him."

She laughed, the musical sound slightly tinged with bitterness. "I do not know the full extent of my upbringing, sir."

"Douglas. We are married. Addressing me so formally might lead to questions that we do not want to answer."

She nodded. "Douglas. You are quite right. But to allay your fears, I grew up in the earliest years of my life in St. Giles. My mother and I shared a room with another woman, her husband, and their two children. It was relatively comfortable and dry, but far from safe. I know only too well when a man has nefarious intentions. You develop a sense for those things after a while."

Douglas couldn't fathom that the delicately pretty creature before him, with her soft features and ivory skin, had not just come from such a place.

managed to survive it by her wits. The realities of life in the rook squalid, impoverished, crime- and disease-ridden—were beyond harsh

“I am sorry you had to go through that,” he offered, uncertain what to say.

Her lips quirked. “I am not. Everything that I have experienced in life has shaped me into the person I am today. I am rather happy with who I am.

“Would you alter the course of your past if it meant being someone else?”

“I do not know, truthfully. Regardless, we need to discuss our current situation and how it has altered the way we might deal with one another.”

“You wish for me to stay here in the master suite with you?”

“There are two bedchambers?”

“There are,” he said. “But I do not think that will be sufficient for you until she plans to work. The servants here have no loyalty to me. I have been a soldier for as many, many years. Most of them had never laid eyes upon me until this year when my uncle died. But Terrence grew up here and lived here for the decade I was with the army. He has their fealty.”

He saw her uncertainty. Her expression shifted almost imperceptibly before she once more schooled it into impassivity. “Then we are to have a bed chamber?”

“Yes. Until he leaves, which may not be for some time. My father-in-law. He is perhaps,” he admitted. “I had thought that we might take our time and get to know one another a bit before we embarked on the more intimate part of marriage—to give you some distance and privacy as we adjust to this new state.”

“To be perfectly clear, the distance and privacy were entirely your own. Not mine. I understood when I agreed to the marriage what I was committing myself to.”

It was as if all the air had been sucked from the room. God above, the more he discovered about her, the more fascinating he found her.

She cocked her head to one side, staring at him curiously. “How curious must we know one another for it to be enough?”

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series—HE'D STEPPED CLOSER to her with each word, until they stood toe to toe. . up into his dark gaze, Louisa felt herself swaying toward him. She'd t else to been kissed. But growing up as she did, she certainly knew more about many young ladies did. And all the nonsense from Alexandra's gothic life has made it sound positively divine. "How well do you normally know I am. women you take to your bed?"

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off and "A kiss, Louisa. Only a kiss."

Before she could think of some appropriate response, he'd perceptibly swooped in. His lips covered hers, moving over them in a way that share a mesmerizing. For all his seeming indifference to her initially, that kiss revelation. It was gentle but insistent. Generous and also demanding. Months, not at all what she had thought. She'd certainly seen others kissing and get to much more. But she'd never experienced it. She'd never known that it of ours sweep her away into a haze of pleasure.

his new When his arms closed about her, pulling her against him, her lips in surprise. He swiftly took advantage and deepened the kiss. And our idea. was simply lost to it. All thought fled and she clung to him, recommitting whatever might come next.

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HE'D STEPPED CLOSER to her with each word, until they stood toe to toe. Staring up into his dark gaze, Louisa felt herself swaying toward him. She'd never been kissed. But growing up as she did, she certainly knew more about it than many young ladies did. And all the nonsense from Alexandra's gothic novels made it sound positively divine. "How well do you normally know the women you take to your bed?"

The moment the question escaped her lips, she wished she could call it back. It was terribly provocative. And bold. So very, very bold.

His lips curved in a smirk. "There is no way to answer that question that does not cast me in a negative light. I think it's best, always, to let the woman in question decide what is well enough. But perhaps there is a small experiment we might try."

"Oh? And what is that?" she asked. Was that truly her? There was no denying the flirtatious challenge in her voice, but where in heaven's name had it come from?

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Before she could think of some appropriate response, he'd simply swooped in. His lips covered hers, moving over them in a way that was mesmerizing. For all his seeming indifference to her initially, that kiss was a revelation. It was gentle but insistent. Generous and also demanding. It was not at all what she had thought. She'd certainly seen others kissing and so much more. But she'd never experienced it. She'd never known that it would sweep her away into a haze of pleasure.

When his arms closed about her, pulling her against him, her lips parted in surprise. He swiftly took advantage and deepened the kiss. And Louisa was simply lost to it. All thought fled and she clung to him, ready for whatever might come next.



Chapter Seven

DOUGLAS PUNCTUATED THAT kiss with a slight nip, his teeth scraping over the lushness of her lower lip. The shiver it elicited from her was to test his resolve. He wasn't going to bed her. Not yet. Despite the desire he felt for her and her apparent willingness, he knew that wasn't enough. Louisa, with her sweet and passionate response, was so innocent. And they had known one another only three days. He was strong enough to want it, but not self-serving enough to give in to those desires.

Forcing himself to gentle the kiss, to ease it back from the carnal calamity and to something sweeter, something that was far more about romance than about naked lust. When his breathing had slowed, with the blood that had been racing in his veins returned to its normal pace, he felt his back more still. With a final brush of his lips against hers, he released her.

"That was not how I intended for things to go. I want to be certain when you invite me to your bed, Louisa, it's because you want me there and not because you feel it is simply what a wife is supposed to do. With enough things stacked against us in this without adding the weight of obligation."

She shook her head. "You are mistaken, Douglas. Nothing that has happened between us has been because I felt it was what I ought to do. If I had been concerned with that, I would have refused you outright."

The startled laugh that erupted from him shocked them both. It had been a long while since he had laughed. Certainly, he hadn't since returning to Rosehaven. "Indeed. I suppose you would have. In light of that, Louisa, I would advise you to rest while you may. I imagine there will not be any more for you tonight."

"Where are you going then?"

All trace of amusement fled. "To find out precisely what Terrance is doing here and what he really wants. Nothing he says can ever be taken at face value."

face value.”

With that resolve firm in his mind, he turned and left the room. The best that she not be present for his confrontation with Terrence. She was a distraction for him, and with his cousin, having all of one’s faculties was imperative.

He found him in the billiard room. It was where Terrence normally spent the majority of his time while in residence. Or at least, it always had. It gently seemed his habits had not changed.

“Cousin, I would have thought you had better things to do today. Please, keep me company,” Terrence said, lifting his gaze from the billiard table as he took his shot.

Douglas nodded in agreement. “Certainly more enjoyable things, but there is little that would not be preferable to being in your company. I can simply toss you out of this house, not without providing other arrangements for you. Uncle James made that a contingency, didn’t he? You must support me regardless of whatever wastrel endeavors you throw yourself into.”

Terrence lined up the next shot. “Unless your marriage is dissolved, something happens to either of you before the year is out. . . . What a pain that would be.”

As the billiard ball sailed down its path, Douglas slammed his hand on the table, sending the shot awry. “Do not threaten her . . . or me. You might regret it, Terrence. I’m not the easy-tempered boy you remember.

“You know now what you are capable of. Stay away from Louisa. Hide yourself from your creditors as you like, but make no mistake that I will have you over to them myself if you make too much of a nuisance of yourself.”

Douglas didn’t wait for his cousin to reply. Instead, he turned on his heel and walked out. Behind him, he heard the crashing and banging indicating Terrence’s temper tantrum. He didn’t smile. There was no satisfaction in Louisa, Terrence was dangerous, but for the time being, his hands were tied. If she provided other suitable lodgings for Terrence, he was forced to remain at Rosehaven.

“So I’ll find him suitable accommodations,” he murmured and returned to the library. He’d have Hatton look into the matter. The man known at contents of his late uncle’s will front to back. If there was a way around it, he would know.



It was
e was a
s about LOUISA HAD RETREATED to a small settee in the sitting room of the maste
It hadn't been her intent to fall asleep, but the nerves of the d
y spent restlessness from the night before, and the strange mix of emotions wh
been. It resulted from the kiss she'd shared with Douglas that morning had
overwhelmed. Sleep had been a reprieve from the turmoil.
ay than But she awoke with a shiver. The room around her was freezing.
le event that should have been impossible. It was the tail end of August, a
Even as dismal as English weather could often be, an icy chill to
out then defied all explanation.
cannot Unable to simply shrug it off as her imagination, Louisa did sor
suitable that would have made Alexandra proud even as she cringed. "What
Now I want? I know you are here. I can feel your presence!"
throw The answer came in the form of a loud thump near the door
someone had banged on the wall. Louisa was terrified, though she l
ved. Or would not be to her benefit to let that be known. So she rose and
ity that towards the spot where the noise had originated from. No sooner l
reached it than the doorknob rattled. It was a clear indication that she
d down follow whatever it was to wherever it might lead.
ou will Three times, Louisa thought. Three times, whatever that presence
And I had reached out to her in some way. It had caused her no harm
ut here raising a bit of gooseflesh on her skin. Even as she told herself that, h
nd you was racing. It beat in her chest like a drum as she opened the do
stepped out into the corridor.
his heel Looking left to right, she waited for some sort of sign. It came v
ative of fluttering of a curtain at the opposite end of the hall. With a mix o
on in it. bravado, reluctant courage, and curiosity, she headed in that direction.
Unless It was almost like a child's game, being led about by knocks, bar
let him ruffled drapery. Was it the spirit of a child? She dearly hoped not. Pe
was the only way the spirit had to communicate with the livin
etoured particulars of how that all worked was something of a mystery to l
ew the doubt Alexandra would have known instantly.
id it, he "I should have paid more attention to those horrid novels,"

murmured.

When she'd turned at the end of the corridor into another wing house, she simply stopped and waited. This time, it was a plume er suite, which led her to a door near the end. Reaching for the handle, s ay, the somewhat surprised when it turned easily beneath her hand. And ye ich had she pushed the door, it did not open easily. The wood had swollen v left her heat and humidity. She was forced to put her hip against the door and with all her might.

A fact When it finally crashed inward, she stumbled into the musty roo fter all, curtains were drawn tightly. Only a small sliver of light mana the air penetrate. It was enough that she could see the outline of furniture dro holland cloth. Stepping deeper into the room, she narrowly skirted a s nething the foot of the bed to reach the window. Pulling the curtains wi do you secured them and then turned to take a better look.

It was a room very similar to the one she'd been given on her an —as if least in terms of size. Tugging one of the dusty furniture coverings aw knew it found rich, rosewood pieces inlaid with delicate patterns. The walked something about the room itself that felt *feminine*. Whomever that ro ad she belonged to had been a woman. Of that much she was certain.

should Curious but also compelled, she moved to one of the pieces of fi hidden beneath its dusty shroud. Tugging the fabric away, she found was, it staring at a small writing table. The curious thing was that it appeared beyond been left in a state as if the person who had been using it might walk in er heart moment. There was a half-written letter lying atop it and a quill dippe or and that had been dried for years.

Picking up the elegant stationery, Louisa instantly felt uncomfortable with the if it were a terrible violation of privacy . . . because the letter was ad of false to her husband.

igs and *My dearest Douglas,*
rhaps it *I am a horrid creature for hoping this letter does not find you wei*
g. The *all. I hope it finds you in the same agonizing misery that I curre*
er. No *contend with—the loneliness I feel when we are not together.*
days without you seem to grow longer each time you return
Louisa *university.*

When I think of how you urged me to run away with you, to elope and find myself regretting my refusal. Even though I know it was the right thing to do, that you must finish your education and that we must marry in a respectable manner, I cannot help wishing the days that that may happen had already passed. What I would not give to know that at your next visit home we would be married, instead of merely enjoying another all-too-brief holiday together.

Your uncle

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And that was where the letter stopped. No signature. No indication of author's identity. Only of her expectation that she would one day occupy a position that Louisa currently held as Mrs. Douglas Blackwell.

It wasn't jealousy that she felt. She certainly was not entitled to feel a thing. But she did feel deceived in some ways. Should he have told her he'd been on the cusp of marrying someone else? Someone else who, if her instincts were correct, met a very tragic end?

"Who are you?" Louisa whispered to the empty room. But it was empty. Not truly. That familiar rush of cold air surrounded her for an instant before receding. As it did, a small compartment beneath the writing table sprang open—a hidden drawer.

Dropping to her knees, heedless of the dust, she reached into that drawer and brought out a cloth-wrapped bundle. The cloth itself was a lovely red and blue paisley shawl. Within its folds, she found a small leather-bound book that was obviously a journal and several letters addressed to Caroline Farris. What had become of her? And if it was her, why was her spirit still linger at Rosehaven?

With far more questions than answers circulating in her mind, Louisa elected to take the lot of it with her. Lifting her skirts, she tied them about her waist and created a pocket of sorts. Why she felt the need to conceal those items she did not understand. But if Caroline Farris had told her that they needed to be hidden away, she wasn't going to brandish them for others to see. She would have answers, and there was only one person to whom she could turn. It was not her husband.

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Chapter Eight

LOUISA FOUND AUNT Mary in the morning room. She was drinking her coffee, staring intently at the cards spread out before her.

“And whose fortune are you telling now?”

Mary shrugged, lifting one elegant shoulder. “No one in particular, simply seeing what the future in this house may hold.”

Louisa stepped deeper into the room. When she reached the table, she looked down at the assortment of cards and felt a shiver race through her. They looked quite ominous. “What is this?”

“The Tower,” Mary replied. “It warns of impending chaos and darkness. There are dark times ahead at Rosehaven, my dear. Secrets,” she tapping another card, “hidden agendas, lies. Dark times, indeed.”

“Who was Caroline Farris?”

Louisa couldn’t say who was more startled by the question, Mary or herself. She’d intended to ease her way into that conversation, to subtly conduct her investigation. Clearly, she had failed. She’d changed her gown to one that gave her actual pockets and now removed the journal from inside it. The letters, she had hidden in their rooms. They were intimate in a way that she could not imagine Douglas would wish his aunt to be privy to.

“You’ve been snooping,” Mary finally replied, but there was no anger in her voice.

“Not snooping. I was invited.”

Mary’s eyebrows lifted. “By whom?”

“Caroline Farris,” Louisa replied. “Or whatever remains of her house.”

Mary blinked in surprise. “You’ve seen her?”

Louisa took the seat opposite her. “Not exactly. I have . . . a faint presence. Cold spots, drafts, a fluttering curtain. And while I would dismiss those as simply the vagaries of an old house, we are in the thirteenth century.”

summer heat. And by following those things, she led me to her room that journal. The question I have, is why?"

Mary leaned forward, her voice barely above a whisper. "There are things to find out. There is a woman I know who claims to have the ability to commune with the spirit world. She is in London. I will write to her and you are prepared for the answers, Louisa?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I must speak with Douglas."

tea and "He's gone out," Mary said. "I saw him riding away earlier this morning. He appeared to be in quite a temper. Likely because of his conversation with Terrence. That boy does certainly know how to get under everyone's skin. I'm sure he has the corresponding accountability for his actions. To call him a boy is to facilitate his continued immaturity."

ugh her. Mary blinked in surprise. Then she laughed. "I like you, Louisa. I don't usually say that about many people. But I do like you. It's the rare bird who is not afraid to speak her mind so freely. Are you intimidated by anything at all?"
trouble. added, "I haven't encountered it yet. I'm certain it exists, however. I think I'll go back upstairs. When Douglas returns, will you tell him I'd like to speak with him?"

Mary or With Mary's nod of agreement, Louisa left the drawing room and went directly to her way back upstairs. Once again, she was left only with more questions. What had happened between Douglas and Terrence to invoke his temporary temper? As she reached the top of the stairs, she saw the same maid she had seen once before—the one who'd been loitering outside the kitchen. Once again, she was not working. But this wasn't simply shirking her duties. The girl was giggling in Terrence's arms as he kissed her neck. It was clear that they were well and intimately acquainted with one another.

"What is the meaning of this?"

in this Terrence pulled himself away from the maid long enough to give her a scathing look, before dismissively adding, "You are a married woman. Your behavior requires explanation, my cousin is more of a prig than I thought." With that, the two disappeared into one of the many bedrooms along the corridor. Louisa felt her laughter echoing behind them.

like to Impotently furious, Louisa lifted her chin and made her way back to her room. The insolence and utter disregard for propriety was bad enough, but there was something even more disturbing about it. There had

and to familiarity between Terrence and the maid, Fanny, who, according to Louisa had discovered earlier, had only been employed at Rosehaven a few months. And Terrence, allegedly, hadn't been back to Rosehaven since the reading of James Blackwell's will. So when had there even been an opportunity for them to meet?



morning.

IT WAS LATE when Douglas arrived home. His earlier encounter with Terrence had already put him in a foul mood, but his meeting with Hatton had only worsened it. Unless Terrence did something truly diabolical, they were going to have to face the fact that Terrence could only be denied the right to return to Rosehaven if he posed a threat to its other inhabitants or until he no longer remained the heir apparent to its current owner.

Rosehaven if he posed a threat to its other inhabitants or until he no longer remained the heir apparent to its current owner.

So he might have a child with Louisa, something he had not planned on at all. Or wait for Terrence to actually bring harm to someone. Those were the only two options. Neither was acceptable. The first for a variety of reasons: it would take a length of time that would be required. The second because it was the very thing he hoped to avoid.

Passing the butler in the entryway, he directed, "Have a tray sent to Mrs. Blackwell and myself. We will dine in our suite tonight."

"Certainly, sir," the elderly man replied with a note of censure in his voice. It was clear that he held Louisa in some disregard.

"Let me make something very clear. My wife will run this household with her own satisfaction. If she says a staff member should be fired, they will be fired. If she says she dislikes the way someone is fulfilling their duties, that word is law, and they will be sent packing. I've tolerated your rudeness and disrespect for long enough. I will not have her tolerate it, as well. And if she has a problem for you, you may collect your severance and go home immediately."

The aged servant ducked his head in his first ever display of deference. "Certainly, sir. I shall be certain that all the staff is made aware of Mr. Blackwell's authority."

Taking the stairs, Douglas made his way directly to the master's study. When he entered, Louisa was seated at a small table. Spread out before her was a

to what was a small book and several letters. But she wasn't looking at them. She
in for a look at him and had clearly been waiting for some time.

in since It was bad form to abandon one's wife on their wedding day, reg
been an of the circumstances of their marriage. "I'm sorry. I had to get out
while. I wasn't fit company for anyone. Discovering that we are linked
with Terrence for the duration put me in a foul mood."

"Well, I'm on the verge of making it much worse, I'm afraid. But
tell me about Caroline Farris."

Terrence The last thing he'd expected was to hear that name from Louisa. I
had only he rarely spoke of Caroline to anyone. "She was my uncle's ward. We
were stuck up here together."

beside at "And you were in love," she said. There was no accusation in her voice
was now merely an observation.

He considered his answer carefully. "I thought I was, but we were
too young. So young that I think neither of us was capable of really
loving someone. Had she lived, we would have married, and we might have
been happy together . . . but I do not know. I'm not certain anyone within
the very member of this family is capable of love."

"How did she die?"

It was up for A sigh escaped him. He didn't talk about Caroline—hadn't even
mentioned her name in years. "She had a riding accident. There was nothing she
did in his better than her horses, and she was the most accomplished equestrian
I have ever seen. But even the most skilled rider can have an accident. She
was thrown and struck her head on a stone. When we found her, she was
unconscious. And when we brought her home, she lingered in that state
for several days, before ultimately passing away."

ess and "I do not think it was an accident. I think she was murdered . . .
I'd like to know if that spirit is lingering here at Rosehaven."

leave

Terrence.
of Mrs.

in suite.
before her

was a small book and several letters. But she wasn't looking at them. She was looking at him and had clearly been waiting for some time.

It was bad form to abandon one's wife on their wedding day, regardless of the circumstances of their marriage. "I'm sorry. I had to get out for a while. I wasn't fit company for anyone. Discovering that we are likely stuck with Terrence for the duration put me in a foul mood."

"Well, I'm on the verge of making it much worse, I'm afraid. But first, tell me about Caroline Farris."

The last thing he'd expected was to hear that name from Louisa. In truth, he rarely spoke of Caroline to anyone. "She was my uncle's ward. We grew up here together."

"And you were in love," she said. There was no accusation in her voice. It was merely an observation.

He considered his answer carefully. "I thought I was, but we were very young. So young that I think neither of us was capable of really loving someone. Had she lived, we would have married, and we might have been happy together . . . but I do not know. I'm not certain anyone who is a member of this family is capable of love."

"How did she die?"

A sigh escaped him. He didn't talk about Caroline—hadn't even spoken her name in years. "She had a riding accident. There was nothing she loved better than her horses, and she was the most accomplished equestrienne I have ever seen. But even the most skilled rider can have an accident. She was thrown and struck her head on a stone. When we found her, she was unconscious. And when we brought her home, she lingered in that state for several days, before ultimately passing away."

"I do not think it was an accident. I think she was murdered . . . and her spirit is lingering here at Rosehaven."



Chapter Nine

LOUISA WATCHED HIM react to her statement. Denial, disbelief, anger. So all of those things flash by. That they knew one another so little and she could read him so clearly was both strange and comforting.

At last, he demanded of her, “Why would you say such a thing?”

Louisa took a deep breath and prepared to tell him the strange truth of my life, I’ve had a certain instinctive understanding of when I’m in danger . . . and of who is dangerous. I’ve trusted those instincts, and they have never steered me wrong. The first day that I was here, when you left the library, I felt this strange chill. The air wasn’t just cold, but it moved undulated. Surrounding me. And while I was startled, I didn’t feel threatened.”

“That is hardly proof,” he said skeptically.

“It happened again that night in my room, when I saw the figure go all white.”

“Then what you saw could not have been Caroline—”

“No,” she concurred. “It was not. What I saw was a living, breathing person with actual form. Of that, I am entirely certain. And I have a suspicion of who that person was. But first, I need to tell you about my encounter with Caroline today.”

That was greeted with stony silence. Then after a moment, a curt nod was clear that he was far from convinced. Still, Louisa continued. “I dozed off for a bit of a nap this morning. When I awakened, it was to that same cold sensation. The window was open, but it’s terribly hot outside. There was not even a hint of a breeze. And yet that cold air was whirling about me. I decided that there must be a reason for it. So I told this spirit to leave and what it wanted. And it did.”

“How?”

“First was a thump on the wall beside the door. Then the curtains

at the end of the hall. I took that turn. Then outside what I assume had been Caroline's room, a puff of dust came from beneath the door... partially silhouetted against the light so that I might see it."

"Again, that is not proof."

"No. But of all the rooms in this house for me to wander into, it is strange that the one I discovered was hers? And that while I was in there, the secret drawer beneath the writing table simply sprang open and revealed the sawall that you see here . . . her journal, the letters that the two of us still sheexchanged."

"So you think Caroline's ghost has contacted you because she's jealous?" Louisa shook her head. "Not at all. I think she's reaching out because she thinks I am in danger . . . the same sort of danger she was in, but I am in Terrence was the one who killed her."

What had he said? Silence filled the small room. He didn't say a word. Louisa kept waiting for him to have some explosion of temper, or worse, to simply laugh at her and face. But ultimately, she decided that his silence might be worse than anything. "It feels like something, for heaven's sake," she admonished after it became intolerable.

"That is quite a leap. You spent a great deal of your formative years surrounded by those with criminal intent, and it has colored your perception of the world. What reason would Terrence have to kill Caroline?"

Louisa spread her hands. "To prevent you marrying her and having a child. Had you married your uncle's ward, there is little question that the inheritance outcome of your uncle's will would not have changed, even in the most suspicious contingencies within it did. The fortune would have been yours, and Terrence would have nothing. And now, because we have married, he is at risk of losing everything once more. Do you think it a coincidence that he was here on the same day we married? That he stood there next to his well-rested horse and told us he'd ridden all the way from London just that morning? If I spent too much time around the criminally intended, Dorian, there is no doubt you have spent too little."

me. And
d me to



HE WANTED TO deny all of it. Not because it was unbelievable, but because it stirred was entirely believable. Not wanting a thing to be true did not make

ad been he'd stayed there, married Caroline when they were younger and not
erfectly join the army, would she have still been alive? Had Terrence really
her? He wished that he could so easily deny the claim, but he had little
his cousin was capable of such a thing. The question was whether or not
isn't it had been opportunity.

it room, "What have you gleaned from reading her letters and journals?"
e vealed was a bite to his tone, one that he could not help. It felt like an invasion
of your privacy, but then, they were now married and privacy was very much
of the past. How could he resent it if what she said was true? He'd
alous?" encountered a ghost or apparition. At least, he hadn't to his knowledge
use she he couldn't outright deny that such things existed when his uncle had
because such a firm believer. Indeed, the entirety of Pluckley believed it. And
there was a rational source for such accounts, surely it would be
waiting Blackwell nee Jones.

1 in her "I haven't read them. I did read the half-finished letter that she'd
2. "Say the middle of writing to you. When I realized who the letters were in
able. for and who they had likely come from, I felt it wasn't my place to read
e years I have looked at her journal a bit, but only to flip through it until I could
ception the last entries . . . the events leading up to her death."

"They were fairly innocent," he admitted. Then wryly added, "I
ving an entirety."

hat the "We are not in love. We were not married or betrothed at that time
if the worlds were completely separate, and our paths had never crossed. There
and hence no betrayal in this, and there is no jealousy. You had a life before with
risk of likely one that involved more women than simply Caroline Farris.
showed daresay when our year is up, there will be women after we part ways
s fresh, offered with a very matter-of-fact shrug.

ust this It irked him—the notion that she was completely unbothered by the
Douglas, of him with another. And while it had been his wish to live apart, he
her to be at least somewhat aggrieved by the fact. "Indeed. You
remarkably rational about these matters, and that is why I find your
of your interactions with this *spirit* to be credible. But I would hope that
not Caroline. I would hope that she has found peace."

cause it "Perhaps this is why she is not yet at peace," she suggested. "If
it so. If uncover the truth of the events surrounding her death, it might ease her

Moving towards the table where she sat, he took the chair next to

It left to begin perusing the assorted letters. Most of them were innocent. A
y killed them hinted at the passionate kisses he had shared with Caroline. But
e doubt of how innocent she had been, things between them had never pro
ot there beyond that.

He had often written back to Caroline on the same stationery she had
' There to him, turning it sideways and writing overtop of and in between the
ision of flowery scrawl. It seemed as though a century had passed between the
a thing and the present. He certainly felt a century older.

It never "What children we were," he mused.

age, but Louisa opened the journal, turning it to the last entry and passing
ad been him. "That is the most damning entry."

if ever Picking it up, he scanned the entry. And his blood ran cold.

Louisa
*Loathsome Terrence has come home. No doubt he's heard that
Douglas and I intend to marry when he returns from London in
week. He's here to pester poor Uncle James about his share of
estate. If he were left all the money in England, he would manage
to spend every last drop. 'Tis simply his way.*

But not
*I've taken to avoiding him. I eat my meals in my room. I spend
much time as possible away from the house. I go riding. I take baskets
of food to the poorest of the tenant families. Most of them will
accept it because it comes from Rosehaven. Superstitious nonsense,
really. I've looked for the lady in white countless times and have
not to see her. It's likely one of the baker's shameless daughters sneaked
about to meet a footman . . . or Terrence.*

ne. Our
There is
ve met.
And I
rs," she
*How I hope that Uncle James will give him enough money that
will once more go back to London and leave us here in peace.
His presence disrupts the entire household.*

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wanted
ou are
account
hat it is
The entry was dated three days before the fateful ride that had ended
Caroline's tragic fall. Six days before she died. And he hadn't realized
Terrence had been there the entire time. His cousin had told him that
arrived only shortly before he himself had, and he'd taken him at his
word.

He had been too distraught to do anything else.

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soul."
her and
"I should have been here," he said. "If I'd been here, she would not
felt the need to hide from Terrence. She would not have been
her and

few of someone to protect her from him.”

mindful She shook her head. “For what it is worth, he would have simply gressed another way. He wanted to ensure that you were on equal bachelor when your uncle died. That was the only way he could be certain that ad sent wouldn’t be changed, and he would have had allies in this house then r large, he does now. The woman in white that I saw my first night here . . . I at time it was the maid, Fanny. I saw them together in the corridor today. The very familiar with one another, and not simply in the liberties he was Beyond that, they seemed to be well-known to one another.”

ng it to He knew the maid she spoke of, and he also knew that the girl h come to work there six months earlier. The butler had stated she v niece, though that had always seemed a rather dubious claim. knowledge, the man had never acknowledged having any family at all.

that “Then we send her packing immediately.”

next “If we do that,” she protested, “then we give up any advantage w the For the time being, until we know precisely what he’s planning, we e to go on as if nothing has been discovered about his past crimes.”

l as “So we just pretend to be lost in newly wedded bliss and obliv everything else going on?” he asked.

kets Louisa’s answering blush told him, without her needing to say a not that she was thinking of the kiss they had shared that morning. It ha nse, been far from his mind. Even when he’d been tending to other thin yet awareness of her, of how much that simple kiss had stirred his desire king had been ever present.

t he “I think bliss might be a bit of a stretch. After all, everyone is fully His of your reasons for marrying me,” she replied.

“What the world thinks of us isn’t important, Louisa. All that ma least for the next twelve months, is how we deal with one another. I kiss you again, but only if you want that too.”

nded in She was silent for a moment, staring into his eyes. Whatever s ed that there must have swayed her, because she simply launched herself i at he’d arms. And he was selfish enough to accept all that she offered. s word.

ot have without

someone to protect her from him.”

She shook her head. “For what it is worth, he would have simply found another way. He wanted to ensure that you were on equal bachelor footing when your uncle died. That was the only way he could be certain that the will wouldn’t be changed, and he would have had allies in this house then just as he does now. The woman in white that I saw my first night here . . . I believe it was the maid, Fanny. I saw them together in the corridor today. They were very familiar with one another, and not simply in the liberties he was taking. Beyond that, they seemed to be well-known to one another.”

He knew the maid she spoke of, and he also knew that the girl had only come to work there six months earlier. The butler had stated she was his niece, though that had always seemed a rather dubious claim. To his knowledge, the man had never acknowledged having any family at all.

“Then we send her packing immediately.”

“If we do that,” she protested, “then we give up any advantage we have. For the time being, until we know precisely what he’s planning, we need to go on as if nothing has been discovered about his past crimes.”

“So we just pretend to be lost in newly wedded bliss and oblivious to everything else going on?” he asked.

Louisa’s answering blush told him, without her needing to say a word, that she was thinking of the kiss they had shared that morning. It had never been far from his mind. Even when he’d been tending to other things, that awareness of her, of how much that simple kiss had stirred his desire for her, had been ever present.

“I think bliss might be a bit of a stretch. After all, everyone is fully aware of your reasons for marrying me,” she replied.

“What the world thinks of us isn’t important, Louisa. All that matters, at least for the next twelve months, is how we deal with one another. I want to kiss you again, but only if you want that too.”

She was silent for a moment, staring into his eyes. Whatever she saw there must have swayed her, because she simply launched herself into his arms. And he was selfish enough to accept all that she offered.



Chapter Ten

SHE HADN'T MEANT to quite literally throw herself at him. But she could regret it because kissing him felt like a little bit of heaven. When he touched hers, she could forget about Terrence and whatever scheme was afoot. She could forget about the ghostly presence at Rosehaven. *She forget that everything between them was only temporary.*

His arms had closed around her, but his hands were far from still. They moved over her back, her shoulders, her hips. And everywhere he touched her, she burned. The pins fell from her hair, one by one, as he plucked them free. When the mass of it was loose, he buried his hands in it.

But Louisa was not content to be a passive participant. She explored his body as well, marveling at the firmness of his flesh which was so different from her own. Then he was pulling back from her. Immediately she missed the heat of that kiss.

"I'm sorry, Louisa. I didn't intend for things to go quite so far," he explained, his voice roughened and his breathing a bit ragged.

"Do you regret that they did?"

"I should," he said. "But I won't lie to you."

"My only regret is that you stopped," she admitted, her voice little more than a whisper. "It is our wedding night, after all."

"You should have time to get to know me—"

"I know all that I need to know. I know that I can trust you. Do not tell me how I know, but I do," she insisted. "And we do not have the luxury of waiting. Terrence would challenge the validity of our marriage in court and claim everything for himself."

"This thing between us has nothing to do with Terrence. His presence is simply a reminder of what else is at stake. But you and I . . . this is only about us, what we feel and what we want." It was uttered firmly, but the doubt was easily visible in his gaze.

“If you think I’m trying to seduce you out of obligation, you’re mistaken,” Louisa said. “I know what I’m doing. And I know what I’m not. I’m not some shrinking violet who with no notion of what passes between husband and wife. So when I say I want this, I know precisely what I mean.”

Apparently her words convinced him. He rose from the chair, lifted her easily into his arms, before striding toward his bedchamber.

She couldn’t breathe. Nerves, excitement, desire. The mix of feelings left her breathless. His lips, his hands, none of that swayed her from the feeling that what they were about to do was right. And when he deposited her on the bed, Louisa raised herself up on her elbows and watched as he began stripping off his clothes. His coat and breeches were first, followed by his waistcoat and shirt.

It was a marvel to look at him. Smooth, sun-bronzed skin over sculpted muscle. The dark hair covering his chest and bisecting his abdomen tempted her. She wanted to touch him, to feel that beneath his fingertips. So she did. She sat up and reached for him, her fingers tracing over his skin to appease her curiosity.

But he gripped her wrist, halting her exploration. “You need to get dressed, she that dress before this goes any further.”

Accepting the challenge in his gaze, Louisa began to unbutton the front of her dress. When the last button was freed, she took a deep breath, steadied her nerves and then shrugged her shoulders to free herself from the garment. With the fabric pooled at her hips, she shimmied herself free of it entirely, scooped it up and then tossed it aside along with his clothing.

Layer by layer, she removed each item until she wore only her shift. Then he did he climb onto the bed with her, bearing her back onto the mattress and pillows. When his lips closed over hers again, it was an entirely different kind of thing. This wasn’t simply a kiss, but an orchestrated and strategic assault. She was seduced. Claimed. He was both generous and demanding at once. Time flew entirely, and she could do nothing but give herself up to the sensations stirred within her.

With skilled hands and expert lips, he brought her to the brink of madness, then beyond it. Waves of pleasure exploded within her. It wasn’t until then that he joined their bodies. There was a moment of discomfort, but she was so lost in the throes of her release it was barely noticeable. In the intimacy of it, the vulnerability of giving herself to him entirely,

you are overwhelmed her. It was no longer just physical pleasure. There was a I want.of completeness she had never known before. But as before, he drove .ween at the brink of ecstasy, until she was all but mindless with it. She co at that nothing then but lose herself in the pleasure he could give her— pleasure they could find together.
ing her



ess, but

do was “THEY’VE CONSUMMATED THEIR marriage! You said it was to be in name on her Fanny rolled over in his bed and looked at him with sleepy eyes. S l cravata sly creature. It was one of the reasons he had sent her to Roseh: sabotage his cousin’s efforts to find a bride. “Explain to me h c or firm, misinterpreted that!” Terrence demanded of her.

ridged “I never said it would be in name only. I said it would be a marri ath her convenience. For one year. Then they would part ways,” she insisted. ‘ trailing did tell her they would have no children.”

Terrence frowned. “How, if they are going at one another like ani t out of rut, is that possible?”

“He said that precautions would be taken,” Fanny insisted sitting u bodice bed. Naked, she stretched to shamelessly accentuate her best assets—a to calm truly remarkable breasts.

argument. Even as a man who had partaken in more than his fair share of rely. He pursuits, it was an impressive sight. And a distracting one. After apprec the view for a moment, Terrence tossed her dress at her. “Preca ft. Only French letters fail. Withdrawal is hardly a guarantee. And none ound of changes the fact that he’s married her. The only way I get the money iffere nt if he dies and I can be certain there is no heir in her belly!”

ult. He “You could always just kill them both,” Fanny suggested.

Thought Terrence didn’t immediately discount the idea. It might well be h ions hereal option. “I think the White Lady of Rosehaven needs to make appearance. A more bold one this time. After all, everyone believ rink of presence is a harbinger of tragedy. What greater tragedy could there as only for a husband to be so overcome with jealousy that he kills his youn though and then himself?”

was the Fanny leaned back against the headboard. “You better marry me a ly, that

feeling this. Who else would put up with your scheming and turned a blind eye to her toy you top every halfway pretty maid in the house?"

could do Terrence only smiled. He wouldn't marry her. Fanny would disappear like so many other young women did. Maids ran off all the time after all. And he wasn't about to make an actress who'd slept with London's ne'er-do-wells in London the mistress of his home. But he needed her cooperation for a bit longer, and he'd let her keep her delusions to ensure her assistance.

only." "Get dressed so you can get to your room and change into your coat," she was directed. "We've no time to waste."

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“Get dressed so you can get to your room and change into your costume,” he directed. “We've no time to waste.”



Chapter Eleven

LOUISA COULDN'T SAY what it was that had awakened her. The room with Douglas was still in the bed beside her, his breathing deep and even. Lying at him, she was so tempted to just lie there. But there was a sense of urgency that was undeniable.

Easing from the bed, she reached for her chemise and slipped it on. She had been shameless enough already without parading around in the nightgown. Inexplicably drawn to the window, she looked out into the darkness of the garden beyond. Instantly, she knew where the sense of urgency had come from.

The white shrouded figure moved through the garden. The moonlight was bright, but not bright enough to see any details at such a distance. Before, it wandered along the garden paths to the lane, and then disappeared from sight. Turning away from the window, she gathered her dress but forgot to bother with shoes. She was shrugging into the gown even as she slipped out of the room. Padding down the corridor barefoot, she would have to be careful if she had any hope of catching up to whomever was impersonating the ghost.

Rounding the corner to the stairs, Louisa drew up short. Terrence stood before her, a cruel smile playing about his lips.

“You know what they say about curiosity and cats, don't you, Cousin?”

Louisa tried to hide the shiver that raced through her at the obvious meaning in his words. “I certainly know what they say about every dog having its day.”

That cold, bone-chilling grin on his face turned into a snarl. “I have no regret insulting me, Cousin Louisa. And it may well be the last thing you hear from me.”

She had no other warning. His hand snaked out, grabbing her up and hauling her with him. But not down the stairs. Instead he pulled her

opposite end of the corridor. The panic she'd felt at first began to fade as she struggled against him, even as she drew in a deep breath to scream for help.

He'd clearly guessed her intent, as he slammed her into the wall, pressed his hand over her mouth and nose. "Do not make a sound. I have a pistol in my pocket and I will shoot you without qualm. Then I will shoot Douglas. And there is no one in this house who would gainsay me . . . except for my dear Aunt Mary who's ready for Bedlam with all her talk of clairvoyant-looking crystals." Roughly, he released his hand.

"What do you mean to do with Douglas?"

"Nothing," he said. "So long as he doesn't manage to get himself married before the year is out. You see, that's the tricky wording of James's will. It doesn't matter who he's married to, or how many times he's married, so long as on the one-year anniversary of the reading of the will Douglas has himself a wife. If he fails, then it becomes my turn. I'll have a chance at the family fortunes then."

"It was Fanny I saw in the garden. Wandering around in the dark and looking just as white like some sort of phantom, to scare away any poor superstitious girl who might be tempted to ignore the family's dark history," he hadn't surmised. It was a stalling tactic. He'd pushed her back against the wall and from there was a table beside her—a table bedecked with a small but heavy and quick if very ornate candelabra. Fumbling for it, she finally managed to clasp it in her fabled hand over it just as he abruptly let her go.

She could see him reaching for the gun in his pocket. It was her chance. Swinging the candelabra upward, she caught his arm with the ornate scrollwork slicing his hand. Then she brought it crashing down on Douglas's forehead this time against his forehead. Blood welled from the laceration in his hair and was running into his eyes.

Louisa scrambled away, screaming as she then ran down the corridor, pushing his back to the room where she'd left Douglas sleeping. Even over her ragged breathing and pounding heart, she could hear Terrence's "You'll never do." She'd only managed to best him before because of luck, an element of surprise. That would no longer be on her side. With no other choice, Louisa screamed for all she was worth.

She ran to the

side and
came for



DOUGLAS SAT UP with a jolt. He wasn't immediately certain what awakened him, but he was instantly aware of one thing. He was alone. The pistol in his hand was no longer in the bed beside him.

Douglas. Something else penetrated the haze of sleep. The air around him was freezing cold. So cold that he could see his breath. Instantly, memories and Louisa's description of her encounters with Caroline came to mind.

"Are you here?" he whispered.

There was no sound, only the opening of the outer door to their chamber. It was a clear indication that he should follow. Feeling both foolish and afraid, he rose from the bed. Moving quickly, he grabbed his trousers and struggled into them. Shirtless and in his bare feet, he ran into the corridor. He could see Louisa running toward him, and chasing after her was a brave man, Terrence.

Caroline had warned him. She had warned him to spare Louisa the fate she had suffered.

Rushing forward, Douglas grabbed her, pushing her behind him. He saw Terrence brandishing the pistol, but when he saw Douglas, Terrence abruptly stopped. When Terrence raised his hand, leveling the pistol, Douglas knew he meant to fire. He would kill him, and then he would kill Louisa. Unwilling to let that happen, Douglas did the only thing he could. He

saw the minute flinch in Terrence's hand, just before the other man squeezed the trigger, he threw himself back against the wall, dragging Louisa with him. The shot went wide. Without giving Terrence the chance to reload, Douglas launched himself at the man, tackling him to the carpeted floor.

It seemed that Terrence lacked the skills to do battle with another man, someone who could match him in strength. His cousin apparently on his own engaged in violence against those who were weaker than himself.

Drawing his fist back, he hit Terrence again and again. Only when Terrence stopped moving entirely did he manage to pull himself back from that brink, back from allowing the damnable Blackwell temper to drive him to murder.

Turning to Louisa, he said, "Rouse a servant and send for the magi

She nodded mutely and then stumbled toward the stairs on unsteady feet.

He wanted to call her back. She was in no condition for such things, but he could hardly leave her alone with Terrence, even though he was uncooperative at present. There was no way to know how long he would remain that way.

A pained groan from his cousin only confirmed it was the right time. When Terrence's eyes opened, Douglas hauled him up by his coat and forced Terrence's own bloody cravat to bind his hands. "You'll hang for what you've done."

"What did I do other than have a midnight tryst with your bird in the chamber, slightly out of hand?" Terrence demanded, pausing to spit blood from his mouth. "Do you really want all of England to know what a trollop I am and married?"

"It has nothing to do with Louisa," Douglas said. "And everything to do with Caroline. You killed her because I meant to marry her. Because James would have written you out of his will entirely then."

Terrence laughed. "You'll never be able to prove it."

"I don't need to." With grim satisfaction, Douglas explained, "You'll be in the local gaol until the next assizes. And by then, Uncle James's will, with all of its contingencies, will have been met. You'll be both penniless and disgraced. And I will have just cause to deny you entrance to Rosehaven again. No doubt Fanny will be less than enamored with you once you've been squeezed out of the Blackwell family fortune. She might even be persuaded to testify against you."

There was a flicker of fear in Terrence's gaze then, the realization that his scheming had been for naught. He was on the cusp of losing everything. "I'll go. I'll leave here, and you can have the bloody fortune!"

"That isn't good enough. Caroline deserves justice. I failed to protect her in life, but I will not betray her again in her death."

When
back from
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strate."

She nodded mutely and then stumbled toward the stairs on unsteady legs. He wanted to call her back. She was in no condition for such things, but he could hardly leave her alone with Terrence, even though he was unconscious at present. There was no way to know how long he would remain that way.

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"What did I do other than have a midnight tryst with your bird that got slightly out of hand?" Terrence demanded, pausing to spit blood from his mouth. "Do you really want all of England to know what a trollop you've married?"

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There was a flicker of fear in Terrence's gaze then, the realization that all his scheming had been for naught. He was on the cusp of losing everything. "I'll go. I'll leave here, and you can have the bloody fortune!"

"That isn't good enough. Caroline deserves justice. I failed to protect her in life, but I will not betray her again in her death."



Epilogue

October 1st, 1832

IT WAS WELL into the evening by the time they returned from the assizes at Ashford. Just over a month since the constables had taken both Terrence and Fanny into custody. The servants were abuzz with the gossip. They had both been found guilty of their respective crimes. Terrence was sentenced to transportation, and Fanny was sentenced to a seven-year term in prison for her role as a conspirator.

Mary felt vindicated, per her own report, stating that she had thought poor Caroline's demise had resulted from something far more nefarious than a mere riding accident. And, of course, her cards had told her that it would happen just so. Or so she informed them dramatically as she sailed from the room with a swish of her heavily flounced skirts.

"Why did the magistrate and the judge keep talking about all the wretched things wrought by this wretched place?" Louisa asked as soon as the door closed.

Douglas's glance at her revealed far more than he had intended. She saw instantly that he didn't want to tell her. It was evident in his expression and posture, in the very air around him.

"You can tell me," she urged. "After everything I shared with you, knowing how positively hysterical it sounded, you have to know that you can trust me as I trusted you."

"It's not the same thing at all, Louisa," he said softly. "You were worried about me thinking you mad. I'm worried about you thinking me a murderer. That's what everyone believes all Blackwell men to be—past, present, and future."

She said nothing, just waited patiently for him to continue. After a long sigh, he did.

"My father murdered my mother. Much like Caroline's death, it was made to look like an accident. A fall down the stairs. But I saw it all.

what he did. He pushed her in the middle of an argument, and she felt death. It was never proven, never taken to trial. But everyone knows there is my grandfather who buried three wives, all of them under mysterious circumstances. That is how he amassed the Blackwell fortune. There's not a penny on every groat."

"They are not you," Louisa said simply.

"How can you be sure that I will not turn just as they did?"

"Because you have integrity, Douglas. You are not capable of the same wickedness. If you were, you'd have continued to let the world go to hell. Caroline's death was an accident just to spare the family more scandal. Honesty and justice mean more to you than personal gain."

"I want her to be at peace," he said softly. "I cared for her very much, but I wasn't in love with her . . . not as she loved me. I've felt guilty about that for years."

Louisa looked down at her clasped hands. "Perhaps you would have always grown to love her as she loved you."

"I don't think so. Certainly there was affection and a kind of love, but loving someone and being in love with them—that is something quite different." He paused then, looking away thoughtfully. "No, I was not in love with her. I was in love with something else."

"For the army? The life of a soldier?" Louisa asked. Though she had never loved him, it felt as if her heart was breaking. She'd made the terrible mistake of falling in love with him. It had been a valiant fight to keep her feelings contained, but she had failed pitifully. And in eleven months, he would send her away to the front.

"No. The army wasn't my purpose. Just a distraction. It allowed me to escape the gossip and conjecture of this place. To go where no one knew my family history and expected me to turn into a monster."

She looked up then, meeting his gaze steadily. "Was I destined to become a fallen woman just because my mother had?"

His eyes widened with shock. "Of course, not. And women do not fall alone. There is always a dishonorable man somewhere within their reach."

Someone who made promises they had no intention of keeping."

"I know something about that," she said. "I made promises to myself that I have not kept." And all of them had involved shielding her heart from the world by keeping some kind of distance between them.

"I know what that means?"

l to her “I promised that I would guard my feelings, that I would not fo
s. Thensort of attachment to you. Because we will part at some point, and I l
steriouswish to have my heart broken. That is why I think we should go back
s bloodseparate chambers. I can return to the room I stayed in when I first arri

He shook his head. “No. I don’t want that. I want you with me, Lou

“I can’t. I am not Caroline. I cannot love you and have only
glimmer of affection in return,” she admitted.

of such

d think

l. Truth



HE HADN’T DARED hope. Not really. Even without her confession, he’d
deeply.that when their year was through, he would not give her up. Lou
y aboutinvaded his thoughts. His heart. She had burrowed into his very
seemed.

ld have “And why would you think that you do not have my love? I think j
you’ve had it from the moment I first saw you. Hatton had his way a
ve. ButHe’d had it in mind all along that I should have a love match,” he cor
entirely“So he found the one woman in all of England, perhaps in all the work
eant forwould never be able to resist.”

Douglas watched her, analyzing every flicker of emotion on he
smiled,There were many. Despair, hope, longing, tenderness—and perhaps th
fallingwhat love truly was. It wasn’t a single emotion but the presence o
rtained,emotion, swirling in a storm created by one person. Louisa could ma
rway. feel everything, and he had hope that perhaps he was that to her, as we

l me to “I thought I could resist you, too. That I could guard my hea
ew myenough to keep you from stealing it.” His mouth twisted in a rueful
that admission.

become “I didn’t steal it,” she protested. “It was an even exchange. I took
but I gave you my own in return.”

not fall “Stay with me, Louisa.”

stories. “For the next eleven months?”

“Yes . . . and then for every month after. I never want to part fro
self thatAnd I say to you something that I have never said to another woman. I
m him,just love you. I am in love with you. Hopelessly and permanently.”

She smiled despite the tears glistening in her eyes. “How conveni

rm anything I feel exactly the same, and that I have no intention of going anyw
ave no With a flick of his fingers, he locked the door behind him, ar
k to our Douglas held out his hand to her. And when she came to him, he shov
ved.” in every way that he could just how deeply he loved her and how n
isa,” wanted her.

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The End

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that I feel exactly the same, and that I have no intention of going anywhere.”

With a flick of his fingers, he locked the door behind him, and then Douglas held out his hand to her. And when she came to him, he showed her in every way that he could just how deeply he loved her and how much he wanted her.

The End

Author's Note

The village of Pluckley in Kent is reputed to be the most haunted village in England. The pseudo haunting perpetrated by the villains in this story is a homage to the legend of the Lady of Rose Court. And Caroline's ghostly tale is a sad one for me, but it is purely fictitious. There is nothing in the paranormal tales from Pluckley that relates to her tragic tale. But I think that after she saved Louisa and her killer was brought to justice that she found her own sort of peace. If you'd like to read more about Pluckley's ghostly inhabitants, a simple Google search will result in a wealth of information.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed my contribution to the ghostly collection.

Chasity Bowlin

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The village of Pluckley in Kent is reputed to be the most haunted village in England. The pseudo haunting perpetrated by the villains this story is an homage to the legend of the Lady of Rose Court. And Caroline's ghost was a sad one for me, but it is purely fictitious. There is nothing in the many paranormal tales from Pluckley that relates to her tragic tale. But I like to think that after she saved Louisa and her killer was brought to justice that she found her own sort of peace. If you'd like to read more about Pluckley's ghostly inhabitants, a simple Google search will result in a wealth of information.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed my contribution to this ghostly collection.

Chasity Bowlin

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Also from Chasity Bowlin

[Into the Night \(Novella\)](#)

About Chasity Bowlin

Chasity Bowlin lives in central Kentucky with her husband and a menagerie of animals. She loves writing, loves traveling and incorporating tidbits of her actual vacations into her books. She is an Anglophile, loving all things British, but specifically all things Regency.

Growing up in Tennessee, spending as much time as possible with her doting grandparents, soap operas were a part of her daily existence, from the by back to back episodes of Scooby Doo. Her path to becoming a romance novelist was set when, rather than simply have her Barbie dolls cruise in a pink convertible, they time traveled, hosted lavish dinner parties and even had an evil twin locked in the attic.

Website: www.chasitybowlin.com

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Once Upon an Enchanted Well

Mary Wine

Once Upon an Enchanted Well

Mary Wine



An Ending is Also a Beginning...

LADY WILMITON WAS displeased.

Rhona knew the pinched look around the lady's face heralded the of the Lady of the House's temper. Normally Rhona would have fled the cottage where she lived with her mother, but her father was dead and Lady Wilmiton was in charge of everything until her son came of age.

So there would be no running away.

Rhona stood alongside her mother while the lawyers waited for Wilmiton to sign the documents they had laid in front of her. But she scowled at the paper, clearly displeased with what was written on it already signed more than a dozen sheets, a necessity of inheritance law that one seemed to anger her.

She looked at Rhona. The Lady had no love for her, that was something Rhona knew very well even at the age of ten.

"My Lady," one of the lawyers decided to attempt to placate Wilmiton. "It is but a small country house—with all the other holdings we have, it is nothing of significance. The will is very clear, if you do not give this property over, you will not receive the rest of the estate and holdings."

"As you will!" Lady Wilmiton hissed at Rhona.

She grabbed the quill, jabbed its silver point into the ink well, and scribbled on the paper. Her son looked down at the document, his eyes moving back and forth while he read.

"There," Lady Wilmiton declared. She sent Rhona's mother a side-glance. "Take your whore's earnings. You will freeze up there in the borderland. I promise you the dowry promised to your daughter will go to the Church! For no man should have to suffer your bastard daughter for her sins. Put them out!"

Put them out...

Rhona had heard the words being whispered in the kitchen and

rooms since the night the Lord took the last sacrament. A hush had
over the house in the days that followed, only the whispers grew
volume.

They will be put out...

Rhona knew the whispers were about her mother and herself. As
the silent footmen behind them came forward. Their gazes were averted
tight expressions appeared on their faces. They began to herd her
mother much in the same way that they might deal with geese, with
arrival arms spread out wide.

back to Rhona's mother darted around one of the men, dipping low to avoid
outstretched arms. There was a crinkle of paper when she grabbed the
signed and sealed sheet of parchment. The lawyer's assistant tossed
bag to her.

or Lady "Put them out at once!" Lady Wilmiton's voice became shrill. "Go
ie Lady border and die there!"

. She'd "Mother... Rhona is my sister," the new Lord Wilmiton spoke up.

but this "You are never to say such a thing again." Lady Wilmiton turned
son. "She is the spawn of lust. A product of adultery. She is to take
nothing lest she follows her mother's path."

Whatever else Lady Wilmiton said, Rhona didn't hear it because
l Lady footmen pushed them past the doors which were closed tightly behind
ings you It was a relief to be out of the room and yet, Rhona shivered because
not sign had known no other home.

ings." "Psst... psst..."

Rhona looked over to see one of the kitchen maids hiding
d put it passageway. She looked fearfully toward the closed doors before wa
ing back them.

Rhona's mother grabbed her wrist and ran toward the woman
cathing footmen were left behind.

on the "I had the tinker wait."

o to the The tinker came around every month or so with items to trade. Rhona
a wife! always liked going to see what his wagon had collected on his journey.

The kitchen maid took them through the storerooms. She stopped
looked behind them to make sure no one was following them.

id back "Here now," the maid said. "Take these bundles. It's not much
understand I can't have the lady notice anything missing, or I might be

fallen place.”

“I am grateful for your kindness,” Rhona’s mother whispered.

The maid nodded. “His Lordship loved you with all his heart. For
She pulled a little pouch from her bodice. “His Lordship wanted you
to have this now, this.”

There was a jingle of coins when her mother grasped it.

“Hurry...the tinker will be leaving soon.” The maid encouraged Rhona
and her mother toward the door.

Rhona’s mother tugged her out into the yard beyond the kitchen. A
tinker was there with his wagon. Instead of flashing Rhona a smile
newly bringing her something he hoped her father might purchase for her, the
tinker pointed at an open place in his wagon. Her mother climbed in
and pulled her along with her.

The tinker took his place at the front of the wagon. He made a clatter
sound that the horses recognized. The wagon lumbered forward, Rhona
and her mother swaying along with the rest of the cargo. Rhona looked
back at the house.

“Look forward Rhona,” her mother advised her. “Always choose
Never look back at death for it will catch us all soon enough.”

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“Hurry...the tinker will be leaving soon.” The maid encouraged Rhona’s mother toward the door.

Rhona’s mother tugged her out into the yard beyond the kitchen. The tinker was there with his wagon. Instead of flashing Rhona a smile and bringing her something he hoped her father might purchase for her, today, the tinker pointed at an open place in his wagon. Her mother climbed up and pulled her along with her.

The tinker took his place at the front of the wagon. He made a clicking sound that the horses recognized. The wagon lumbered forward, Rhona and her mother swaying along with the rest of the cargo. Rhona looked back at the house.

“Look forward Rhona,” her mother advised her. “Always choose life. Never look back at death for it will catch us all soon enough.”



Every Challenge Presents an Opportunity

LADY WILMITON HADN'T lied about the borderland being cold.

Rhona shivered, hugging a tattered length of wool closer against her body. She'd lost count of how many days they had traveled. At times she had needed to wait for another merchant who was heading north before they could continue their journey. Now, Rhona looked up to see a sky black with swollen clouds. The wind was whipping, and the trees had lost their leaves, so the thin branches slapped together making an eerie sound like bones dancing.

"Up that road."

This man who had most recently traded them a spot on his cart for a few bits of silver pointed at what might have once been a road, but was now overgrown. The plants were as high as Rhona's chest because no wagon had used it all summer. Still, there were ruts in the ground, and she knew that there was something—or had been something—up ahead of them.

"I can't recall ever seeing any light up there." The merchant dashed away, leaving further hopes of finding something welcoming at the end of the path. "A few more shillings, I could take ye into the village."

"No thank you." Rhona's mother was quick to turn his offer down.

The merchant shrugged. His feet made squishing sounds in the mud as he turned his way back to the front of his cart. A little click of his tongue and he started forward.

Overhead there came the ominous rumble of thunder.

It was definitely not a cheery welcome to their new home.

Her mother squared her shoulders and began walking in the direction the merchant had pointed them. Not wanting to be a coward, Rhona lifted her chin and followed. She instantly felt better, like she had achieved something by refusing to give in to her fear. Even if that was her pride talking, it was certainly better than standing on the side of the road just waiting for trouble.

to begin drenching her.

The reeds which had grown up on the road swayed and danced in the wind. Rhona decided she liked the idea of them dancing, for that was a good word. They followed the ruts and then went around a bend. The light faded, and again, the thunder cracked above them.

And then, lightning zigzagged through the mass of black clouds. Rhona blinked, blinded temporarily by the white-hot light. When she could see again, there was a house in front of her.

She gasped.

And she heard her mother sucking in her breath.

The house was blackened by moss and the stone structure was dark and full of foreboding. The yard was overgrown. Once there had been a road in front of the steps but now there were broken tree limbs and a tangle of vines and like brambles for them to weave through before they managed to make it to the bottom step.

As they made it, her mother muttered, "At last." There was a note of gratitude in her mother's tone, but Rhona couldn't see anything that was remotely worthy of about which they should be pleased.

"Oh, Mother...will we freeze here? Did Lady Wilmiton curse us?" Rhona asked in a thin voice. "Or...is this Divine Retribution because Father married to you?"

Her mother turned to face her. "Listen to me, Rhona. Lady Wilmiton drinks bitterness by choice. She has that entire, fine manor home, a son, and rents to collect. Yet she rises each day to only see the things she does not have."

Rhona felt her fear dissipating but even as she began to smile, the sky split open with another bolt of lightning. It illuminated the house and the closed shutters and dark stone. The thunder boomed and rumbled as the demon was clawing its way out of the dark mass of clouds.

"Rhona," her mother spoke again once the thunder had passed. "We should be so very happy, for your father is watching us from Heaven." With that her mother opened the bag the lawyer had tossed to her during their eviction. Inside there was a ring of at least twenty or more keys. That, it was there were things of value inside the house.

"We have a place to call home, Rhona. Each morning we will see all the goodness around us."

“But it is dark and ominous, Mother.” Rhona was ashamed of how
with the she sounded, but she just couldn’t help it.

“It is strong, and will shelter us from the storm!” Her mother
gave another way to see their circumstances.

“But this is the borderland...are there not savages and witches?”
Rhona forbidden thing Rhona had ever heard while hiding near the kitchen door
could see began to bubble right out of her.

“Listen, my precious daughter.” Rhona’s mother smoothed the hair
from her face with gentle hands. “This is a land of enchantment. You
dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies. Our hearts
are brimming full of merriment. And before you know it, you will fall
in love with a fine man here on the borderland, far, far away from those nobles
and lust to own every last thing that they see. Here, we shall have a full life
time to there is enough for everyone. We will brighten everything with
determination to live well so that your father need not worry about us.”

After the long trip north with naught but fear chilling her heart,
Rhona was happy to see the light of hope shimmering in her mother’s eyes.
Her mother shook the keys, so they jingled. It was a happy sound, for the
Rhona precious things in every house were always locked away and the ring
was not always on the belt of the most senior staff member.

Now the keys were in her mother’s hand.

Rhona followed her mother up the steps of the house. The first key
was the one to the front door. Her mother pushed it in and gave the lock
a turn. The wind howled behind them, but the door opened. A crack of light
gave them a brief look at the room beyond the door and a boom of thunder
from the sky sent them both across the threshold in a hurry to be inside no matter
how ominous and thick the blackness was inside the house.

Her mother closed the door against the rain. It pelted the closed door
rather like it was frustrated over not being able to soak them.

They would brighten everything with their determination...

Rhona forced a smile onto her lips and followed her mother
with hurried instructions.

It meant

to smile and

“But it is dark and ominous, Mother.” Rhona was ashamed of how fearful she sounded, but she just couldn’t help it.

“It is strong, and will shelter us from the storm!” Her mother offered another way to see their circumstances.

“But this is the borderland...are there not savages and witches?” Every forbidden thing Rhona had ever heard while hiding near the kitchen door just began to bubble right out of her.

“Listen, my precious daughter.” Rhona’s mother smoothed the hair back from her face with gentle hands. “This is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies. Our hearts will be brimming full of merriment. And before you know it, you will fall in love with a fine man here on the borderland, far, far away from those nobles who lust to own every last thing that they see. Here, we shall have a full life where there is enough for everyone. We will brighten everything with our determination to live well so that your father need not worry about us.”

After the long trip north with naught but fear chilling her heart, Rhona was happy to see the light of hope shimmering in her mother’s eyes. Her mother shook the keys, so they jingled. It was a happy sound, for the most precious things in every house were always locked away and the ring of keys was always on the belt of the most senior staff member.

Now the keys were in her mother’s hand.

Rhona followed her mother up the steps of the house. The first key would be the one to the front door. Her mother pushed it in and gave the lock a turn. The wind howled behind them, but the door opened. A crack of lightning gave them a brief look at the room beyond the door and a boom of thunder sent them both across the threshold in a hurry to be inside no matter how ominous and thick the blackness was inside the house.

Her mother closed the door against the rain. It pelted the closed shutters, rather like it was frustrated over not being able to soak them.

They would brighten everything with their determination...

Rhona forced a smile onto her lips and followed her mother’s instructions.



In a Blink of an Eye...a Child is Grown... the Season has Passed...

“**W**HAT WILL YOU do now?” Norla asked.

Rhona looked over at her friend. Norla had blue eyes which reminded her of a summer sky.

Brighten your day with cheerful thoughts...

Rhona knew the words for she lived by them, even if some days she lived by them more than others.

But Norla was waiting for a response to her question. Rhona pulled her gaze away from the newly disturbed earth where her mother had been at rest. The men who had come up from the village to help dig the grave pulled their hats back on now that the prayers were finished. It was their work, so Rhona filled a small basket with some of the food that the villagers had brought with them and offered it to the men in exchange for their €

“You really don’t have to worry,” Norla said. “You have a fine dowry which will make a good dowry.”

Norla looked up the way to where Samuel Birkins was standing in front of the house. He was rubbing his hands together like a child anticipating a treat. Rhona wanted to feel something kind toward him, but the truth was she didn’t want to wed him.

And Samuel appeared more enamored with the house than her.

“I don’t have to get married,” Rhona muttered.

Norla shrugged. “Everyone gets married.” She thought for a moment and didn’t know anyone who didn’t get married at least one time.”

“Rhona has been promised to the Church.”

Both girls turned to see the priest. He stood near them, his hands tucked beneath his chasuble. There was a satisfied smile on his lips, and he looked at Rhona very much in the same way that Samuel looked at the house.

“Your mother refused to honor your father’s wish that you take the

He glanced over at the new grave, his insinuation clear.

There was a hint of tightness in her throat, but Rhona swallowed it.

“It was Lady Wilmiton who wanted me to take the veil,” Rhona said the day they’d been put out of her father’s house.

and “I am pleased you remember,” the priest said. “It is time for you to take your place.”

Samuel Birkins had walked toward them. “What’s this?”

The priest turned to look at him. “Rhona has been promised to the Church. This house will pass—along with her—into service of the Church.”

Rhona felt as though she was being strangled. Drawing breath felt impossible. But she had to protest. She had only herself now.

“I am sorry Father, but I have no calling to take the holy veil.” The priest came out in a tone that was far from confident. She gulped down some air in an attempt to steady herself.

The priest still had a smile on his lips but the look in his eyes was cold. “To serve the Church is your path to redemption. Your parents’ sins are accounted for.”

“Those aren’t her sins,” Norla argued. “Rhona is a kind, good soul.”

“Right,” Samuel added his opinion to the debate. “Rhona can make a good wife and mother. We will take the Sacrament of Marriage and our family with respect for the holy scriptures.”

“Without a dowry or the house and land?” the priest asked pointedly.

Samuel’s complexion darkened. “The house was her mother’s. I have indeed myself. It had the seal on it. Right and proper.”

The priest withdrew another document, and he opened it to show the seal. Samuel leaned forward to inspect it. A few other men had joined them.

“The young Lord Wilmiton has reached his maturity. He has decided to honor his mother’s wish to see Rhona take the holy veil as a Bride of Christ.”

“You mean he’s decided to save himself from having to give a portion of his estate to a half-sister,” Samuel argued.

“He would not be the first to take that path,” Clement, the assistant mayor, mumbled. He was a literate man of learning. He leaned to look at the document once more, pursing his lips together while he scrutinized it.

“Come now.” Samuel’s tone changed in an effort to persuade the young man. “This house is all the way up here in the marshes. It was for sale for a

before Rhona and her mother came. It's only useful to those of us who
are here."

He recalled "Its placement will help the Church to establish a presence here.
The priest looked at the hills behind the stone house. "The bonfires and wind
will at last be tamed with a holy presence, like a beacon of light."

The priest's tone was full of zeal. Rhona lost the battle to maintain
composure. Suddenly she was once more a half-grown child being
thrown into the cold. Only this time, it was far worse, for she was going to be
thrown into a cold cell at a convent.

Samuel gave her a last look before he turned and walked away, his
face clearly heavy. Clement reached to pat him on the shoulder as he followed
her words. Neither of them looked back at her.

"You will be joined by the other sisters soon," the priest informed
her. "I will return to hear your vows and see you cut your hair."

It was cold.
She must be

"
Worry me.
and raise

Samuel

saw the

another
him.
He decided to
follow Christ."
He picked up any

He took it to the
kitchen at the

the priest.
the decade

before Rhona and her mother came. It's only useful to those of us who live here."

"Its placement will help the Church to establish a presence here..." The priest looked at the hills behind the stone house. "The bonfires and witchery will at last be tamed with a holy presence, like a beacon of light."

The priest's tone was full of zeal. Rhona lost the battle to maintain her composure. Suddenly she was once more a half-grown child being put out into the cold. Only this time, it was far worse, for she was going to be stuffed into a cold cell at a convent.

Samuel gave her a last look before he turned and walked away, his feet clearly heavy. Clement reached to pat him on the shoulder as he followed.

Neither of them looked back at her.

"You will be joined by the other sisters soon," the priest informed her. "I will return to hear your vows and see you cut your hair."



By the Moon's Light, New Beginnings

“THIS IS A land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and to the song of fairies. Our hearts will be brimming full of merrime before you know it, you will fall in love with a fine man here borderland...”

Rhona awoke to her mother's voice.

She sat up, looking around the chamber but there was no one the small tin lantern hung by the door still had a candle flickering inside. The light scattered across the floor in a hundred crescent moons of light, beating back the pitch-blackness of night.

Fall in love?

How was she to accomplish that with the Church coming to claim her? The window shutters rattled again.

Harder.

Rhona looked toward them before she climbed from the bed. A moment was better than sitting in her rumpled bedding feeling defeated.

Far better to look for a sign of hope, even in the rattling of window shutters.

The floor was cool against her bare feet now. Autumn was in the air as the shutters were being moved by the cooler air that was coming down from the north to push the warm air of summer away. But she liked the idea of the shutters rattling because her mother was speaking to her.

She lifted the little bar of wood that held the twin sides of shutters together. They opened wide and a gust of wind blew in. She laughed and leaned against the window; the moon was almost full. Its brightness was like the smile of her treasured friend's face.

And in the distance, there was a flicker of light.

Rhona gasped.

It wasn't the sort of gasp one made when they were frightened. It

was the sound of excitement. The dread that had twisted her during slumber melted beneath the rush of anticipation flooding her as surely as the bank of a river eroded during a spring snowmelt.

Stir

Someone was up in the pasture.

The light danced and the wind moved the clouds so that more starlight shone down to illuminate the spot.

She saw him.

d listen Cast in the silver light of the stars, there was an unmistakable outline. A man in a kilt. The strangest sensation took over her, as though the man had reached out and touched her, igniting a trail of chaff inside

The flame caught in an instant, flaring up like a tinder bowl did after struck a flint stone above it. For a moment, everything was bright and clear. She was just waiting for her to hold a wick over the flames. But what caught her attention was something inside of her. She'd never realized there was darkness deep within her, but now, there was a new flame, even if she didn't know what it intended for.

You are desperate...

Her little inner voice was not wrong.

Rhona sat back on her haunches and tried to rekindle the excitement that had made her open the window shutters, but reality had arrived to extinguish her hopes. The wind blew and the clouds covered the sky, darkening the area where the man had stood.

Window Like the light had been pinched out.

Suddenly, the wind blew again, hard, and the shutters slammed against her face. Rhona ended up on her backside in the middle of the floor. The room was pitch black and far colder than she'd noticed before. Sitting up in the middle of the shift, she felt exposed and vulnerable.

Your mother never gave up...

Her inner voice was reprimanding her, but Rhona liked what it said and thought back to the night they'd arrived at the house and her mother's smile on a "This is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies."

Rhona felt her self-confidence strengthening. She grabbed her stockings and shoes before reaching for her simple wardrobe, which consisted of long, simple garments that closed at the waist to make her a dress. And then the first thing she grabbed was a length of wool she used as a shawl. She wrapped

ing her over her head once before crisscrossing it across her chest and using the single button at its tip to close it behind her back.

She was not afraid of the night, especially under a full moon, and she was going to find out who else found it a silvery place of wonder and delight. She was of the

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Sometimes, Duty Places You Where You Meant to Be...

“**I** TOLD YE that she saw the lantern.”

Hamish glared at Peadair. “Now what are we going to do?”

Peadair offered his friend a shrug. Hamish opened his hands.

“She’s on her way up here!” Hamish exclaimed.

“It is but one wee little lass,” Peadair tried to shame his friend by settling down. “Hardly a threat. Are ye no’ just a bit impressed with that she’s not afraid of the night? I am.”

Hamish grunted. “Are ye daft? We have a well to dig. The Chief wishes clear. Dig this well and make sure no one sees us doing it.”

“Aye, I remember what he said,” Peadair muttered. “And we’re the dead of night to keep our word.”

Hamish pointed at Rhona. “She is not going to help us keep this p secret.”

“I am still fascinated by her,” Peadair remarked. “She has courage for certain.”

“The only thing certain is that we will be getting no more work tonight,” Hamish said with disgust. He snorted before turning and grabbing his shovel from the ground. “Let’s go. We cannot be spreading rumors being a magical place if anyone sees us digging the well.”

“I suppose ye are correct.” Peadair picked up his own shovel.

Hamish didn’t wait for Peadair. The other man turned and began back into the forest. Peadair paused at the edge of the meadow, unable to resist the urge to see the girl from a little closer.



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“Aye, I remember what he said,” Peadair muttered. “And we’re here in the dead of night to keep our word.”

Hamish pointed at Rhona. “She is not going to help us keep this project a secret.”

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Curiosity Always Leads the Way to Adventure...and Danger...

RHONA KNEW THE upper meadow.

She knew it well from early springs spent enjoying the flowers long, cold winter. She also knew it from warm summer nights when the sun was bright, and her mother had made good on her promise to frolic and so Rhona's father saw them happy.

They had lived a good life. And the meadow was a treasured place. When the wind prickled her eyes, but Rhona smiled because the air was so warm. The sun shined and the clouds parted once more. She stopped, staring at something she had never seen before. Illuminated by the silvery light was a hole in the ground. Rhona expected to see the dirt piled nearby, yet there was no dirt. Only but the dried-out flowers.

Was it an illusion?

She hunkered down next to the edge of it, reaching out to touch the ground where the dried-out stalks of summer's plants were and the dark, cool earth. She felt the moistness on her fingertips, proving that it was not an illusion.

So the man had been real.

Rhona stood. The wind whipped her clothing around, flattening it against her body. She turned in a circle, looking at the edge of the forest.

And there he was.

Watching her.

That same jolt of sensation went through her like a bolt of lightning, cracking open the sky during a storm just as it had when she'd first come here. And inside, she felt as though she was just as turbulent as the thunderstorm.

She should dismiss it as illogical but returning to reality with its sharp edges wasn't appealing. So she continued to look at him while he

pounded hard, and the wind pressed the fabric of her clothing against her body again.

He was watching her, and she discovered it felt very different from the way other men had looked at her.

“Are ye not afraid of the darkness, lassie?” His voice was deep and resonant, well with the night.

“What is to fear?” She replied. “There is nothing here now that is not here in the light of day.”

“I am here,” he answered seriously. There was a soft crunch as he stepped out from the edge of the forest toward her. “I know ye saw me.”

Should she confess that she’d come just to meet him? Rhona pondered, doing precisely that.

“You will not harm me.” Rhona wasn’t sure where her confidence came from, only that she was firm in her thinking.

“Lassie, ye should not take such chances.” His voice had turned stern, a sound of warning. “Some men would take advantage of ye.”

“Not you.” Rhona decided to simply say what she felt.

He tilted his head to one side. “How can ye be certain of that?”

Rhona looked around the meadow. “This is a place I have always come to for merriment and adventure.” When she brought her attention back to him, it was to discover that he’d emerged from the edge of the thicket.

Her heart accelerated.

“My name is Rhona. Why are you digging a well at night?” she asked.

Rhona sounded nervous. No, that wasn’t quite the correct word. She pondered for a moment before she realized that she sounded like she was out of breath.

“It would be best for ye not to ask about it.”

Rhona offered him a soft sound of amusement. “You can hardly expect to have a well go unnoticed.”

He smiled in response. “Aye, well, as to that...ye are correct.”

“So why do you dig at night?” Rhona pressed him for an answer.

“My countrymen need the well, for we cross this land, as our ancestors have for centuries, and we need the English to stay away from here,” he answered her.

“What a clever idea,” Rhona remarked.

“The Chief and the woman who owns that house there.” He pointed

inst her down the meadow. “They have an understanding. She will tell one that the well just appeared and is enchanted.”

om the Rhona felt her joy dissipate. Reality came crashing down on her landslide. “My mother has died.”

l paired “Yer mother, lass?”

Rhona nodded. “We buried her today and the Church says my brother has promised the house—and me—to them. I am sorry, but you have to dig your well in another spot.”

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“Goodbye, lass.”

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A Scotsman Never Surrenders...

HAMISH GRUNTED AND grinned. “Well then, we can go home.”

The rest of the men smiled, clearly liking the way Hamish viewed the situation.

“The well is nae finished,” Peadair stated firmly.

Hamish turned a harsh look Peadair’s way. “Ye just said the well is dead and the house is passing into the holdings of the Church. The Church will not be allowing us to spread rumors of enchantments. Best to go home.”

“I do not intend to tell our Chief that we failed,” Peadair told them.

Hamish narrowed his eyes. “Well, I would like to know just how you are planning to deal with this matter.”

Peadair heard the frustration in Hamish’s tone. But he also recognized the challenge.

“I’ll think of something,” Peadair said.

Hamish mused his lips together. “Ye want to see that lass again.”

The rest of the men looked at Peadair, trying to decide if Hamish was correct.

“She is a fair lass.” Peadair decided not to deny it.

“Ye just said she is promised to the Church,” Hamish grumbled. He shook his head before he pointed at Peadair. “Ye’ll bring a curse upon ye with a trifle with a lass promised to the Church.”

“Well now...that is one way to get the rumors the Chief wanted going, is it nae?”

Around him, his men’s eyes widened. Peadair had intended to tell them, but what he felt was a lot more like shame. Rhona had trusted him, and it seemed a very poor way to repay her faith in him. In fact, the disappointing her bothered him a great deal.

The problem was, he wanted to see her again. So much so, that he

really care how he managed to do it. Just so long as she wasn't lost forever.

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Reality Knows No Mercy...

“**Y**OU ARE NOT the first to feel being given into the keeping of the hard to accept.”

The Mother Superior used a kind tone. What filled Rhona’s mouth with bitterness was the knowing look in the woman’s eyes.

She was speaking from experience.

“In time, you will be grateful someone thought to make certain you have a place,” the nun continued. “Many in this world do not enjoy difficult circumstances.”

The nun wore the simplest of clothing. Her wimple was worn and still serviceable. She sent Rhona a kind smile before she joined the other nuns walking into the house.

Rhona didn’t have to leave.

She looked at the house. It was her home. So she walked back into the house.

The nuns were quiet while they went about their work. The bundle of belongings taken up to the upper floor while someone started working in the kitchen. The scent of warm food began to fill the lower floor, striking Rhona with an unexpected softening toward the idea of living with the nuns as one of the numbers. Even hushed as the nuns were, they drove away the silence that had been lingering since her mother died.

A soft bell chimed. Rhona watched the nuns appear from where they had been, lining up before kneeling before a statue of the Holy Virgin which she had brought with them. Like them, it was a simple wooden crucifix. Serviceable and yet artfully crafted.

After making their obedience, they began to sing. The soft tones of their worship were lyrical and while not precisely cheerful, they did banish the shadows of the lingering shadows from the house.

When they finished, they filed past the mother superior on their way to the kitchen.

the supper table. Rhona stood still but the mother superior did not forgive.
“Come Child,” she said softly. “Break bread with your sisters.
your family now.”

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the supper table. Rhona stood still but the mother superior did not forget her.

“Come Child,” she said softly. “Break bread with your sisters. We are your family now.”



A Restless Spirit Finds Companionship the Night...

WOULD THE WELL be further along than it had been?

Rhona opened her eyes with the question on her mind. Even in the night, slumber refused to claim her. Instead, her mind churned. She heard the soft sounds of the other nuns who were in the room with her now.

She couldn't go to the window to open the shutters.

It seemed such a harsh restriction. Every window was shut tight the night now and Rhona was almost sure that she felt the house being

There was no rain tonight.

In fact, the moon would be full, with no clouds to cover it.

How could she lie in a dark room while there was bright moon frolic in? One of the nuns began to snore, proving that she was a thinking the room was stifling.

If the man was out digging the well, she would not be alone.

Just thinking of him made her heart start thumping harder. A sense of adventure came along with that acceleration of her heart. Her blood racing through her body, making climbing out from beneath her bed a trouble at all.

She took her shoes with her to the door and set off down the steps. The kitchen door was the easiest to open and the hinges didn't even squeak.

It was worth the effort.

Outside, as she'd known it would be, the moon was full. Bright light filled the air in a unique way so that the night delighted the senses. There was enough light to see and yet, not enough to overpower her other senses.

She heard the crickets and the sound of an owl. There was the crunch of dried leaves beneath her feet and the crunching of dry stalks. Each season had its own sounds and scents. Now she smelled the musty scent of old and dried-out seed pods. The pinecones were brown, and the oak trees

dropped their acorns.

In another week it would be Samhain, the beginning of the darker the year. The hills would be dotted with bonfires to celebrate the end of the harvest.

in

Will it mark the beginning of your life as a nun?

Rhona walked faster, trying to outrun her own thoughts. The difficulty was the fact that the nuns had improved the feeling inside the house and that made it impossible to reject the idea of joining them.

It was a quandary.

One she didn't want to try to solve.

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ard the
So she climbed up to the meadow, smiling when she found the cover the spot where the well was being dug. Now there was the scent of
Kneeling down, Rhona struggled to move the thick logs covering the hole.

against
stifled. "Are ye going to make me worry about ye falling in, lass?"

Rhona gasped. She started to jump forward, heading right into the strong arm caught her around the waist and lifted her up and away from the well.

He spun her loose but stood between her and the well.

light to
lone in "You startled me." Rhona defended herself.

He grunted. "Ye know it is a well."

She did, and it was beginning to fill with water. She could smell it. He rubbed her waist while she tried to get her mind to start working. It seemed though the concept of speaking had just become impossible for her.

id went
ding no "Did I hurt ye, lass?" he asked.

Rhona shook her head. But he looked at her, rubbing her waist, forced herself to stop.

ps. The "It...tingles...where we touched," she muttered.

His lips twitched, and then his lips parted in a wide smile. "Is it
lass?"

ht light
ere was His tone was warm and hinted at something she didn't quite understand. Some forbidden thing that she was insanely curious to discover more about.

And she liked it. For there was a sensation brewing inside her that she wanted to encourage him to continue to smile at her.

unch of
son had "It is," she confirmed.

l leaves
ees had She heard him draw in a breath almost as though she'd impressed. That sensation inside of her heated up some more, approaching the

point.

half of “Ye are toying with me, lass,” he admonished her.

l of the Rhona shook her head. “I am speaking truthfully, sir...Um...What name?”

He crossed his arms over his chest indecisively. “It might be best he realnae tell ye who I am, lass.”

of her “Oh, did you see the nuns arrive today?” Rhona asked. Her vanished as quickly as a bunny darting into the thicket at the sight of a predator, leaving her feeling at the mercy of her circumstances. “Do you feel I should accept my half-brother’s decree to take the veil?”

er over Speaking the words out loud made her miserable. “They have claimed the waterhouse and every last item inside right down to the grain in the storehouse. Rhona continued. “The priest says I must atone for my parents’ sins.”

He snorted. “Ye can live yer own life.” It helped banish the helplessness that had been tightening around her. Rhona looked up at him, but she found no solace. Frustrated.

n it. “You shouldn’t offer me solace,” she rebuked. “Not when you refuse to tell me your name.” She was being emotional.

Rhona drew in a deep breath. “It’s my fault, coming up here without an invitation from you.” She tipped her head back, looking up at the moon. “My mother and I had happy times here. I wanted to bid them farewell.”

med as His warning wasn’t misplaced. It had been a long time, but she recalled the whispers in the kitchens of the Wilmiton house. Tales of families who had been attacked because they strayed from the protection of the forest. She families.

It was time to run back to her burrow before she was plucked from the meadow by a hungry owl.

that so, Rhona turned then to start back down the meadow.

But he caught her wrist.

erstand. This time, she gasped. The connection between their flesh did more than tingle. A ripple of intensity went up her arm and through her body. It felt as though she’d only been half-awake for her entire life because now, she was so aware of him that the contact was like the difference between night and day.

ed him. Except the darkness around them seemed to suit the strange serenity boiling inside of her far better than sunlight would have. There

whisper in the wind, teasing her with a promise of more delight should he allow him to pull her back toward him.

“My name is Peadair. I should let ye go back to a safe life, but tis not my will. I do nae want to.”

The wind gusted.

All around them, the trees swayed, their limbs rustling like some distant applause.

Was her mother speaking to her? Or was it the evil spirits of the forest also trying to encourage her to stray into their clutches?

“What do you want to do, Peadair?” Rhona shouldn’t have asked the question and yet, she was certain it would torment her for the rest of her life, if she didn’t find the courage to speak.

“I want to tempt ye to kiss me beneath the moonlight, lass,” he murmured. “But that is a selfish thing since ye are to take the veil.”

The wind blew again. This time it came from behind her. The fabric of her skirts billowed toward him.

Did he tug her towards him?

Or did the wind push her?

Rhona didn’t care. He enfolded her in his embrace and lifted her chin. “My heart might press that promised kiss against her lips. There was no thought of reaction. She couldn’t ever have imagined how intense the kiss would be.”

Her belly twisted and her head felt light. There in the place where she had lived her happiest times, Rhona discovered there were in fact greater joys for her to experience. A far deeper form of companionship.

But the wind gusted again. This time a branch in the forest cracked from the fall. The sound startled them both. Peadair broke away from her, pushing her behind him while he faced the threat head-on.

When nothing materialized from the edge of the forest, he relaxed.

“I suppose the wind has the right idea...interrupting us,” Peadair murmured more than when he turned back to face her.

Rhona didn’t know what came next, only that she’d lost all will to fight. So yes, it was wise that the wind had interceded.

He reached out and smoothed some hair back from her face. “Go to your bed, lass.”

“But—”

Peadair pressed his thumb over her lips. “Ye tempt me almost beyond—”

uld shed discipline Rhona. And the way ye kissed me back tells me ye feel the s
She did.

ne truth Even so, Rhona stepped away from him. It felt as though she ripped
skin off in doing it too. The wind blew again, this time full on her from
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discipline Rhona. And the way ye kissed me back tells me ye feel the same.”

She did.

Even so, Rhona stepped away from him. It felt as though she ripped her skin off in doing it too. The wind blew again, this time full on her front, as if to tell her to go now.

So she went but the moment would live inside her heart for the rest of her life. What bothered her about that was knowing that taking the veil would mean pledging herself to no more adventures. No moonlight dances. No kisses. She wasn't sure she could do it.

But reality wasn't going to allow her to refuse.



Honor is a Gift a Man gives to Himself

“SHE’S A FAIR lassie...” Hamish was trying to tread lightly with his words. But Peadair knew his clansman had witnessed him kissing Rhona. “I should have thought of the lass’s reputation.” Peadair decided to atone for his own crime.

“Aye, that’s what I was getting at.” Hamish was quick to agree. He lives in a small village. No man wants a wife who is known to be away her kisses to others.” Hamish squirmed. “And seeing as how I’ve promised to the Church...ye cannae be wedding her yerself.”

Hamish shook his head. He reached out and patted Peadair’s shoulder. Clearly, his friend thought the matter finished.

He just wished he could resign himself to never seeing Rhona again. But he could not.



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At the Cross Roads of Life...There is No Perfect Choice...

FATHER ISSAC RETURNED in the morning.

He was clearly pleased with the changes the nuns had made in the house. He took a long time inspecting the tiny chapel they had made of the former sitting room.

“Excellent.” The priest spoke after a silent prayer. “Here, you shall do the work of the Church. So close to the border, fleece can be gathered. Your sisters will card, spin, and knit during the winter, and work the fields in the spring and summer.”

The mother superior had her hands tucked beneath the long tabard she was worn over her underrobe. She stood silently, listening attentively.

Father Issac finished. He paused for a moment before he caught Rhona's eye. There was a look of satisfaction in his gaze that made Rhona feel guilty about resenting him. There were a full dozen nuns in the house and there was plenty of room for twice that number. Wasn't it selfish to want to keep it all for herself?

“Your name will be Sister Rebekah, in remembrance of the fact that you honor the call to service that was sent to you.”

Father Issac looked at the floor in front of him. When Rhona continued to stand, he cleared his throat and looked at the floor once more.

“Kneel,” Mother Superior whispered.

“I cannot take a vow I do not feel a passion for,” Rhona objected. She tried to temper her tone but there was still a hint of rebellion in her words.

“Just as with marriage, passion grows after the ceremony,” Father Issac instructed her. He locked gazes with her and this time he pointed at the floor in front of him.

“As you serve, your devotion will yield contentment,” Mother Superior said.

added.

Such an act would benefit more than just herself. Rhona tried to taste the supper she'd shared with the other nuns and the feeling of family she noticed.

Family was so great a blessing, one she longed for.

But there was a price...

She would never be free to feel Peadair's kiss again.

Rhona shook her head, earning a frown from the priest. "If that choice, you should not share in the warmth of this house. You shall not be out."

"The girl should be granted time to adjust," Mother Superior suggested.

Father Issac didn't agree. His eyes narrowed and a pinched look appeared around his mouth. "She shall not join in Communion with the members of this house who have all pledged their lives to the service of the Church. It is not easily done at the table with them would be to belittle the faith they have in taking their own vows."

Several of the nuns had gathered. They began to point at the spot where the priest, silently urging her to bend to his demand.

Yet her knees felt as solid as the oak trees surrounding the meadow. "There is a small work shed at the top of the meadow." Mother Superior's voice was compassionate. "There is no hearth for warmth or light in this structure will afford her a view of the house and all that might be hidden from her sight as she bends. We shall have the comfort of knowing we have followed the Lord's example of not forgetting to bring the straying sheep back into the fold."

Father Issac wasn't content with the idea. But he swallowed his rage and nodded. "Send her to the shed. Nothing in this house is to be spared for her comfort. If she is to have bread, she must trade linen fiber or carded wool for it. There shall be neither conversation nor kind expressions, for such things are reserved for the members of this house." Father Issac sent Rhona a stern look of disapproval. "Only after you bend shall you earn mercy."

Father Issac

on the floor

Mother Superior

added.

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But there was a price...

She would never be free to feel Peadair's kiss again.

Rhona shook her head, earning a frown from the priest. "If that is your choice, you should not share in the warmth of this house. You shall be put out."

"The girl should be granted time to adjust," Mother Superior suggested.

Father Issac didn't agree. His eyes narrowed and a pinched look appeared around his mouth. "She shall not join in Communion with the members of this house who have all pledged their lives to the service of the Church. To sit at the table with them would be to belittle the faith they have in taking their own vows."

Several of the nuns had gathered. They began to point at the spot in front of the priest, silently urging her to bend to his demand.

Yet her knees felt as solid as the oak trees surrounding the meadow.

"There is a small work shed at the top of the meadow." Mother Superior's voice was compassionate. "There is no hearth for warmth or light. The structure will afford her a view of the house and all that might be hers once she bends. We shall have the comfort of knowing we have followed our Lord's example of not forgetting to bring the straying sheep back into the fold."

Father Issac wasn't content with the idea. But he swallowed his response and nodded. "Send her to the shed. Nothing in this house is to be spared for her comfort. If she is to have bread, she must trade linen fiber or carded wool for it. There shall be neither conversation nor kind expressions, for those things are reserved for the members of this house." Father Issac sent Rhona a stern look of disapproval. "Only after you bend shall you earn mercy."



Longing Makes the Heart Feel Empty

THE NIGHT HAD always held such magic before.

Rhona longed to bask beneath the stars but by each day's end, she fell into an exhausted slumber. In keeping with the decree of Father Issac, she had to produce something of value or suffer starvation.

She'd never realized how long a week could last.

The weather didn't offer her any cheer either. Dark clouds crowded the sky, peppering the little shed with cold rain. Beyond the threshold of the shelter was a sea of mud that swallowed up the summer months, transforming it into a bog.

A second week crawled by, and Rhona found herself looking toward the house with a hunger she feared would transform into a longing. Being a nun suited her not at all.

Does taking the veil suit you?

Her inner voice wanted to help her persevere, but the truth was, she was bending. It wasn't the endless work that made her think of kneeling before Father Issac; it was the solitude.

"I did not want to be a nun either."

Rhona looked up from carding wool. The Mother Superior was standing in the doorway of the little shed. She smiled warmly at Rhona.

"You think it a harsh life," Mother Superior continued. She withdrew a bundle from beneath her tabard. "Yet there are others which offer more comforts or dignity."

She placed a bundle on the window ledge.

"Come back to the house, Child. I do not wish to know our next comfort comes from your suffering."

Rhona tightened her grip on the handles of the carding paddles. The Mother Superior was watching her.

"Is there a man in your heart?" Mother asked. "If so...where is he?"

Rhona longed to know where Peadair was as well.
She'd tested him. Was that the reason for his absence?
He owed her nothing.

♦♦♦ "So that is what stands between you and taking vows." Mother S
read the expression on Rhona's face correctly. She tucked her hand
beneath her tabard while she contemplated Rhona. "I will see you next
Child, if you do not come to me first."

The nun was gone as silently as she had appeared. It wasn't until
she fell noticed the sound of the rain hitting the thatch on the roof that she r
ac, she how solitary her life was now.

But she still didn't want to take vows she wasn't sincere in taking.

You won't be the first to make do with what you can get...

ded the Her inner voice was correct, but it frustrated her. So she began to j
of her paddles again to straighten out the fibers of wool. Swish-swish. Ba
eadow, forth. Simple, repetitive work. She didn't loathe it, but she wasn't r
give up on there being some moments of excitement in her life as well.

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Not when she was thinking about doing something that would last
rest of her life.

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You won't be the first to make do with what you can get...

Her inner voice was correct, but it frustrated her. So she began to pull the paddles again to straighten out the fibers of wool. Swish-swish. Back and forth. Simple, repetitive work. She didn't loathe it, but she wasn't ready to give up on there being some moments of excitement in her life as well.

Like Peadair's kiss.

Two weeks really wasn't all that long.

Not when she was thinking about doing something that would last for the rest of her life.



When Fate and Whimsy Combine...

SAMHAIN WAS THE day when the veil between the living and the dead was at its thinnest.

Such was a pagan belief and Father Issac would disapprove for it. Well, he already found little about her to praise.

Rhona awoke in the middle of the night. It was a sudden ending of a slumber, like an interruption. She blinked, trying to decide if she'd heard something, or if it was just her longing for company.

Whatever the cause, she was wide awake. So much so, that she felt something was waiting for her outside the little shed. Wishful thinking aside, Rhona crawled out from beneath the bed she'd made of her surplus and listened for a moment but couldn't detect any sound of rain. So she opened the door, just a tiny amount.

She gasped at the sight in front of her. The sky, which had been covered in dark clouds, was suddenly free of them. It was nearly magical, for the stars were bright and the crescent moon looked like a smile waiting for anyone willing to venture out into the night.

And there in the middle of the meadow, was the well.

Its smooth stone exterior stood there where it had not been the last time Rhona looked out of the door. A thick branch had grown over it with ivy was wound onto it.

And there were candles. At least a dozen of them were set around the well. Their wicks were lit, and the yellow flames danced in the night breeze. Peadair was there too.

He stood tall and perfect, just the way she remembered him. The candles illuminated his face, showing her that he was looking at her.

The wind blew from behind her like it was urging her up the hill to the well and where Peadair stood.

Rhona didn't intend to argue. She'd never felt so confident, never

to walk somewhere more in her life. Never really understood th
destiny until that very moment for she felt as though things beyond the
world were urging her along.

She didn't know what awaited her, but she knew it was the only
walk. By the time she made it to him, she was breathless, but she l
wasn't the walk that had taxed her. Her heart was hammering l
somehow, Peadair was her future.

was at "We have finished the well, lass," he muttered when she'd reach
"It is time for us to go home."

certain. Her breath caught. The idea of him leaving made it feel like her he
being torn in half.

of her He lifted his hand, offering it palm up. "Will ye wed me, lass?
d heard away with me with no more than my promise that ye shall have a good

Rhona was already placing her hand into his before he finished
felt like She blinked in surprise when she heard him, though. "Wed?"

or not, Peadair tilted his head to one side. "Aye. I would not care to cu
at. She well by behaving dishonorably and stealing ye away without marrying

opened "You have stolen my heart," Rhona declared.

There was a chuckle from behind Peadair.

covered Or maybe it was Peadair who rumbled with amusement. Fr
he stars darkness beyond the circle of light the lanterns cast, men moved f
o greet They made a half circle behind Peadair.

"Do ye mind, lass?" Peadair asked. "Will it bother ye that ye v
respect yer father's wishes for ye to take the veil?"

ist time Rhona shook her head. "My mother promised me that someday I
t a rope fall in love. My father gave us this house to live in, happily. It was his
who decreed I should take the veil, and later my half-brother out of sp
he new greed."

reeze. Rhona discovered she was holding her breath by the time she fi

There was a tension in the air, even if she didn't quite know the caus
ght, the Peadair smiled at her before he turned his head to look across the new
something still concealed within the darkness.

where A shadow shifted and formed into a man. He moved forward, hi
tucked into the wide sleeves of his religious robe. He looked for a lo
wanted at Rhona. She stared straight back, for she'd spoken truthfully.

"I will wed you," the priest stated firmly.

e word The men behind Peadair nodded and made sounds of approval.

mortal But Rhona made a small sound of protest. Peadair's grip tightened her fingers. As long as she lived, she knew she would recall the path to squeeze, for it was an impulse and something that couldn't be faked.

knew it He longed for her, just as much as she wanted their union.

because Like they were two parts of a whole.

ed him. so, you cannot take a holy sacrament.”

art was “I do not have a dowry,” Rhona muttered, fighting back the urge. “My house has been given to the Church. Even this clothing I wear has been given to them.”

’ Come “If the dowry has been given, you should take the veil,” Father declared.

asking. The pain Rhona had felt before was nothing compared to the agony that stabbed through her at that moment. She clasped Peadair's hand and earned a reassuring squeeze in return.

.” “As to that, Father, what has value to me is this well,” Peadair said. “We can keep the English away from it, that is dowry enough. I have your blessing from me Chief.”

om the “You do?” Rhona asked.

orward. Peadair returned his gaze to hers. “Aye, lass. I would not dishonor you with anything less. I half-feared ye'd not be waiting for me, but I will not return home to speak directly to me Chief before returning with a bride for you.”

Rhona felt her cheeks warming. Even in the dim light, Peadair's eyes would shift to her face, making it clear that he saw the blush.

widow “Is there a witness to this agreement?” the priest asked.

oite and Hamish cleared his throat. “Aye.”

The priest nodded. He turned back to Rhona and Peadair and lifted his hands out from beneath his chasuble to begin the ceremony.

se of it. The wind blew around them, teasing her ankles while the priest spoke the words that would bind them together. The concept of unity suddenly blossomed into something altogether more encompassing than Rhona had ever understood before. It was beyond her imagination, and she happily gave herself completely to it.

Now and forever.

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And the End is, in Fact, a Beginning..

FATHER ISSAC HUFFED and puffed on his way up from the house. The circle of nuns heard him groan before he managed to meet them.

“Yes?” Father Issac muttered in an irritated tone. “Has the girl last? Bring her down to take her vows.”

“Look at the well, Father.”

The voice was so meek that Father Issac wasn’t certain which one of the nuns spoke. Not that it mattered. He cleared his throat and took a few steps toward the well.

“I do not recall a well being here,” Father Issac muttered.

“It was not there yesterday,” a nun insisted with wide eyes.

The rest of the sisters shook their heads to confirm that they had not seen the well before.

Father Issac cleared his throat. “A well...does not appear overnight.”

“Unless it’s enchanted.”

Father Issac turned his head to see Norla standing at the edge of the forest thicket. Samuel and Clement had come with her. All three of them were standing at the edge of the forest, not even a toe in the meadow.

“There are stories Father,” Samuel began. “Tales of this meadow being enchanted.”

“Aye,” Clement added. “That’s why the house could never be so close if one wanted to risk their little ones being lured away by the Fae folk.”

“This is why the Church needs to have a presence here,” Father Issac declared. “It is time for these tales to stop being repeated.”

“They have taken the girl,” Clement said. His old voice crackled with many years to count, lending credence to his words. He pointed a finger at the well.

Father Issac turned and squinted.

There on the edge of the well sat Rhona’s clothing. On top of the

head wreath of autumn leaves. all scarlet and gold, along with a barle
bridal crown, the stems carefully crafted into a headpiece that dated
back in time than anyone recalled. It was the traditional—although p
adornment for an autumn bride.

♦♦ “Do you think she drank from the well at midnight?” Norla ask
husked tone. “She must have seen the face of her groom.”

“If she drank the water, the Fae would think it a binding commi
ne littleClement answered.

“Such a sweet, tender lass,” Samuel muttered. “Little wonder s
bent atenchanted by the well...left in a cold, dark shed by herself.”

Father Issac made the sign of the cross over his chest. His com
had turned pasty.

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“Do nae be too hard on yourself, Father,” Clement spoke up. “Th
mother often danced upon the green beneath the moonlight.”

“The cloister’s life would have saved her,” Father Issac muttered
not seenshake of his head. “It is too late now.”

Everyone was silent for a long moment. A gust of wind howle
t.” from the north, bringing the bite of winter.

“Return to your prayers,” Father Issac instructed the nuns.

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“Leave the clothing,” Father Issac decreed. “It is like the thirty pi
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enough to use it.”

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gnarledheaded back for the house.

m lay a

head wreath of autumn leaves. all scarlet and gold, along with a barley stalk bridal crown, the stems carefully crafted into a headpiece that dated further back in time than anyone recalled. It was the traditional—although pagan—adornment for an autumn bride.

“Do you think she drank from the well at midnight?” Norla asked in a husked tone. “She must have seen the face of her groom.”

“If she drank the water, the Fae would think it a binding commitment,” Clement answered.

“Such a sweet, tender lass,” Samuel muttered. “Little wonder she was enchanted by the well...left in a cold, dark shed by herself.”

Father Issac made the sign of the cross over his chest. His complexion had turned pasty.

“I only intended to have the girl see the blessing of joining the cloister,” the priest defended himself. “I wouldn’t have left her there much longer.”

“Do nae be too hard on yourself, Father,” Clement spoke up. “The girl’s mother often danced upon the green beneath the moonlight.”

“The cloister’s life would have saved her,” Father Issac muttered with a shake of his head. “It is too late now.”

Everyone was silent for a long moment. A gust of wind howled down from the north, bringing the bite of winter.

“Return to your prayers,” Father Issac instructed the nuns.

One of their numbers started toward the clothing. Norla drew a huge gasp. Her eyes were wide with alarm when the nun and Father Issac looked toward her.

“Are you not worried the enchantment will spread to you?” Norla asked in a hushed tone.

The nun jumped back and hid her hands beneath her tabard.

“Leave the clothing,” Father Issac decreed. “It is like the thirty pieces of silver paid to betray Christ...it will only bring a curse to anyone foolish enough to use it.”

He muttered a soft prayer and made another sign of the cross before he headed back for the house.



When, at Last, a Prophecy Comes to Pass

“**D**ID YE DANCE upon the green in the moonlight lass?” Peadair asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

Rhona was busy dressing, but she flashed him a smile that was full of joy. She was nearly bursting because she was so happy.

“The night we arrived here, it was cold and dark. I was a child, so frightened. This is what my mother said to me...” Rhona reached out and took his hands in hers.

“This is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies. Our hearts will be brimming full of merriment. And before you know it, you will fall in love with a fine man here in the borderland.”

Peadair threw his head back and laughed. When he lowered his eyes, they were sparkling. She wanted to remember that look, for it was there in his eyes. One she was eager to begin.

“Come lass, it’s time to go home where I shall remain happily ever after by ye forever.”

Peadair clasped her hand and turned so that he was facing her. She began to walk, and Rhona followed him without looking back.

Do you see me, Mother? I shall be so very happy...so you do not worry.

The End



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“This is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies. Our hearts will be brimming full of merriment. And before you know it, you will fall in love with a fine man here on the borderland.”

Peadair threw his head back and laughed. When he lowered his chin, his eyes were sparkling. She wanted to remember that look, for it was her future there in his eyes. One she was eager to begin.

“Come lass, it’s time to go home where I shall remain happily enchanted by ye forever.”

Peadair clasped her hand and turned so that he was facing north. He began to walk, and Rhona followed him without looking back.

Do you see me, Mother? I shall be so very happy...so you do not need to worry.

The End

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Mary Wine

The Enchanted Well Series

Once Upon an Enchanted Well (Novella)

Highland Rogues Series

[The Highlander's Demand \(Book 1\)](#)

[The Highlander's Destiny \(Book 2\)](#)

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About Mary Wine

Mary Wine has written over twenty novels that take her readers from pages of history to the far reaches of space. Recent winner of a 2008 Award for erotic western romance, her book LET ME LOVE YOU was quoted "Not to be missed..." by Lora Leigh, New York Times best author.

When she's not abusing a laptop, she spends time with her sewing machines...all of them! Making historical garments is her second passion. From corsets and knickers to court dresses of Elizabeth I, the most expensive clothes she owns are hundreds of years out of date. She's also an avid student of martial arts, having earned the rank of second degree black belt.

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Once Upon a Haunted Haven

Lexi Post

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Inspired by William Wordsworth's poem "She was a Phantom of Del

Inspired by William Wordsworth's poem "She was a Phantom of Delight."



Chapter One

*Northampton
September, 1817*

HIS WARM HANDS covered her shoulders from behind as he nuzzled her. Letting her head fall back against his shoulder, Lady Juliet Hast Abercorn shivered with anticipation. She knew his hands, his lips, his touch, and soon he would take her to the stars. Her light shift was too much for her heated body and she itched to have it off, to feel him touch her, kiss her in places that made her feel alive.

Even at the thought, her shift was gone and she faced him, her bare nakedness touching hers. He pulled her tight against him as his mouth pressed against hers in a kiss that made her bare toes curl. She felt loved, beautiful, and worthy all at once. His kiss moved from her lips to her neck and lower back. She held her breath to what she knew came next. His mouth—

A sharp bump to her temple woke her as her head banged against the interior of the coach. Blinking, it took her a moment to recognize her surroundings. The usual wave of cold after the dream flowed over her, making her pull her cloak tightly about her. With no one in the coach, there was no need to worry, but she did. He had followed her!

Pushing aside the curtain over the window, she looked out at a tree-lined road lit by the coach lanterns in the night. When she'd left Thorndale Manor, she'd assured herself the dreams would stop, but if anything they were more real, as if she were in a waking dream. It was far too unsettling, too intimate to confide to anyone.

She let the curtain fall. The dreams had been her only solace after her husband died. It had been barely half a day before his brother had descended upon Thorndale Manor and made it clear she must leave. He cared nothing for her; she had no family left and nowhere to go, or rather almost nowhere. Only her clothes, a few books, some private items, and her horse, she

take up residence in her only inheritance, a haunted cottage.

She shivered at the thought of her dire straits. The home had been down from her great-aunt, to her grandmother, then to her mother, and in the past two generations having ever dared venture to it. She'd been to of the haunting since a young child. And now, with no servants and a basket of food, she was about to be the first to spend a night at Bra Cottage in generations.

She'd sent a letter to the caretaker, not knowing exactly when she'd be arriving, having postponed her departure as long as possible. She hoped Kingman had at least thought to set wood for a fire and maybe a lantern for her neck.

The coach slowed. Moving aside the curtain again, she found things barely discernable. Were they being robbed? She held her breath as the coach came to a halt. She jumped when the door opened, but it was only for her coachman, or rather the man who used to be her coachman.

"Why are we stopping?" Her voice barely made a dent in the silence of the night.

"We have arrived, my lady." The coachman held out his hand to help her to descend.

Beyond his figure was nothing but darkness. No owl hooted nor crow cawed, as if they knew better than to disturb the air with their sound. She swallowed hard, gathering her courage. Finally, she took his hand and sidestepped to the ground.

Before her were only thick woods, and she frowned.

"This way, my lady." Holding a lantern with one hand, he held the other out toward the front of the coach.

Picking up the skirts of her black traveling dress, she moved forward. Her stiff limbs, the chill of the air making her thankful she wore her woolen coat. Once past the horses, she looked up to find a large cottage, the lower windows and two above lit with cheery light. Her eyes itched with tears and she welcomed the sight.

"There looks to be a small stable around the side. If you'd like to settle your mare into her new home?"

She nodded, grateful for the man's thoughtfulness and who else would have prepared her home. Feeling a little better, she moved forward and opened the door. Withgate, which was also whisper quiet, reminding her that despite the long journey she was about to enter her ancestor's domain.

No sooner had she closed the little gate and taken a step upon the
passed flagstone walkway, then the front door opened.

ither of She froze, her hand to her chest as her breath stopped.

ld tales A large, tall figure moved into the doorway, backlit by the dece
d but a warm environs behind him. "Welcome to the nest."

mbling At the sound of his deep bass voice, her heart skittered, and the litt
on her arms rose. She knew that voice! It was the man in her dreams. T

he'd bewho kept her company at night and distracted her from her ogre-in-
oed Mr. four long months. How could she have dreamed of a real person
n. curiosity at what he looked like fought with her fear. Forcing courage i

ie treesstance that she didn't truly have, she lifted her chin slightly. "The nest'

e coach A low chuckle issued from him, causing tiny ripples of pleasure
nly herthrough her body. "That's what your great-aunt called it."

That he knew how her ancestor had referred to the cottage had l
ence of overriding every other emotion, and she took an instinctive step back.

a ghost?

elp her "I apologize. I should perhaps introduce myself. I'm Noah Kingr

latest in my line to take care of Brambling Cottage, and the only one h
r horseto have a Finch come home."

nd. She Home? Honored? Though she couldn't see his face, it was as if he
nd andas he spoke. Relieved he was not a ghost, she forced her legs to

forward. "I'm Lady Juliet Hastings of Abercorn." Despite her intent t
close enough to see his face, she slowed to a stop after three steps.

ie other "No need to introduce yourself, my lady. I would recognize yo
Finch if I were to notice you across the Burlington Arcade in London.'

vard on Her heart raced at his words. Surely, he could not have actually
l cloak. her dreams! She felt her cheeks heat. "You...you could?"

floor's This time he laughed. "Oh, yes." He stepped to the side and ope
s at thearm toward the beckoning warmth inside. "Come see why."

Her curiosity overrode her fear, and she started forward again.
e, I canneared him, his face, illuminated by the light, became clear, and she st
upon the walkway.

er had His hand shot out and grabbed her arm to keep her upright. "It app
ned thehave a rogue stone. I will be sure to get that fixed on the morrow."

ok, she She should say something, but her throat had closed. Mr. Kingmar
surpassed any other man's. He had a high forehead with dark bro

narrow framed the most brilliant green eyes she'd ever seen. High cheekbones gave him an aristocratic appearance, but the shoulder length black hair and stubbled square jaw made it clear he was a commoner. No peer was aptively seen with such a roughened jawline. Unfortunately, it somehow made her more stunning, and his very broad shoulders just added to the pure male aura radiating from him through his rough white shirt.

The one "Lady Juliet, are you injured?" His brows lowered and concern filled his blue eyes.

? Avid She wrested her gaze from his face and shook her head, forcing her eyes into her look toward the doorway and not at him. Still, his scent, that of a piney wooded forest, perhaps pine, wafted over her, calming her nerves. "It's not so difficult to see out here."

He recognized her hint immediately. "Please come inside. I know you're used to the outdoors, but I hope I made it comfortable."

Was he She opened her mouth to ask if he had actually readied her new home for himself, but thought better of it and instead stepped across the threshold.

man, the ignored



smiled NOAH COULDN'T STOP gazing at Lady Juliet Finch. Though that was no longer his name anymore, that's who she would always be to him. As soon as she opened the door and she'd turned toward him, the light from the window was spilling over her, he knew her. She looked exactly like her ancestor, a woman as a Finch.

Though her mahogany tresses were pulled back, many had escaped and framed her delicate heart-shaped face. Her lips were full, pink, her nose aquiline and her eyes almond shaped. He'd anxiously anticipated his approach to discover their color, laughing inside to see their unique combination of blue and green, just like Orinda's. Her figure was petite, the thick cloak looking too heavy for her small frame to bear.

He didn't understand her hesitancy, which concerned him as it was for himself she feared. But as he'd grasped her arm, he could feel how surely she was. Determinedly, he kept silent as he stepped inside after she allowed her to view the parlor.

Her head swiveled from left to right, her shoulders relaxing. His face was that

es gave He'd been right to have everything ready, despite what his brot
slightly said. Directly across from them, a fire crackled in the fireplace.

ould be She turned to look at him. "This was not what I expected." Her sm
de him faint, but relief shone in her gaze.

aleness Grinning, he stepped farther into the main room. "Did you expec
or smaller?"

lled his "Neither. I had surmised it would be..." she tilted her head, "darke

He found the comment odd. Brambling Cottage sat nestled amo
rself to trees, yes, but the grounds were filled with flowers, birds, and st
a deep during the day. "Well, it is night."

No. It's She looked askance at him, her lip quirking up slightly. "I meant

For a haunted cottage, it feels warm and cozy."

it's not As understanding dawned, he held back his smile. "Allow me t
you the rest." He strode past the fireplace where Orinda's portrait hung

v home "Thank you, that would be—"

d. When she didn't continue, he turned back to find her staring at he
aunt. Her mouth open and her eyes round as she stood in shock.

Had no one told her she resembled, no, not resembled, had th
appearance of her ancestor? He walked back to where she stood and lo
n't her the woman in the portrait. It was Orinda, yet it was now Juliet, i
as he'd different clothing. He'd fallen in love with the painting since his fat
indows first allowed him to care for the inside of the cottage. As a very your
Orinda he'd felt as if she gazed at him like a grandson. To be fair, he'd been
with the stories his mother told of her long before he'd seen the portrai

l on her Lady Juliet raised her hand and pointed at the painting. "That's m
lightly voice could barely be heard above the crackling of the fire.

awaited "I suppose, in some way, it is. That's Lady Orinda, your ancest
were awas the last Finch to live here before you arrived. I'm sure she'
ire was pleased you're here."

She turned a very pale face toward him. "You talk as if she's still a
may be Part of him wanted to tell her Orinda's spirit was very much pres
all she she was obviously quite scared. "Of course she's not alive." He held
er and out toward his right where an open doorway led to the kitchen. "Come
show you the rest of the rooms. I'm sure you're tired and would like
after your long journey."

Bravely, she nodded, keeping her gaze from the portrait.

her had More than a little confused by Juliet's fearful reactions, he k
dialogue to information regarding the physical home. After showing
kitchen behind the fireplace and the small dining room adjacent to the
he took a lantern from the hook by the stairs and led her up to the ne
t larger and the single bedroom with a small private sitting room. He'd started
both rooms as well.

r." Her silence as he explained where all the supplies were told him s
ong the too tired to truly understand. After leading her back downstairs, they
nshin two trunks and a small bag had been placed inside the now close
"Would you like me to bring any of these upstairs?"

inside. She ignored him and instead ran to the door and opened it. "Thank
"You take care of yourself, my lady."

o show Though he heard the coachman click his tongue and the harness j
}. he headed for home, Juliet remained at the doorway.

Not waiting for an answer, he hefted one of the large trunks
r great-shoulder and brought it upstairs, setting it down on the floor of the
room.

e exact When he returned downstairs, Juliet had closed the door, but re
oked at standing next to it staring at the fire across the room.

only in "Would you like this one in your bedroom or the upstairs sitting ro
her had She finally moved her gaze and looked at him, the loneliness in h
ig man, making his stomach clench. "The sitting room will be fine." She touc
in love small bag the coachman had set on the straight back chair by the door
t. carry this up myself."

e." Her "Then I will put this upstairs and leave you to settle in." Heft
second, lighter trunk on his shoulder, he climbed the stairs, pleased t
or. She third step from the bottom no longer squeaked. He'd fixed it as soon
s quite received her letter.

Placing the trunk next to the other, he stood gazing at the lighte
live." idly wondering what was inside. "Perhaps that one is her unmentio
ent, but while the first is her gowns."

his arm No sooner had he said the words than the small trunk lock clicked
, let melid lifted a crack.

to rest "No, Orinda. I will not disturb her privacy." He folded his arm
waited.

Finally, the lid closed and the click of the lock sounded in the silen

cept hisdropped his arms. “She’s had a long journey and is very tired. Don’t s
her thedreams tonight. Allow her to rest.”

parlor, He didn’t wait for a response nor expect one, but turned arou
xt levelstrode back down the stairs. It had been a long time since Orinda had
fires inHe just hoped she could refrain from scaring her great-niece away.

Striding into the parlor, he found Juliet asleep on the settee, no dou
she wasfrom her travels. Quietly, he laid the cloak she’d draped on a chair o
7 foundand left, closing the door behind him.

d door. He took the short path to the stable where he found her animal we
for. Untying his horse, he walked him out before mounting. Looking
you!” the windows, he couldn’t see her, but in his mind he did. “Orinda, I th
needs a lot of tender care.” With that, he headed for home, taking the v
ingle aspath through the woods, looking forward to his nightly dreams.

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dropped his arms. “She’s had a long journey and is very tired. Don’t send her dreams tonight. Allow her to rest.”

He didn’t wait for a response nor expect one, but turned around and strode back down the stairs. It had been a long time since Orinda had a guest. He just hoped she could refrain from scaring her great-niece away.

Striding into the parlor, he found Juliet asleep on the settee, no doubt tired from her travels. Quietly, he laid the cloak she’d draped on a chair over her and left, closing the door behind him.

He took the short path to the stable where he found her animal well cared for. Untying his horse, he walked him out before mounting. Looking back at the windows, he couldn’t see her, but in his mind he did. “Orinda, I think she needs a lot of tender care.” With that, he headed for home, taking the winding path through the woods, looking forward to his nightly dreams.



Chapter Two

JULIET RETRIEVED THE teapot from the hook in the kitchen fireplace and the steaming brew into the Wedgewood cup. Returning the pot to its place, she added sugar to her cup, then sat at the simple table in the room, across from the door, in the skirts of her pale gray day dress. The light from the long window on the left side of the room as it filtered past the ivy growing around its edges.

After a wonderful night's rest with no dreams and no worries, she awoke in much better spirits. She was sure the fear of the unknown had been overcome by imagining the worst and in the light of day, she could see the cottage was not just a cottage, and though small, it was a home.

She took a sip of tea, grateful that Mr. Kingman had stocked the larder with necessities in the small larder. To think, a commoner had been in her room and in her bed! That had truly been a shock. Then to discover she looked like her great-aunt had been another surprise.

Taking a bite of a scone from the dozen Cook had insisted she take on the trip, she wondered how the staff were getting along back at Thorndale Manor. They had all been kind to her, and she worried about them under the new lord. At least her brother-in-law had let them keep their positions.

Now, she'd have to manage her own household, which should be quite difficult, since she couldn't afford even one servant. Unfortunately, when making tea, she had no cooking skills. She hadn't even known how to get the wood to the fire since they used coal at Thorndale, and she'd almost set her dress on fire when sparks sprayed after she threw a log in.

Despite the morning sunshine, her true situation began to weigh on her spirit. On the verge of tears, she started as a warmth passed over her when she'd been hugged. It didn't frighten her and actually made her feel better. "I imagine I should take this new existence one moment at a time."

As if the world agreed with her plan, a finch landed on the vine outside the window. She smiled as she watched it inspect itself in the reflection.

before flying off. She took the last bite of scone, happy that at least she had been able to dress herself thanks to her forward-thinking lady's maid who suggested she purchase front-tying stays. She'd have never thought of stays which made her appreciate the skills of her staff far too late.

Needing a distraction, she pulled closer the little book that she'd brought down with her from her sitting area. She hadn't remembered seeing it the night before, but as she passed through the room, the pretty illustration of a finch on the cover had caught her eye. Opening it, she read, "The diary of Orinda Finch, formerly of Portsmouth and now of North Hampton."

Her heart leapt at the words. This was her great-aunt's diary! The one who was talked about in whispers and touted as a depraved and dappled one.

While her mind told her to close the book immediately, her fingers itched to turn the page. Not truly willing to face her new life yet, she turned the page.

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was but

a few
dreams,
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ler their

I, Orinda Finch, start my exciting new life today. Just two days past I was dreading my marriage so much, I lost the contents of my stomach on the flagstone pathway to the church. But today I am free and in love. I have no doubt my parents dismissed every last manservant from their employ, and I wish I could give them all a letter of reference, but Ambrose says we must not contact them until we return from Green Green. I'm so happy to be journeying there that I fairly floated out of bed this morning. I am wearing my rose embroidered pink dress and cannot express enough how happy I am to become Mrs. Miller. I am not sure Ambrose's good friend will be pleased. He tells me Mr.—

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er as if
etter. "I

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flection

Turning the page, she stared at it surprised. "Mr. who?" Flipping through the pages, she found them all to be blank. Disappointment filled her. "Something horrid happened? Had the friend stopped the marriage? Had the parents? Or had Ambrose simply arrived? Closing the little book, she couldn't seem to take her hand from it. It was as if the very happiness radiated outward.

A knock sounded on the door, and she idly wondered who it could be. When it sounded again, she remembered no butler would be answering. She rose and quickly walked into the parlor. As she opened the door, her eyes caught. Mr. Kingman stood there in the bright sunlight, appearing more striking than he had the night before.

it she'd Admiration shone in his eyes before he gave her a nod. "Good m
l who'dLady Juliet. I trust you slept well?"

of that, She looked askance at him. "I'm Lady Abercorn. Yes, I slept ver

 Mr. Kingman. Do you wish to come in?" She backed up to allow
broughtenter, though it was barely half-past nine. Not even close to calling
g it theThen again, he wouldn't be calling. He wasn't a peer.

on of a "Please, I'm Noah."

7 of one She couldn't imagine calling him by his given name. It just wasn't

 "I came to see how you fared last eve." He strode past her and th
he veryof fresh rain upon pine floated by on the crisp morning air.

woman. "Good morning, Orinda. I imagine you're happy to have compan
ched tothan my own."

page. She turned as he spoke to see him talking to her great-aunt's p

ist I About to remark on his odd behavior, her attention was diverted by t
ach fashioned queue of his hair. Having his midnight strands pulled bac
d in have been what caused her to think his features were more pronounce
t in daylight. Despite that reasoning, her gaze drifted to his backside whi
but clearly defined by his tan trousers. As he turned, she quickly lifted he
etna her cheeks heating at almost being caught ogling him. "I must tha
it of again for readying the cottage. I had no hint as to what to expect."

s. I He frowned. "Did you not know about Brambling Cottage?"

I'm She grimaced. "Yes, I knew of it, but not the dimensions. Truth
g more expected but a single room. I was much relieved to see such comi
r. Had living arrangements." She hesitated, glancing toward the opening nex
Had the fireplace which led to the kitchen behind it. "Yet even expecting such
ok, she accommodations, I fear I have arrived ill-prepared."

s inside He smiled at her, his white teeth beaming and his stunning eyes cri
ould be. "Then it's fortuitous I'm here."

ng. She She smiled back, unable to help herself. He was so quick to smile t
: breath was quite sure he did so often. "And how might your presence be of
g more my predicament?"

 His brows lifted in surprise though his lips still showed hints of his
: breath "It's a predicament we have, do we? Then I must come to your aid a
g more First, tell me, have you broken your fast?"

 At the seriousness of his tone, she couldn't help a small chuckle.
 have managed to make a pot of tea and ingest a scone that traveled wit

orning, He gave her an exaggerated sigh of relief. “That’s an excellent first

He leaned forward as if to impart a great secret. “Tell me. Would you please try well, have a bit of tea left for a guest?”

him to At his suggestion, her cheeks heated once again. “Oh, my. I’ve offered you tea.” She looked about, not sure if she’d seen a tea tray or to serve.

“Then shall we remove to the kitchen to quench our thirst and make done. for your comfort?”

ie scent At his offer, she realized he meant for them to drink in the kitchen been odd to do so by herself, but it felt much more so with Mr. y other Kingman, despite the fact she did understand he knew much more about things. “I would appreciate that.” She moved forward to lead the way, portrait. foot caught on something and she started to fall.

he old- He caught her to him, effectively saving her. But the strength of his k must and the hardness of his body had her own reacting in very inappropriate d in the as memories of her dreams flooded her mind. Heat filled her ich was embarrassment, and she quickly straightened herself, stepping b er gaze, apologize. “I’m normally more graceful.”

nk you He grinned as his knowing gaze scanned her face. “I have no d that. This is a new abode for you after all.” Still, he stepped to the s waited for her to precede him like any gentleman.

fully, I In the kitchen, he stood behind the chair opposite her plate of crun fortably now cold tea, making the room smaller by his presence.

t to the She quickly distracted herself with setting out another cup and lift limited teapot from where she’d left it over the fire.

“I see you found Orinda’s diary.”

inkling. She looked over her shoulder to see him pick up the tiny book ar through it as if it held great secrets. “Yes. I was very disappointed that she stopped writing after the first page. Do you know if she made it to help to Green?”

She brought the teapot over and poured for them both before settin s smile. the trivet located in the middle of the sideboard.

at once. He waited until she’d taken her seat, then sat himself, placing th reverently on the table between them. “Yes, she did.”

“Yes, I She felt an odd sense of relief at the news, but refocused her atten h me.” her guest, who watched her avidly. “I have sugar which I found

it step.” cupboard and can only assume you provided. Thank you. But I h
perhapscream.” Again, embarrassment filled her and her hand shook as she
the bowl.

haven’t His hand grasped hers as his other took the bowl. “Lady At
1 whichthough these surroundings are new to you, I promise you can be happy
you welcome these changes in your life.”

re plans The warmth of his hand holding hers sent a fission of desire so stro
she pulled hers away and stood. Confused, uncomfortable, and besie
1. It haduncertainty, she fought back tears. “I know not how to cook, but even
: NoahI have nothing but pin money and a few jewels. I don’t have any fa
ut thesefriends.” She sniffed, refusing to cry in front of him, instead spinning
but herso he wouldn’t see.

Taking deep breaths, she attempted to stop her tears, horrified s
is armsconfessed all her troubles. She froze as she heard his chair push bac
te waysthe table. Hopefully, he’d be a gentleman and simply leave.

r with He was not. His footsteps drew closer before she felt his hands
ack. “Icover her shoulders. She remained absolutely still, her tears drying up
body focused on where he touched her. He truly shouldn’t be touching
oubt of “Do not be afraid, Juliet.” His breath whispered past her ear, o
ide andtingles of excitement to spark throughout her body. “I promise you,
be well. You’re safe here.”

abs and How could he be so sure? She turned around to ask, dislodging his
only to find herself inches from him, looking up into mesmerizing
ting theeyes.

He cupped her cheek. “Trust me.”

His words were but a breath, and she found herself leaning towa
rd pageher gaze slipping to his lips, which drew closer.

ted she

Gretna



ng it onNOAH STOPPED HIMSELF just in time and pulled back. Juliet was hardly r
be kissed when she had yet to understand the full change her life had
ie bookSilently, he admonished Orinda for causing Juliet to trip and for the
in their heads. Obviously, Juliet was uncomfortable with her passion f
tion onand he kept forgetting he’d just met her. That the diary pages were
in the

have not proved even Orinda didn't believe Juliet ready for her future yet. He offered to have a talk with that spirit.

He removed his hand from Juliet's cheek and held it out to the mercorn, suggest we conquer one problem at a time."

There if Her hands were buried in her skirts and her teeth worried her bottom.

She cocked her head before she spoke. "I am grateful for all you have done for me that provided, but I'm afraid there is no easy remedy for the fact I do not know how to cook."

if I did, "Neither do I." He chuckled. "However, I do have someone who would be most interested in coming to your aid around days a week."

Her eyes lit with hope, the green dominating any blue tints at all she had her shoulders slumped and her chin lowered. "I fear I would not have the money to pay her."

There were so many burdens he could relieve her of, but not yet. He gently strayed to Orinda's diary, something he'd read cover to cover at least as many times as he'd gone from awkward youth to adult man. Thinking of her. Orinda's transition to Northampton gave him an idea. "Do you have any special skills?"

all will Her brow furrowed. "You mean such as embroidery, writing invitations, and being passingly good at the pianoforte?"

his hands, "Yes, exactly." Suddenly, he remembered the new school that had opened last autumn. "There's a new ladies' school that has only been in existence for a year. Perhaps you could teach there."

Her eyes widened in shock. "You mean work...for money?"

He said the words loudly and strode over to the table to pick up the diary. He turned over a few blank pages and was pleased to find the entry he sought. "Yes, here it is." He opened the book wider. "*I'm so pleased to announce myself. I have secured a position as the governess of two adorable little girls ready to start at a nearby estate called Ravenridge. Viscountess Blackmore was very pleased to take me, and since the girls are of an age where I need not live there, the lady is very happy to employ me. My husband is proud of me too. I don't think you should worry for him, he believed me when I said I would do whatever was necessary for us to be happy.*"

Juliet sidled up to him as he read and stared at the page. "But I did

“I would that there this morning.”

He closed the book, avoiding her gaze. “The pages often stick together. “I She gave a short nod as if his explanation sufficed. How long before realized Orinda was only allowing her to see what she could accept?

“I must suppose that if my great-aunt, who I was told was most obliged to you, had been willing to work so she could be happy, I could do the same.”

Orinda had been happy in love, but he withheld his comment. He had been half in love with Juliet before she’d ever arrived, but he was no more than a stranger to her. Or rather, almost a stranger. He had no doubt she’d had a few same dreams he did. “Then would you like me to saddle your horse and accompany you to Silver Meadows?”

Her gaze flew to the long window. “It is far too early for calling.” He held back a grimace, not sure how to gently nudge her in the direction her new life needed to go. Unable to do so gently, he simply stated it. His gaze wouldn’t be a social call, but a request for employment. I don’t know if the duchess would actually meet with you or have you leave a card.”

Juliet’s face paled and her hand grabbed the back of the chair next to her. “Duchess?”

He barely kept from letting out a sigh of frustration. Whether it was a duchess, a marchioness, or a viscountess, they were all the same to him. He appeared Juliet wouldn’t be the only one learning new values. *He* needed to learn more patience. “Yes, the Duchess of Northwick. Do you know her name?” She shook her head.

“Then all the better. She can see you for who you are and not have preconceived views about your person.”

“That’s true.” The tension left her face, but her eyes looked away. She pondered her options. “I will go. Today. I wish to make a good life for myself, nothing more than to spite my husband’s brother, who refused to be reconciled with dispensation.”

A shock of anger flew through him at her statement and an unready kind of urge to lay the errant relative out flat with a knuckle punch had him ready to wash his fists. He forced himself to release his hands. “Then I shall reach my destination.”

“Oh, wait.” She laid her hand on his arm as she said it and immediately filled him. As if she felt it too, she pulled her hand back and buried it in her skirts. “I must change if I’m going before a duchess. I shall be ready in half an hour.”

hour.” With that, she twirled about and exited the kitchen.

ther.” An hour? He shook his head as he lifted the diary once again. “Of course I sincerely hope you’re right.” He dropped the book on the table and it fell over, the back cover open. The last line on the middle of the page stood out in stark relief.

No sacrifice is too great for love.

’d been “Even my patience?”

More than a The little book slammed closed.

had the He held up his hands. “I’m trying.” Dropping them again, he strode out of the room and out the door. He entered the stable, pleased he had fed the horse before knocking on her door. No doubt she hadn’t thought as far as the Thoroughbred would survive. Did the Juliet in his dreams really exist in the direction she was merely what he’d hoped she would be? From the morning she’d been born, he’d known she would come, despite the generations of Kingmans being born with no sign of a Finch returning to Northampton.

to her. He busied himself getting the horse ready. His brother expected him to go over the books from *The Majestic’s* latest cargo, but that would have to wait. Juliet needed his help. He hoped her reception at the ladies’ dinner would go well. If not, he’d find her other employment. His mother had offered to have suggestions. He’d introduce Juliet to his mother eventually, but he wondered if she’d dress as nicely as she did for the duchess. Not liking his own answer, he focused on his task.

ave any Finally, with nothing else to take his time, he walked his own horse out of Juliet’s outside into the bright sunshine. Hearing the door to the cottage open as she stepped around the side to find her coming toward him in a deep breath, he noticed the dress that made the dark highlights in her hair stand out.

ne any She caught him watching her and gave a timid smile. “This is my best dress. I hope it will do.”

sonable It took him a moment to respond. It wasn’t the dress that caught his attention, but the mixture of boldness and nervousness she exuded. He could only hope she was trying to embrace her new circumstances with a positive attitude. It humbled him. “I believe the duchess will think you an admirable model.”

t in her Her relieved smile was his reward, and it caused his heart to race. Swallowing hard, he cupped his hands and assisted her in mounting.

gaining his own horse, he led them down the road toward the estate.
Orinda, I After a while, he had them slow to a walk again, so they could enjoy the
flipped crisp day.

Orinda said out in “You know more about my great-aunt than I do. How is that?”

Her sudden question surprised him. “Why, what do you know of her?”

She shrugged. “Not enough, I’m discovering. I was told she’d married
with a footman, married, and bemoaned her poor judgement the rest of her
life, haunting Brambling Cottage with her unhappiness as she paid the
debt from sin.”

Juliet’s Shocked by her statement, he was grateful Orinda didn’t hear it.
to how do you mean by sin?”

Orinda said exist, or “By marrying a common footman. At least that’s what my grand
father first said. My mother said she married a footman in protest against the choice
the three fathers chose for her husband. Mother said he was quite a bit older than
me, drinking tows and had unusual habits.” She waved in the air with one hand. “I don’t

know the idea what that means. It could mean he liked to eat his dinner while balancing
on his back. At her chuckle, he glanced at her, unable to reckon her humor versus
how she had terrible aspersions she cast on Orinda’s character. Or rather, her mother’s
school grandmother had cast.

Orinda said or might Her smile faded and she became thoughtful. “But that’s not what I
was looking for, but here’s the first page of her diary.” She turned her head to look at him. “She said
she was in love with a man and she couldn’t wait to marry. The page ended with her
saying she was to be Mrs. Miller, but his best friend might be against it. I guess she
rose and actually married her footman after all.”

Orinda said e close, “Tradesman.” He looked forward again. “She married a tradesman
and his partner owned a shop in London. They were very successful. When
he moved out here, he bought Brambling Cottage and the surrounding land. It was
a great day. He sold much of the timber and eventually farmed.”

She didn’t say anything at first, and he gave her time to ponder the matter.
him off. As they came to a fork in the road, he pointed to the right.

Orinda said ould tell Finally, she spoke. “I’m glad my great-aunt was happy and comfortable,
and I think I see now why my mother and grandmother told such horrible stories
about the cottage being haunted. They wanted their version of the story to serve
as a warning.”

Orinda said o race. He raised his brows and stared at her. “A warning about what?”

Orinda said s. Once “Never to shirk your duty to your family. That was very important.”

elders. They were to marry the man chosen for them.” She met his gaze with joy that was a different time. Now we are able to marry for love.”

He couldn't quite keep a smirk from forming. “And did you marry for love?”

“No. After two seasons, I did not happen upon that tender emotion I had run offsettled. I married for companionship and children. I suppose it may have been better for me to become a spinster because when I didn't produce the required child within the first year, the companionship drifted away as well.” She turned her head to focus on the road, but not before he noticed the moisture in her eyes.

“What?” His chest tightened at the experiences she already had, but he admitted to himself, recognizing she wouldn't be riding beside him if she hadn't chosen the choices she had.

As the trees gave way to the open fields of Silver Meadows, he sensed her stiffening. But once they rode through the stone columns at the entrance to the drive, she looked about to break. He pulled his mount next to hers and laid his hand over both of hers.

She halted, but didn't take her gaze from the sprawling home with her large wings rising four stories at least. “It's very large.”

“It must be. It's a school after all.”

She didn't move, not even a blink.

“Juliet, look at me.”

Finally, she pulled her gaze from the house, her eyes a true mix of blue and green and her brows lowered. “I've never requested work before, but I don't know what to do.”

He wished he could give her the courage she needed, but if his instincts were correct, then she already had it within her. She simply hadn't known how to use it. “You never spent the night in a haunted cottage before, but you never had to make your own morning meal, but you did it.”

Her lips quirked up. “I never had to dress myself before, but I did.”

He gritted his teeth to keep from offering to help her undress, then he flew to his lips with supernatural speed. Instead, he nodded.

She glanced back at the house, then met his gaze again. “You needed to be accepting of new experiences. I think I understand now. None have been terribly taxing.”

He choked back a laugh and coughed. “Then shall we see if the Institute of Northwick will welcome you as a teacher?”

e. “But She gave a confident nod and turned forward. “We shall.”

Lifting his hand from hers, he allowed her to start forward first, p
arry forher though not sure why. It wasn’t as if *he’d* raised her to have
stalwart backbone. He couldn’t imagine Juliet not being an asset
on, so Ischool. She had all the refinement of a typical aristocratic lady.

ve been As they came to a halt before the front stairs, he had to ad
red heirimpression of the home was definitely made to intimidate. He felt fiv
ned herten feet wide, were plenty large enough, but this one had at least twi
: eyes. Quickly, he dismounted, worried Juliet would again question her own
onished He helped her dismount, not unaware of how small she was. He
’t madehimself to drop his hands, but she didn’t move.

Instead, she took his hand in her gloved one. “Do not worry. I may
used hergranted a position, but I promise you, I will return.”

ance to At her words, he realized he’d lowered his brows in his concern c
ers anddisposition. Forcing his face to relax, he gave her a lopsided smile. “
reassuring. I shall wait here.”

ith two She squeezed his hand then turned and floated up the steps to
inside.

For the first time since seeing her in his dreams, doubts assailed h
much as he didn’t want to acknowledge it, she was born in a class ab
own. Could he truly make her happy when she was used to grand
cture of Silver Meadows?

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eded to
1 did it.

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e words

l said I
So far,

Duchess

She gave a confident nod and turned forward. “We shall.”

Lifting his hand from hers, he allowed her to start forward first, proud of her though not sure why. It wasn't as if *he'd* raised her to have such a stalwart backbone. He couldn't imagine Juliet not being an asset to the school. She had all the refinement of a typical aristocratic lady.

As they came to a halt before the front stairs, he had to admit the impression of the home was definitely made to intimidate. He felt five steps, ten feet wide, were plenty large enough, but this one had at least twice that. Quickly, he dismounted, worried Juliet would again question her own worth.

He helped her dismount, not unaware of how small she was. He forced himself to drop his hands, but she didn't move.

Instead, she took his hand in her gloved one. “Do not worry. I may not be granted a position, but I promise you, I will return.”

At her words, he realized he'd lowered his brows in his concern over her disposition. Forcing his face to relax, he gave her a lopsided smile. “That is reassuring. I shall wait here.”

She squeezed his hand then turned and floated up the steps to be let inside.

For the first time since seeing her in his dreams, doubts assailed him. As much as he didn't want to acknowledge it, she was born in a class above his own. Could he truly make her happy when she was used to grandeur like Silver Meadows?



Chapter Three

JULIET SAT, WATCHING her hostess pace across the parlor before the fire which had a painting of what appeared to be the kindest woman on earth. She wouldn't admit it to anyone, but upon being escorted into the parlor and seeing Lady Belinda Mabry's portrait, whom the school was named after, she'd immediately felt comfortable. The duchess had explained the school's name and purpose and was now attempting to find a position for her.

She was quite glad Noah had mentioned the need to welcome new people and possibilities because she'd never met a duchess like Lady Norah. Despite being every bit a lady, her black hair done up except for a single curl and her bearing that of a true duchess, her ideas were unconventional.

The lady in question stopped in midstride. "What about horticulture? Do you know anything regarding plants?"

It was the third such question in the last fifteen minutes, and though she was anxious to answer in the positive, she shook her head, beginning to lose hope.

"No bother. I will think of something." And the woman continued on her journey, her jewel green skirts swishing as she walked.

The school didn't teach young women such skills as the piano or calligraphy or writing letters or any of the usual subjects. It was a rather odd school and Juliet was quite sure she would have enjoyed when she was younger.

As if the duchess had read her mind, she stopped. "If you could study any subject, what would it be?"

"I'm not sure."

The duchess waved off her comment and sat in the chair opposite her. "Come, think. What did you most like to learn about as a young child? You must have been something your governess taught you that you enjoyed."

Thinking back, she remembered liking all her lessons. All but p

She'd been terrible at painting, preferring to read instead. "I did enjoy very much."

The duchess leaned forward, her hazel gaze almost gray in its intensity. "Tell me. What did you like most to read? Philosophy, history, literature, or foreign—"

At the mention of literature, her heart leapt. "Literature." She'd spent her childhood reading stories and poems and deciphering what they meant.

The duchess jumped up, actually jumped. "That's it! I need a literature teacher. One of our young ladies far exceeds my own knowledge in that subject." She winked. "I prefer arithmetic, myself. Now, do you live in London? Would you like to live here? We have plenty of rooms available. Our school's—we've expanded to a dozen girls, that hardly fills this place."

Her joy at hearing she had a position was tempered by the quiet realization that while living in such a grand house would be much like what she was used to at Thornwick, her instinct told her both Noah and Orinda would be very disappointed. She wasn't sure why the opinion of a dead ancestor and a commoner counted as a matter, but it did. "I think to begin, I'd prefer to ride over, if that is acceptable."

The duchess smiled warmly. "Of course. Since you have just moved to our corner of the world, I'm sure there's much for you to do to settle in. If you are so pleased you will be one of our teachers. The ladies work on their studies in the mornings, which is why we haven't been interrupted, but the afternoons are for physical activity. If you can return tomorrow, I will introduce you to Lady Sophie and explain our process here. I believe three days a week would do nicely."

Her heart beat hard in excitement and she rose. "Thank you, Your Grace. I'm pleased I can be of some help."

The duchess linked arms with her and walked her to the door. "I shall see you tomorrow morning, then. You have no idea what a relief it will be to have you here."

Within moments, she had said farewell and was fairly running down the steps to tell Noah. Her heart said he'd be proud of her, and she couldn't wait to hear him say it. As she reached the bottom step, he approached, a wide smile on his face.

"From your gay demeanor, I can only surmise you have a new position," he said.

She barely held herself back from embracing him. "I do. I have."

readingteaching literature!”

His brows rose. “Literature? Not writing invitations or the play
tensity.pianoforte?”

erature, She shook her head, laughing at his surprise. “No. It’s a very d
kind of ladies’ school and the duchess is just wonderful.”

o loved Noah cupped her face. “You’re wonderful. I’m very proud of you.”

At his words her heart melted. Suddenly, in that moment, all she
teraturewas to make him happy.

on the He dropped his hands and moved to her horse. “Why don’t you
near orabout your visit as we ride back.”

Though Her heart flipped over. No male relative or acquaintance had eve
her to tell them everything. She volunteered information, but more oft
estion.not, they clearly listened out of politeness only. “I will. There is so r
used to,tell.” She strode forward, and he helped her get her seat.

l in her. After he was mounted, they walked the horses back to Bra
shouldCottage, which barely gave her enough time to relate all that occur
that isasked questions, wanting to know everything about her new experier
position. She found herself honored by his attention.

oved to But once there, he took his leave, saying he had to confer with his
in. I’mabout business and she found herself disappointed he couldn’t stay fo
adies inwas silly. The man obviously had many responsibilities. After watchi
ernoonsride into the wooded path across the road, she entered Brambling Cotta

you to Closing the door, she took off her gloves and started for the sta
k wouldstill filled with such happiness over her accomplishment, she movec

fireplace instead and stood before the portrait. “I know you can’t h
Grace.Aunt Orinda, but I’m fairly bursting. I think you’d be proud. I ha

obtained a position as a literature teacher at the new Belinda Sch
hall seeCurious Ladies, which is at Silver Meadows. I imagine you would k
ll be tothe estate as I understand it’s quite old. I hope you’re pleased. Noah re
you had been a governess, so I decided since I’m of your blood, I mu
own that least a little of your courage.”

n’t wait She stared at the face so similar to her own, wishing the smile
a widewiden, though it didn’t. “If only I could have known you when I was :

know I would have loved you. Though we never met, I feel your love
ition.” happy haunted haven. Thank you.”

will be Wanting to connect with her aunt, she kissed two fingers then lai

on the cheek of the portrait. “Now, I’d best unpack the few books I l
ing thewith me. If I’m to be a teacher of literature, I’ll need to reread a few s

She paused. Was it silly that she spoke to a portrait? Was that nor
ifferentpeople who lived by themselves?

A creak sounded in the far corner of what was the small dining
, freezing her to the spot. Slowly, she turned her head in the direction
wantedsound to discover a cabinet door had opened. Surely, it was just a loo
that had finally let go. Still, she approached the cabinet with cautio
tell medidn’t touch the oak furniture at first, instead staring at the latch on th

Finally, she peeked inside to discover it filled with books.
r asked A chill raced down her spine, and she looked back at the portrai
en thanyou open this?” Of course, there was no answer, so she turned b
nuch toexamine the cabinet. It was an old bookpress with its number still er
on the top. Gathering her courage, she opened the other door and pulle
imblingbook. “*Robinson Crusoe*. Now this is one I have not read.” She set it
red. Hetable and pulled another. “Ah, this one I have read.” Setting the boo
nce and*Pamela* to the side of the other, she continued until she had two piles.

Pleased with how many there were, she closed the cabinet, then ad
brotherthe portrait from across the room. “It seems, Aunt, that we have a
r tea. Itreading in common.” Picking up *Robinson Crusoe*, she moved into the
ing himand settled herself on the settee.

age. A few hours later, she was visited by an older lady, sent by Noa
irs, butprepared a few meals and taught her how to cook them when needec
l to thefinishing the one that she made, she rose from the table to go back
ear me,reading when her gaze landed on the diary. She picked up the book.
ive justthere were more pages stuck together that she could read.

ool for Walking into the parlor, she reclined upon the settee. Careful
now ofturned each page, pleased when she found another written passage.
ead thatwas settling in as a wife and a governess. She must have loved Ambro
ist havemuch to leave her family and life behind, but there was no longing
past comforts.

e could The passage ended, and she slowly turned more pages. Pleased
small. Iwriting on yet another one.

e in this

id them *I’ve had a feeling, but the cook confirmed my suspicions. I’m to b
a child. I cannot wait to tell Ambrose. I know he will be as happy*

brought stories.”
mal for

am. I admit to being apprehensive about the birth, but Cook assures me there is an excellent midwife nearby. I am going to start sewing clothes immediately.

g room,
i of the
se latch

She looked up at the portrait over the fireplace. She had distant corners of the area! She'd have to ask Noah if he knew them. It would be so lonely to meet them. She would feel far less alone.

on. She
ie door.

The next page explained Ambrose's reaction and their discussion of names. At the end of the page Orinda had written, *I'm so pleased we agreed. If it's a girl we will name her...*

it. "Did
back to
engraved

Turning the page, she found it blank. She groaned, whining "Orinda." She couldn't help her disappointment. She glanced at the page and asked, "Are you teasing me or is there something I'm not supposed to see?"

ed out a
: on the
k titled

Turning her attention back to the page, she froze. It was filled with a portrait of Orinda. She swallowed hard and looked at the portrait. Orinda remained as she was, smiling, happy in her life... and in death?

dressed
love of
e parlor

Returning her gaze to the diary, she found the name Agnes. A wave of relief flowed over her like stepping into the sun and she closed her eyes. "Thank you, Aunt." When she opened her eyes, she smiled. She could no longer ignore the fact that Orinda's spirit was still in the cottage. It was a comforting presence in her opinion, and one she was grateful for. Comfortable with the conclusion, she continued reading.

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A FORTNIGHT LATER, sitting at her dressing table, Juliet readied herself for Noah's arrival. She found herself in a pleasant routine. He escorted her to Silver Meadows where she enjoyed coaxing the shy young woman Sophie Dowling to look beyond the story being told. Afterward, she and Noah conversed all the way home, mostly regarding her day. She often asked him about his, but he said he preferred to talk about what she had done

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In the evenings, she read books and Orinda's diary. There were more pages with writing on them now. It had become obvious the diary was haunted as well as the cottage, though she still didn't understand why certain passages appeared and others didn't. Noah said it was Orinda's doing, but she half believed it, but didn't dare question it, since she was thoroughly e

... learning about her great-aunt's happy marriage and the birth of her children, one boy and one girl. Orinda's husband continued to be successful and built a large house nearby, but as they grew older, the house passed in the hands of their son and moved back into their cottage.

... She had a feeling there was a reason for the missing information. ... Noah, she'd learned his family had been the caretakers of Brambling Cottage since Orinda had passed, having outlived her husband by a couple of years. ... According to him, the oldest male Kingman took on the responsibility.

... Surprisingly, she was quite content at Brambling Cottage, yet there was a part of her yearning for more, and she was well aware of why.

... Noah.

... She dreamed of him every night before he came to escort her to the Meadows. The dreams always included amorous congress in many different ways and places. While very pleasurable, they left her frustrated when she woke, no doubt because they would never be fulfilled. What would he think if he knew she had such dreams of him even before she'd met him?

... Ignoring the useless question, she rose from the small dressing table and descended the stairs. She would focus on only the day, something her great-aunt said was the best way to be happy.

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Chapter Four

A FEW DAYS later, a darkening sky in the late afternoon portended storm, which was why Noah fetched Juliet early from Silver Meadows and kept his horse behind hers as they raced back to Brambling Cottage.

The wind had blown Juliet's bonnet from her head, hanging on lavender ribbons as her long hair whipped behind her, the pins she'd used to hold it up lost to nature's forces. But as thunder rumbled, the first large hail hit his bare head, and he wished they'd left sooner.

They galloped around the last bend and up to the cottage's porch. Jumping from his mount, he ran to Juliet and pulled her from her horse as the storm sounded close. "Go inside. I'll take care of the horses!"

A crack of lightning made her jump before she ran for the cottage. The boom of thunder that followed spooked her horse, and he held on to his reins to keep it from bolting. Quickly, he led the animals into the little stable and brushed them down before giving them food. Despite his speed, by the time he finished, the rain came down so hard he could barely see the entrance to the cottage. Without hesitation, he ran out, glad he knew the way since the outdoor temperatures had plummeted with the clouds and with the rain felt like icy darts hitting his skin.

He opened the door without knocking and entered the warm, dry cottage. As he slammed it shut against the wind and water that came in with the rain, Juliet entered from the kitchen. Her laughter froze him to the spot as it washed over his body, warming him from the inside out.

"Aren't we a pair?" She lifted her disheveled hair with one hand. "It's like the hounds of hell were upon my heels, and you look like a drowned sailor."

He grinned as he wiped water from his face with his wet sleeve. "I'm like one." A shiver ran through him, his soaked clothing quickly chilling his skin.

Her face sobered and her brow knit. "You need to get dry. I'll find a towel."

towel.” She left the room, running upstairs.

The last thing he wished for was an early death, so he reached behind his head and pulled up his soaked shirt, letting it slip from his cold fingers and plop on the floor. Pulling his boots off while wet was difficult, but he managed to do so without sitting on the settee and soaking it through. He gathered his hair together and wrung out what he could, careful to keep his hands dry to avoid the drops from touching his bare skin.

A harsh knock interrupted Juliet’s steps as she raced down the stairs had him looking up at the door. Hest rode in.

“I brought a towel and a—” Her eyes widened as she stumbled to a stop by the door. Her gaze was riveted on his wet chest and his body heated at her touch. She used to look away, but now she used to look. When she lifted her gaze, her eyes appeared a deeper blue, all the red and green having vanished.

His pulse thudded hard as desire burned low in his abdomen.

She stepped forward and wordlessly held out the towel.

He took it and dried his torso despite her avid attention. As he brought the towel to his face, her scent filled his nostrils. Unable to remain so far from the door, he held out the white cotton cloth. “Could you dry my back?”

Her teeth worried her bottom lip for a moment, drawing his attention to her mouth, but she moved forward and took the towel.

He turned around, facing the door. Moments went by and he wondered if she would do as he asked. Then he felt the cloth touch his back. She dried him so well, it felt over him as if she were touching him, not drying him, making his desire grow and grow. It was pure torture to resist until he finally didn’t want to anymore.

He turned about, his intent to take her in his arms, but his hand was occupied with the towel.

She scurried to the fireplace, bent over, and dropped another log in. “You need to warm yourself or you might take a chill.”

He dropped the towel on the back of a chair as he walked toward the door, nearly enjoying the view of her backside. All he needed was her.

She straightened and faced him. “Oh. Of course, you need to get out of the fire.”

“I feel the fire.” Stepping aside, she moved toward the kitchen.

He followed. “Juliet.” He took her hands and placed them on his chest. She then dropped his own. “Do you want me?”

Her eyes widened at the question, even as her fingers moved on his chest.

“I...” Her hands caressed him and she stepped closer to press a hesitant kiss upon his chest.

He loosely wrapped his arms around her, allowing her to leave but he wished, but hoping she wouldn't.

She lifted her hands upward and looped them around his neck. She lifted her gaze to his. “Kiss me, Noah.”

Relief, excitement, and triumph filled him as he lowered his lips as she and gently coaxed her to open for him. As soon as she opened her mouth he surprised him by slipping her tongue between his lips to meet his own. He tightened his hold on her, deepening the kiss, tasting her sweet nectar focused on reveling in her small breasts pressing against him. She was so delicate and filled with fire.

He loved her. He had since the day they met, though perhaps before. He needed to show her, even if she wasn't ready to know. He broke from her lips and trailed kisses down her neck.

Suddenly, she pulled away. “Off.” She turned her back to him.

He stilled. “Juliet?”

She bent over and lifted her skirts until they were over her head.

He grinned as understanding dawned, and he helped lift the dress over her.

She faced him in her boots, stockings, shift, and stays. That lace stroked pulled in the folds of linen outlining her small waist and raising her breasts as their taut peaks strained against the material. A soft smile played on her lips. “You too.”

Not willing to let her change her mind, he quickly unbuttoned his pants filled trousers and struggled to push them down to the floor to step out of them. He looked up, he found Juliet had backed away to watch him. He swallowed. “You had at the memory of making love to her in his dreams on the kitchen just behind her.”

Her gaze was fixed upon his erection, her teeth worrying her lip then she looked at him and smiled warmly. “Yes, I want you.”

At her belated answer, all doubts slipped away.

As if she were as anxious as him, she bent her head and began to kiss his chest.

Naked, he stepped forward. “Allow me.” His voice had deepened with desire, and she snapped her head up.

ant kiss Without a word, she lifted her hands and held them out to the sides. Swallowing a moan, he accepted her invitation and slowly pulled the stays, as if shelacing from each eyelet, his large fingers purposefully brushing her skin with every pull. As the stays fell, he moved the chair away from the table. Finally, with his foot, then grasped her about the waist.

She grabbed his shoulders as he lifted her to a sitting position at her stable. Once seated, her hands began to roam over his shoulders, down his chest, over his stomach until, without hesitation, she grasped him.

wn. He He locked his hand over hers, and she looked at him through her lashes, and “I want to know you. Don’t you wish to know me?”

ate, but It wasn’t her words so much as her tone of voice that had tightened. Her boldness pleased him, but also made it difficult to breathe that slowly. “Then we will need to rid you of this.” He tugged the neckline away with his free hand.

Immediately, she let him go and pulled the cloth out from under his backside, then held her arms aloft and simply stared at him.

He chuckled before lifting the linen over her head to reveal her beauty. His mouth went dry at the sight. She was petite, yet rounded in all the right places and the dark hair between her legs beckoned him like a full flower. A full-bloom flower.

A flash of lightning filled the room at the same time a loud crack split the air above them. Juliet jumped, grabbing onto him. He thought her afraid, but when her gaze met his, he could see it wasn’t fear in her eyes, but excitement.

A stab of need shot through him, and he stepped between her legs, soaked her mouth with his own.

Thunder rumbled, and she moaned as their tongues tangled, pulling her against him.

He buried his hands in her hair, bending her backward as he pulled her mouth to kiss her breasts. Teasing the taut peaks, he gave each breast his full attention, loving the taste of her.

Another flash of lightning lit the room for what seemed like minutes, to be followed by a loud crash of thunder that vibrated the little house. The unlace wildness of nature outside stoked Juliet’s fervor.

Her hand grabbed him and squeezed, even as she rubbed her thumb over his skin. It was too much. The storm, the dreams, the woman he loved, combined against him savoring the moment. He removed her hand and held it close.

head on the table. Catching her other, he raised it and held both within
led the his.

breasts Now with her somewhat controlled, he took advantage to touch her
ie table had him. With his free hand, he explored the folds between her legs
erection hardening at her moist readiness. She remained deceptively still
on the he touched the one spot he knew would please her most.

own his Small whimpers issued from her as he pleased her, wanting her
near the brink as his own control slowly slipped.

lashes. Positioning himself at her entrance, he tried to wait. But when
flash and thunder clap filled the room, he slid inside to his hilt.

his sac
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e of her



JULIET GASPED WITH pleasure as Noah entered her, filling her in ever
der her more than she'd ever been. Pinned to the table by his hand and his she
revealed in the excitement skipping through her like the lightning
natural outside.

l in the His damp, dark hair hung loose about his face as he remained mot
oe to a eyes closed, one hand pressed lightly on her abdomen. In the muted l
became her dream, yet he was her reality, a flesh and blood man. H
ounded slowly opened and he stared into hers as he pulled away before fill
, but a once again. His nostrils flared and his hand ran over her stomach
t. upward to catch her breast.

to take Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled, echoing how her body fe
entrance and she wrapped her legs around him. But as he pulled away
ressing the feel of him inside her had her eyes closing as every nerve searched
release she knew he could give her.

left her His rhythm increased and her body spiraled out of control, gras
n equal him even as she lay helpless to control anything, giving herself up
expert ministrations. Just when she thought she would go mad with he
es only the thunder boomed once again and he grasped her waist, pushing i
se. The with a force that filled her with such exquisite pleasure, her world shat

His own shout barely penetrated the happiness that filled her
b along grasped his hand with both of hers, tightened her legs about him, and r
nspired wave of bliss. She floated on a cloud of purest satisfaction, smiling
ver her

in a pool of darkness that was so like her dreams and yet not. Finally, she opened her eyes to look at him and sucked in her breath. Naked love shone in his eyes as she met his green intensity piercing the darkness.

His eyes, his smile. Then just as suddenly, he blinked and what she thought she saw was gone. His mouth lifted in a satisfied grin. "Best storm we've ever had."

She managed a small smile, still stunned by what she'd seen.

He pulled her up to a sitting position against him, his hands cradling her backside, which sent off a new volley of sparks, redirecting her thoughts. She looped her arms around his neck. "I like this."

"So do I." He walked with her to the chair he'd kicked aside, sending a jolt of pleasure through her. Then he sat. "You can uncross your legs."

She did as he suggested, and he sat back on the chair with her on his lap.

She tested their new position, rocking her hips forward a little, then backward, enjoying the pleasure it caused. Her gaze flew to his.

He grinned. "Since I obviously have no control with you. You can control this time."

She'd never been in such a unique position. Burying her hands in his hair, she kissed the side of his neck, pleased at the slight jump she felt inside. The pleasure they could find.

And they did.

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And they did.



Chapter Five

THREE WEEKS LATER as they rode from Silver Meadows to Brambling C Noah only half-listened to Juliet. He needed to pay more attention, kept thinking of the surprise he had planned. He had no doubt she pleased.

He'd spent the last weeks truly wooing her. They talked about C life and her own adjustments. They'd taken walks through the forest e the colors of the leaves as they blanketed the ground, and rejoiced w made her first pie. They'd made love and woken in the morning to taking turns making hot chocolate to ward off the coolness of the until the fires in the fireplaces warmed it once again. They'd even each other dress.

His only concern was there were still a few pages in the dia remained blank. He wasn't sure why Orinda di—

“Oh look. It's a hawk.” Juliet slowed her horse and pointed to the s

He shaded his eyes from the autumn sun to see the large black b floated in the air high above them. “No, that's a raven. There are ma live at Ravenridge. I'm surprised you haven't see one before now.”

She inclined her head as she examined the bird. Now that she was mourning, her pale pink bonnet reflected the color in her cheeks fr cold. “It looks smaller than I remember. It must be very high. I believ is a young lady at the school who is fascinated by birds. I'll have to tel look for the ravens.”

He couldn't imagine being fascinated by anything but her, so l silent.

As they rode to the stable, he jumped down and helped her to dis unable to resist kissing her right there.

Her arms circled his neck as their tongues battled for dominance. one of the many qualities he loved about her. She may be dimin

stature but her assertiveness in bed, or out of it for that matter, kept her within bounds.

Finally, she broke the kiss and looked about her. "It would not do to be caught in such a compromising position." She gave him a sly smile. "Not that many come down this road. Still, I'm thinking there's much we can do inside."

He grinned, deciding he needed to introduce her to lovemaking in the cottage, doors as soon as it warmed. "I'll be in as soon as I finish here."

She spun and sashayed into the house, looking back to make sure she'd be bewatched before she disappeared inside.

Quickly, he took care of the horses, anxious to reveal his heart. As he'd finished, he strode inside and divested himself of his greatcoat, enjoying additional wood Juliet had added to the fire warming the house nicely when she that the moment was upon him, doubts assailed him, but he refused to let them together. He knew what was in his heart.

Juliet entered from the kitchen, her pink dress making her look helped younger, happier. "Cook left us mincemeat pie. It's nice and warm."

He couldn't wait another moment. He strode forward and took her hand, leading her to the settee. "I wish to talk with you a moment."

She smiled, settling onto her seat. "Of course. I do adore conversation with you."

He sat next to her, still holding one hand. "And I wish to be with you. In fact, I have found everything I do is much more enjoyable with you."

"I feel so as well."

His heart raced at her words and he cupped her cheek. "I'm very glad to hear this because I have fallen in love with you. Would you honor me there becoming my wife?"

"Wife?" Her eyes rounded in shock, and she rose abruptly. "How could you ask your wife?"

Confused, he stood as well. "It's not difficult. I can obtain the license from the parish church will read the banns for three weeks. We can be married before All Saints Day."

She stepped away from him, her eyes appearing a bright green. "It was mean I'm a lady."

"Yes. And I'm a man. That's not unusual."

She shook her head as she buried her hands in her skirts. "No,

new nomen is I'm of the peerage."

A knot started in his stomach. "Yes, that's true. But there's no way for us to keep us from marrying. Orinda and Ambrose married. We would smile following in their footsteps."

Her eyes narrowed. "But I'm not Orinda. I'm Juliet Hastings Abercorn. And you are Noah Kingman, not Ambrose. This is not 1727, it's out of the past. Still trying to fathom why any of it mattered if she loved him, he held her in his arms. "But you have no family to keep you from marrying, like Orinda's. I'm sure you would be glad to see her. From what you told me, your brother-in-law would be greatly relieved that he didn't have to send you your pin money."

"Yes, but unlike Orinda, I didn't run away from my life because I was in love. I was tossed out like kitchen slops. I only came here because I had nowhere else to go."

"So you wish you'd never come here?" The knot in his stomach tightened and he rock hard.

"No. I mean that I didn't come here seeking love." Her brows furrowed. "Are you sure you love me and not simply love Orinda's story?"

An icy thought entered his head that he couldn't ignore. "Do you remember me?"

Her gaze left his as she folded her arms across her stomach, but she didn't answer.

He dropped his arms and turned on his heel, heading for the door. The pain in his chest was too much to suffer in front of her.

"Where are you going?"

He turned the knob and pulled, but the door remained shut. Trying to pry it open, he yanked hard, but it didn't move. Anger overshadowed the pain.

"Noah, please. I need to understand. Can't we talk about this? We can talk about it. I beg good at talking."

He turned to face her. "No. Love is something you feel. You cannot sense and talk into it. I do not want you if you can't feel it." He raised his gaze to the portrait over the fireplace. "Orinda, you cannot make someone love you. Open this door now or I will break it down."

Behind him, the door squeaked and he turned to find it unlocked. Without another word, he yanked it open and slammed it shut behind him.

what I



law to
 uld be JULIET STARED AT the closed door, feeling as if a part of herself left with
 Did she love him? She didn't know. She'd never been in love. She
 s, Lady even considered marrying again. She faced the portrait and walked to
 ." not you. I wasn't in love before arriving."
 folded She pressed her hand to her chest as she remembered the look on
 Orinda's face when she said he was in love with Orinda's story. The hurt in her
 believed if made her stomach turn over. That he hurt upset her, but that she caused
 heartbreaking. She felt like the monster in *Beowulf*. How could she have
 was in the one person she cared about most?
 e I had Tears filled her eyes. Never had she felt so cruel. "Surely I must love
 if it hurts this much." She slumped into the small chair near the fire
 turned "But does he truly love me? Am I to marry him simply because you
 once arriving here?"
 rrowed. A noise near the settee caught her attention and she rose to see
 was. The diary, that had been closed, was open to the last page, which
 not love been blank the other day. She looked down at it on the small table
 anxiously read it aloud. "No sacrifice is too great for love."
 e didn't Her heart raced at the words, knowing they were Orinda's advice
 turned from the diary and looked at the portrait. "But am I in love?
 or. The he?"

The diary flew across the room and into the fire.

"No!" Her heart constricted as she raced to the fireplace. Knocking
 the book from the flames onto the floor, she beat them out with the
 broom, tears now streaming down her face.

The feeling of loss doubled. "Don't do that. Please don't. Just let
 I'm confused doesn't make your love story less beautiful. I'm not your
 wish I'd known you so I could be like you. I wish...."

She sunk to the floor, gently cradling the diary that had become
 her greatest treasure. She didn't know what she wished.

latched.
 him.



SHE'D DRUDGED THROUGH each day for the next fortnight. What had been

haunted haven was now just a cottage. No new words appeared in the air and nothing creaked open when she needed it. The only vestige of Noah that remained were the dreams, and they had turned frustrating, hadn't allowing her any satisfaction even in sleep.

it. "I'm And Noah had not returned. He'd sent friends to escort her to Silver Meadows, which made the cold ride even colder. She constantly fought Noah's and she missed him terribly, the cottage now a reminder of the joy his eyes shared with him.

and it was Today, she had planned to tell Lady Northwick she would move to the school since there was nothing left for her at Brambling Cottage.

ive hurt But last night changed everything. She was going to find Noah. After buttoning her blue spencer, she tied on her hat then pulled out her gloves. She looked out the window, waiting for the strange man who married her to saddle her horse to finish. Her heart raced, and a feeling of dread filled her.

ve him Her dreams changed last night. Noah lay in her bed, not moving, not breathing. She'd held his cold hand, desperately trying to encourage him to live, but the physician shook his head. She held out hope as Noah scolded her hand, but then Orinda, floating nearby, held her hand out to him and took it.

ce. She His hand went limp in hers and her heart broke apart, waking her. And is find herself crying. In that moment, she knew. She loved Noah and she wanted to see him, to tell him, and convince him to live. She didn't doubt her ability to do so.

ing the She just hoped it was a warning of what might be and was not willing to let anything already occurred.

nearby Finally, the man came out from the stables, and she left the cottage.

because "Good morning, my lady. I've come to escort you to Silver Meadows. The gray-haired man had to be as old as her grandmother before she died, but I

u, but I "I'm not going to Silver Meadows today. Would you be so good and escort me to Noah Kingman's house?"

me her The man lifted his cap and scratched his head. "Well, I don't know if that, my lady. I had very particular instructions. I don't think Mr. Kingman would be happy with me."

een her She wanted to rail at the man that Mr. Kingman was not in any condition to be unhappy with him, but she bit her tongue. Every moment that was wasted could be better spent caring for Noah. "Then if you would be so good as to help me mount."

ie diary “Yes, my lady.”

Orinda The man gave her a lift, and she settled in her sidesaddle. “Now, never not mistaken, Mr. Kingman’s house is down that path, correct?” She turned to the narrow, wooded path opposite her gate. Only Noah took that path. Silverall her escorts had come by the road.

ht tears The old man frowned. “I don’t rightly know, my lady.”

y she’d Frustrated and not a little peeved at the man constantly referring to her as “my lady,” she simply nodded. “I do believe that’s the way. Let us first go to the Without another word, she set her horse in that direction. Once on the path, she could see it was well worn and urged her horse on faster, not knowing where her escort was.

on her The ride through the dark wood was not long, but she had a bit of a ho was by the time she emerged onto a great lawn on the side of a house that had belonged to her late husband’s. Could this be where Noah labored? No doubt her presence here, barely would be looked upon as odd by whichever lord owned the place, but she knew him no longer cared.

ueezed Though it was very early, she rode up to the front steps and managed to dismount onto the middle one. Quickly, she tied her horse’s reins around a concrete knob at the bottom, picked up her skirts, and ascended the five steps. She knocked on the door. If Noah used the path to this estate, then she was bound to know where he was. She heard a male voice before the door opened.

hat had A young man who looked very much like Noah stood there gaping at her, his skin growing disturbingly pale. But he wasn’t Noah, as he was shorter, thinner, his hair lighter, and his eyes were hazel.

idows.” “I’m looking for Mr. Noah Kingman. Could you tell me where he lives? I believe he lives nearby?”

id as to “Orinda?” The man’s voice came out in a choked whisper.

Wanting to stamp her foot in frustration, she settled for tapping her foot. “I’m not Orinda. I’m Lady Juliet Finch.” She used her aunt’s name, hoping the man to know she was a neighbor. “Now can you help me?”

“Who is it, Jacob?”

ndition At the sound of Noah’s voice, her heart leapt. She brushed by the servant and crossed into what was a large parlor. At the other end, so kind toward her through an archway was Noah.

Tears of relief filled her eyes as she ran to him. She grasped his

the waist, manners be damned. This was the man she loved, and he wa
, if I'm
pointed
h while



NOAH WRAPPED HIS arms around Juliet. No matter how hurt he v
couldn't resist. His younger brother closed the door and arched a b
o her ashim. He lifted his shoulders. He had no idea why Juliet was at Royalv
id out." why she was crying. As much as he didn't want to care, his heart sque
ie path, her need for him.

wing or Moving his hands up to her shoulders, he gently pushed her back
at her. "Why have you come here?"

ie a chill She sniffed. "I was so worried, I couldn't arrive fast enough."

size of "Would you like to sit and explain?"

errand She nodded, a tremulous smile on her lips.

she no He led her over to a chair, but when he started to move aw
wouldn't release his hand. Hooking the closest chair leg with his f
aged topulled it over and sat. With his free hand, he retrieved a handkerchi
round ahis pocket and offered it to her.

ie steps. "Thank you." She released his hand to blow her nose.

omeone The noise sounded so much like a mouse squeak that he had to bite
ie door to keep from smiling. "Perhaps you should start at the beginning."

Immediately, her hand shot out and grabbed his, her blue-gree
g at her, trained on his own. "Tell me you are healthy. Have you been ill?"

is a bit "I haven't been ill. I am healthy."

She released him again and dabbed at her eyes. "I had a dream. No
he is? Ia nightmare. You were in bed, dying. I tried to keep you with me, but
was there. She was a ghost and she held out her hand to you and yo
took it." She dabbed at her eyes, new tears springing forth.

it. "No, Orinda? Why would she send... understanding dawned a
wanting admiration for the lady spirit, which was already high, rose even mo
had made Juliet understand what she felt for him. Though he didn't
approve, he appreciated the nudge. "So you wished to see if I was well

stunned "Yes, no, yes. I couldn't bear to lose you. I'm sorry that I said wha
striding I've never been in love before. I didn't understand."

His heart tripped at her words and his entire body grew tense. "W
n about

s alive! you understand?”

The frantic look in her eyes vanished as they softened, appearing for the first time in weeks. She smiled. “I love you, Noah. I didn’t know this is how love felt. I know now. I would be honored to be your wife if you’ll still have me.” Elation filled him. Embracing her, he captured her lips in a gentle kiss. She accepted with a nod of acceptance. He brushed back the tendrils of hair from her face and let her see his joy in his gaze. “I will. You have made me the happiest of men.”

He gazed at her. “And now, I’m the happiest of women.”

“Then may I be the first to congratulate you both.”

At Jacob’s voice, he released Juliet and frowned at his younger brother. “You do know eavesdropping is quite rude.”

Jacob, who leaned against the doorway with his legs crossed, unbothered by the interruption, bowed. “True, but I wasn’t asked to leave either.”

Before he could reprimand his brother further, Juliet tensed, pulling away from his arms. “Oh, I must apologize. Will your employer be upset I came here? I had to see you and didn’t care what anyone thought. I took your path through the woods to find you.”

That she’d searched him out no matter the social consequences cost her for him she truly did put him above all else. But he was puzzled. “What do you mean by my employer?”

She glanced over at Jacob and then at him. “I mean this house. You know, the man who gazes your brother have positions here?”

He grinned, but his brother laughed. “Noah, you had best tell the whole truth before any banns are read.” With that, he disappeared around the corner.

Orinda “What does he mean by the truth?” Her back came up straighter and her eyebrows knit.

He took her hand in his, though she let him grudgingly. “I haven’t told you. I have only withheld information based on what Orinda allowed me to see in the diary.”

Though her hand softened within his, she still frowned. “There were only a few blank pages left.”

“Yes, and I’m sure even as we speak, they will be complete. I remember reading how Orinda’s husband built a large house?”

She nodded.

“His good friend, Mr. Kingman, his partner in trade, also built

house. This is his house, or rather the part we're sitting in was his
ar more Then his son added on, and then my father added to it. I thought it was
felt, but large enough."

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened.

Quickly, before she could grow angry, he finished. "The man
his love married was the business partner of my great-grandfather. My
continued the trade portion of the business and now have many s
believe our ancestors' close relationship is why Orinda can send us dre

Her mouth snapped shut, and she pulled her hand from his and
brother her arms. "Orinda sent the dreams?"

He nodded, then stopped, questioning his own assumption. "I beli
crossed did. It could be her husband since he and my great-grandfather we
good friends. I cannot be completely sure."

She appeared to think seriously about his explanation. "I did dr
here? I you before having ever met you." Her brows suddenly lowered. "Did y
through Orinda conspire to make me fall in love with you?"

His face heated. "It's not that way. I believe Orinda wants you
rified happy, and she knew I had half fallen in love with her portrait as a
What do You were right. I was in love with her story. But I'm not so addle
confuse that with my deep love for you."

Juliet's eyes misted once again. "Then I'm very happy I had the g
of my great-aunt. I'm looking forward to a life filled with love and ha
ell this thanks to you both."

He rose and pulled her up with him. "Would you like to see you
home?"

She shook her head. "No. Wherever you are, I know I'll be happy."

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house. This is his house, or rather the part we're sitting in was his house. Then his son added on, and then my father added to it. I thought it was plenty large enough."

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened.

Quickly, before she could grow angry, he finished. "The man Orinda married was the business partner of my great-grandfather. My family continued the trade portion of the business and now have many ships. I believe our ancestors' close relationship is why Orinda can send us dreams."

Her mouth snapped shut, and she pulled her hand from his and crossed her arms. "Orinda sent the dreams?"

He nodded, then stopped, questioning his own assumption. "I believe she did. It could be her husband since he and my great-grandfather were such good friends. I cannot be completely sure."

She appeared to think seriously about his explanation. "I did dream of you before having ever met you." Her brows suddenly lowered. "Did you and Orinda conspire to make me fall in love with you?"

His face heated. "It's not that way. I believe Orinda wants you to be happy, and she knew I had half fallen in love with her portrait as a youth. You were right. I was in love with her story. But I'm not so addled as to confuse that with my deep love for you."

Juliet's eyes misted once again. "Then I'm very happy I had the guidance of my great-aunt. I'm looking forward to a life filled with love and happiness thanks to you both."

He rose and pulled her up with him. "Would you like to see your future home?"

She shook her head. "No. Wherever you are, I know I'll be happy."



Epilogue

Brambling Cottage
All Hallows Eve

JULIET STARED AT the flames in the fireplace, happy that it would be a quiet night in her haunted haven for a while. Tomorrow, she would take a common name like Orinda did almost a hundred years earlier Kingman.

“Are you warm enough?” Noah joined her on the settee, lifting a blanket to cover both of them.

She linked her fingers with his. “I am now. Do you think she’ll come?”

“I think she will. I believe she wants to share in our happiness. Perhaps she gloats that she was right that we needed each other.”

“Oh, I did need you. Even more than I knew. But you always knew.”

“Not quite.” He squeezed her hand. “Oh, I thought I knew, but it wasn’t until your coach pulled up to the cottage and I saw you for the first time. Something inside me shifted.”

“Are you sure that wasn’t Orinda whispering in your ear?”

He chuckled. “I’m positive. I’ve never heard a sound from her. I only felt her presence and accepted the dreams as from her.”

She desperately wanted to thank her great-aunt for bringing Noah home. “It must be getting close to—look!” She pointed as an apparition of Orinda floated toward them from the fireplace. Her heart pounded with love for the woman before her. “Aunt Orinda.”

Noah stood, bringing her to her feet as well. “Thank you for coming home.”

She held his hand tight, afraid to move. “Thank you, Aunt, for bringing me here and telling me your story.”

Orinda smiled and gave them a nod.

“We will continue to care for your home here.” Noah’s assurance pleased her.

Juliet couldn't resist and blurted out her excitement. "We're married tomorrow."

Orinda nodded again, giving them a knowing look.

Noah laughed. "Yes, we will get started on a family right away, you."

Her great-aunt winked. Then two hands appeared on her shoulder and a man's visage grew clear next to hers as he floated behind her. He appeared dark and pulled back in a queue. His lips lifted under a thick mustache and his eyes crinkled as he smiled at them.

Orinda leaned her head back against Ambrose, then she looked at her last and made a kiss in the air before fading into nothingness.

Juliet's heart filled with joy as a single tear tracked down her face.

– Mrs. "What is it, love?"

She smiled as she looped her arms around Noah's neck. "Just a teasing for all of us."

As his lips descended upon hers, laughter filled the cottage with love, and promises for the future... from the past.

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The End?

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Juliet couldn't resist and blurted out her excitement. "We're getting married tomorrow."

Orinda nodded again, giving them a knowing look.

Noah laughed. "Yes, we will get started on a family right away, just for you."

Her great-aunt winked. Then two hands appeared on her shoulders and a man's visage grew clear next to hers as he floated behind her. His hair appeared dark and pulled back in a queue. His lips lifted under a thick beard and his eyes crinkled as he smiled at them.

Orinda leaned her head back against Ambrose, then she looked at them and made a kiss in the air before fading into nothingness.

Juliet's heart filled with joy as a single tear tracked down her face.

"What is it, love?"

She smiled as she looped her arms around Noah's neck. "Just a tear of joy for all of us."

As his lips descended upon hers, laughter filled the cottage with warmth, love, and promises for the future... from the past.

The End?

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Marrying a Mabry Series

[Stealing the Duke \(Book 1\)](#)

[Painting the Earl \(Book 2\)](#)

[Revealing the Viscount \(Book 3\)](#)

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About Lexi Post

Lexi Post is a New York Times and USA Today best-selling author of romance inspired by the classics. She spent years in higher education and teaching courses about the classical literature she loved. From Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death" to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, she's read, studied, and taught wonderful classics.

But Lexi's first love is romance novels so she married her two first loves: romance and the classics. Whether it's dashing dukes, hot immortals, sexy cowboys, or hunks from out of this world, Lexi provides a sexy experience with a "whole lotta story."

Lexi is living her own happily ever after with her husband and 11 cats in Florida. She makes her own ice cream every weekend, loves colors, and you'll never see her without a hat.

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Once Upon a Haunted Romance

Mary Lancaster

Once Upon a Haunted Romance

Mary Lancaster



Chapter One

GEORGE'S HIRED CHAISE lost a wheel some three miles from the next inn. Since the sky was already beginning to darken with both storm and dusk, he chose not to shelter in the wrecked carriage, but to take and walk on to the inn, from where he would send help back to the post and the horses.

Tired as he was, George enjoyed the walk. Since deciding to come from his travels, he seemed to have spent far too much of his time cocooned in carriages, and his body appreciated the opportunity to stretch. How could he doubt he would appreciate the soaking once the storm clouds broke and strode on at a cracking pace.

Even so, he could hear thunder rumbling away in the distance, and rain came on before he could have been more than halfway there.

The posting inn was on the edge of a village. It was not hard to find in the dark, since the racket of voices, music, and laughter penetrated the bellow of the rain on his hat, and even the louder rumbles of thunder.

The inn was so packed that at first no one noticed his quiet entrance. The taproom seemed to have overflowed into the coffee room. A fiddle was scraping away in one corner. A few young women were screaming with laughter from the laps of young gentlemen. A cockfight appeared to be in place in the middle of the room, surrounded by raucous gentlemen offering encouragement to the birds and waving money around. In fact, for a large crowd, it seemed to have a disproportionate number of gentlemen and more ordinary country folk and travelers of other classes.

George did not care for crowds, particularly of the unexpected and disorganized variety. The flying feathers and blood made him feel as if he had to hold on to his purpose quite hard to force himself to stay. He tilted his hat, gripping it far too hard. The sea of noise was overwhelming and seemed to drown him.

From the depths of the heaving masses, a harassed-looking man in a white apron, a feather clinging to his hair, squeezed through to him.

“Evening, sir. Can I help you?”

“My post-chaise lost a wheel three miles back on the Dover Road. My postillions need help to get the horses and the vehicle to the inn. I need a room for the night and dinner.”

If anything, the innkeeper looked even more harassed. “I’ll send a posting of ostlers to do what they can. Your postillions can bed down in the stable with the grooms. But as for a private bedchamber, sir, I couldn’t do it. My business here depended on it.” He flapped one hand around the chaos. “The cockfight prizefight in the neighborhood tomorrow, and it’s brought all the people down from London and God knows where else. To say nothing of the people here of lesser men. I like business as much as the next innkeeper, but I’m a bit of a fool. My wife will be after blood—*more* blood, and probably never, when she finds they’re holding cockfights in here...”

It was a long time since anything had panicked George, but he could feel it rising up from his toes now.

“When will they go to bed?”

“Half of them ain’t got beds,” the innkeeper said. “They’ll have to bed down here, which I admit I wouldn’t care for myself.”

“Neither would I,” George said, desperation clamoring. “Can you suggest me nothing else? Discomfort I will live with, but it has to be private.”

“I got nothing like that, sir. Even my own servants are bundled together, and my whole family’s in one room. I can ask if anyone will give up their chamber for a gentleman, but I tell you now, I wouldn’t have time for taking breath.” Perhaps he read the panic in George’s face, for he turned his head and yelled the nearest table. “Here, anyone like to give this poor, soaked gentleman a bed and sleep down here?”

“Not me, I’m going home to my Jenny,” rumbled a countryman.

A traveler of indeterminate rank shook his head furiously. “Sorry, but I’m not for the king himself! I was here first, and here I stay.”

“Perhaps there is another hostelry in the area?” George said, trying to look off through the noise.

“Not round here, no,” the innkeeper said. “And to be honest, no one in the village will open their doors to a stranger. But you’re welcome to kip down here for nothing—dinner and breakfast half price.”

n in an “I’d rather sleep outside in the rain.” It was truth, if vaguely insu
the innkeeper, so George hoped he hadn’t said it aloud.

“Oh, I don’t know,” the countryman said with a grin George didn
ad. Thelike. “There’s Hazel House. Loads of space up there. I’m sure the w
quire abe happy to look after a gentleman.”

“Ain’t no call for that, Jack,” the innkeeper scolded, though Geor
coupleno idea why.

stables “What?” Jack demanded innocently.

it if my George didn’t care. “A lodging house? Where do I find it?”

ere’s a “Straight through the village and take the right fork,” Jack said he
qualityA man on his other side grinned and nudged him. George saw it but
hordesupset to analyze the meaning.

this is “Good half-hour’s walk or more, though,” the innkeeper warned,
nine!—at Jack and his friend. “You’ll get soaked in this weather. If the li
doesn’t get you. And she’ll likely not let you stay, anyway.”

uld feel But George, eager to be away from the inn, was already making
door, calling over his shoulder, “You won’t forget to send someone
with the post-chaise and horses?”

o sleep “No, it’s in hand, sir, but...”

George waited for no more. He almost crashed through the inn
u offerdoor in his haste to leave. For an instant, the pleasure of having the ba
stone and wood between him and the noise and the sea of raucous st
king inwas intense. Rain pattered on his head. He put his hat back on, and w
give upoff the brim and down the back of his neck. He shivered and set off t
old mythe village.

istily to The thunder rumbled closer. The rain was about to get heavier.
an their



friend, THUNDER CRASHED JUST as Francesca parted the curtains to let Mark see
window. The boy jumped with excitement and climbed on to the wind
ying toto peer into the darkness.

“I can’t see anything!” he said, disappointed, while the thun
I doubtrumbled away into silence. “Just rain on the glass.”

elcome “In a few moments, you’ll probably see some lightning in the sky

ting to flash, and then you have to count until the thunder sounds to tell how
away the storm is.” Francesca tried to keep her voice calm, since she
’t quite want to communicate her own foolish fear of thunderstorms to her son.
idow’she really wanted to do was hide them both under a thick blanket and
her fingers in her ears.

ge had But she forced herself to sit on the window seat while Mark stood
her, avidly waiting. It wasn’t long. Lightning flashed, sudden and
illuminating the figure of a man near the window.

Francesca gasped and leapt up, whisking Mark off the seat.

lpfully. “Did you see the man?” he asked, wriggling excitedly. “Was it Papa?”

was too The clatter of thunder prevented her having to answer. *Of course
not Papa. Papa has been dead for more than two years, half of your life.*
glaringnever wanted him to forget his father, but nor did she want him to
ghtninghim in every shadow or stranger lurking in the garden...

Why was a stranger in the garden in the midst of a storm? C
for the shoulders hunched against the battering rain, moving quickly
to help purposefully...

The thunder quietened again into a much closer, insistent knocking.
Her breath caught. Mark realized it at the same time.

’s front “Someone’s at the door!” He broke free of her, rushing across the
irrier of “It is Papa!”

rangers “Marco, it isn’t.” The words stuck in her throat as she started after

ater ran Lightning flashed again, followed by an almost immediate
through thunder that made her jump almost out of her skin. By the time she
move, Mark was out of the room. She hurried after him into the
snatching up the nearest candlestick on her way.

At once, a blast of cold air hit her, along with the too-loud pelting
rain on the ground outside. The candles flickered crazily.

In front of Mark’s tiny figure, the front door stood open and the
out the threatening figure of a man stepped into the house. He slammed the
ow seat behind him.

Francesca flew forward to grasp Mark by the shoulder. Just touching
derclapfelt like a massive relief, but she still had the stranger to deal with. He
dripping, to face her. She raised the candle higher to glare at him.

, like a He was a stranger, too tall, too masculine, and far too much in her
He stood still, a large, wet bag and beaver hat grasped in one hand,

How far from Mark to her. Rain streamed off the capes of his greatcoat like a waterfall. In the candlelight, the hair at his temples glistened silver. His face was unreadable but did not appear immediately threatening.

“You’re not Papa,” Mark said.

“No, I’m not anyone’s papa,” the man agreed. His voice was hoarse, perhaps from the weather, or from surprise, and yet gave an impression of vagueness. But his eyes, lifting to Francesca’s once more, were remarkably clear and direct.

“You have no business here,” Francesca said icily. “Where the devil are you?”

“No. Forgive me,” the stranger said. At least he sounded like a gentleman. “The boy let me in, and I’m afraid I was so wet I didn’t want to imagine further invitation.”

Words stuck in her throat. Should she betray vulnerability by saying, “I am alone, apart from two ancient servants, so you have to go”? Or should she simply, rudely, command him to leave?

One should not send a dog out in such weather. And the stranger was already soaked to the skin.

“You cannot stay here,” she said, more annoyed with the situation than with him.

Besides, even as she said the words, she realized how powerless she was to enforce them. He was bigger, stronger, and all of her haughtiness could not compensate for the fact that behind her stood only a doddering elderly woman and even they must be asleep.

An expression of resignation crossed the man’s face. He inclined his head, picked up his sodden bag from the floor where he had dropped it, and turned to the front door, reaching for the latch. Water spilled off his shoulders down his neck, over his gloves. He was shivering with cold.

“He *could* be Papa,” Mark said doubtfully.

He could not, of course, and he wasn’t. But Percival had been a knight in his time, too, caught in many a storm. And this man clearly was a knight, as she bade him.

“Wait,” she said, before she could think, let alone talk herself out of it. “Why did you come *here*?”

“They said in the village you might have room. The inn is packed with gazing gunnells, and I could not face spending the night in the coffee room.”

a small hordes of strange drunks.”

His face She swallowed, keeping her gaze on his face and hoping she wasn't to make the worst mistake of her life. “Mark, go and fetch Martin. He must have heard the door for the noise of the thunder.”

a little Mark grinned and ran off. He was too starved of company not to welcome a stranger. There was guilt in that, but mostly she was concerned for the weretraveler.

She glanced at his sodden bag. At least it appeared to be made of wool. “Have you dry clothes in there?”

“I hope so.”

like a “If they are damp, Martin will bring you something of my husband's. I will show you to a room to change, and then you had better come to the drawing room. There is at least a fire there. Martin will show you the way, Myshe added, to make sure he understood he would not be left alone to go? Or the house.

“Thank you.” He slid his hand off the latch with unmistakable relief. “Give me your hat and your coat,” she commanded.

Obediently, he peeled them off, but hung them on the empty hooks on the coat stand instead.

Mark bounced back through the baize door with Martin wheezing behind him. They had come so quickly that she knew Martin must already have reached halfway up the stairs when Mark found him.

couple. “Martin, be so good as to show this gentleman to the spare room and let him have anything of Mr. Hazel's that he might need. Then bring him to the drawing room.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Martin replied, scowling at her, though whether from his hair, of the effort required or her admission of a strange man to the house, he could not tell.

The stranger meekly followed the old man upstairs, carrying his overcoat. Thunder rumbled into the distance.

about to Francesca took the dripping beaver hat from its hook and passed it to Mark before lifting the overcoat, heavy with moisture. “We'll take it to the kitchen to dry,” she said, and Mark happily followed her back again.

led to the There, she asked Ada to make tea while she hung the overcoat on the kitchen stove. Hastily, she made a few sandwiches under Ada's

glower and carried the tray up to the drawing room herself.

't about She was only just in time. She heard Martin's slow tread on the sta
e won't then a murmur of voices before quick, sure footsteps across the hall f
knock sounded on the drawing room door.

welcome "Come in!" Mark called cheerfully.

with the The stranger entered with a somehow endearing lack of certain
much arrogance, or even self-confidence, would have appalled her ju
leather, and probably sent her from the room, dragging Mark in her wake. But
the man's gentlemanly posture and clearly excellent clothing, his exp
was apologetic and wary.

d's. He In fact, it came to her that he was anxious.

to the "Forgive me. I was mistaken," he said.

e way," His hasty speech calmed her further. "Sit down and tell me how, o
wander Take the chair nearest the fire—you must be chilled to the bone. Do y
your tea with cream and sugar?"

of. "Just sugar, thank you." He took the cup from her with a nod th
almost a bow and took himself off to the opposite chair. Mark gazed
s on the with an interest that did not appear to disconcert him—at least r
further.

behind The stranger said, "I thought from the way the men spoke at the i
ve been this was some kind of rooming house. It is clearly no such thing. I c
beg your pardon for disturbing you. Is it improper for me to stay here?"

1. Lend Francesca sighed. "I think you were misled rather than mistaken, si
to the His eyebrows flew up. "Deliberately? Why?"

"I am foreign. I have no husband to protect me, and they choose t
because the worst. I believe you were not meant to believe me the landlac
ise, she rooming house, but rather a merry widow who welcomes the comp
single gentlemen."

own bag. The stranger blushed, which enchanted her.

"I am glad the possibility did not cross your mind," she said frank
ed it to I really would throw you out in the storm."

hese to "Perhaps you should anyway. It is already lessening, and if you ar
k down here apart from servants..."

Mark laughed. "Don't be silly. She has me!"

lose to "That must be a great comfort to her," the stranger said gravely.

artin's "What's your name?" Mark asked him. "I'm Mark, though Man

me Marco sometimes.”

irs, and “George.” The stranger set his cup and saucer on the table beside the floor. He delved into his pocket. Holding a visiting card between his fingers, he moved over to offer it to Francesca. “I meant to give you this when I came in.”

Slowly, she lifted her gaze from the card to his face. “You just tell me your name is George.”

“George is my middle name. My friends use it. But I am officially Sir Arthur.”

This time it was she who blushed, at being over suspicious. “Francesca Hazel,” she murmured, and inhaled too quickly as a clap of thunder sounded closer once more. At least she did not jump or spill her tea. Sir Arthur’s brows twitched as though he had noticed her reaction, but he said nothing. “My papa is Percival Hazel,” Mark informed him proudly. “He was a great violinist and composer, but he died.”

“I’m very sorry,” Sir Arthur said sincerely, although in truth, Mark sounded remotely sad. He didn’t, as a rule. “I have heard of him, of course.”

“Perhaps you heard him play?” Francesca said.

“Sadly not.” He seemed to feel something more was called for, but he added, “I have been away a good deal.”

“Abroad?” Francesca asked, hoping he had been to Italy.

“Some of the time.”

“Of course it was difficult for him to play in Europe during the war with the peace of 1814, he played in Paris and Vienna, and all over Italy. I think he felt obliged to take us home when Bonaparte escaped.”

“I did not go abroad until 1815,” Sir Arthur said. “Just before Waterloo.” Curious timing. She did not say so aloud.

“I am returning home from Africa,” he offered.

Her eyes widened. “What took you there?”

“Curiosity. I went to Egypt, originally, to see the tombs. I would have stayed longer, but I have responsibilities at home.”

“Of course. Have a sandwich. Tell me about Egypt.”

He began a little hesitantly, as if unsure what, if anything, she wanted to hear, but after she asked a couple of questions, and Mark expressed his amazement, his natural enthusiasm seemed to carry him away. He was well, with considerable knowledge, a deep understanding, and occa-

subtle humor that she almost missed. She found herself transported under a burning sun, among people of wildly different customs and beliefs. She leaned back into a past that was both fascinating and frightening.

” Because she was so spellbound, it was some time before she noticed. Mark had apparently lost interest. He had wandered off to the sofa near the window and was sitting smiling, as though at something or someone she could not see.

ally Sir Her stomach gave one of its uneasy twinges.

Mark laughed. “No, I like him. He’s funny.”

ancesca Sir Arthur stopped talking and glanced at Marco, then back to Francesca who smiled faintly.

Arthur’s “He’s playing,” she said, hoping it was true.

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Chapter Two

GEORGE HAD JUST got comfortable. Warm and dry, in quiet, peaceful surroundings, with warm tea and food in his belly and the company of a gentle, beautiful young woman. She seemed so interested in his story that he had almost forgotten they were strangers. He liked to make her smile and watch the array of expressions cross her face and know she understood. He liked her voice too, low and musical and intriguingly accented.

And then the boy seized his hand. “Come and meet my papa!”

George kept his gaze on the boy, holding on to her words, *He’s papa* that he did not quite believe. They had all said “Papa” was dead. The boy was the inn who had called her a widow, Mark, Mrs. Hazel herself. Was he being fooled in some way again?

It did not happen often, and he had taught himself to recognize the signs of a scammer, the flamboyant men and women, the liars and the cheats. There weren’t many of them and he had felt no such alarm bells with her.

The boy was smiling, but his eyes were serious. He really wanted to meet someone. Without looking at Mrs. Hazel, he rose and let Mark lead him to the sofa.

“This is my papa,” the boy said proudly. “Papa, this is George, who got caught in the storm. We’re letting him stay because he is kind.”

George looked where the boy was looking—at the back of the sofa. He felt a little frisson of memory, one deeply buried in his own childhood. Showing a very different adult someone no one else in the room could see. And just for a moment, he imagined he *did* see a man sitting on the sofa, a misty, insubstantial figure with wild, merry eyes and a sensitive mouth. He shivered, and the illusion vanished.

Mark laughed. “Papa says you had better be, but he is only joking. Tell him you like him.”

“Enough, Marco,” his mother interrupted, as though she were trying to

to speak too sharply. "It is past time for bed, and the storm is quiet goodnight to Sir George."

For some reason, the name surprised him. People either called him Arthur, or just George, depending on when and how they knew him. He wasn't quite sure why he had told the boy he was called George, except there was an honesty in such young children, and George was more related to who he was. Sir Arthur was who he had become, the miracle that enabled him to travel where he willed, meet interesting people, learn a great deal more than just books, make decisions. But at heart, he was still George. "Good night, Sir George!" Mark said enthusiastically. George smiled. "I feel I should be slaying dragons when you call me goodnight." "Good night."

"Can I help slay the dragons?" Mark asked over his shoulder. His mother led him from the room.

"Of course. You shall be my apprentice."

Mark grinned at him, in clear expectation of an exciting new game. It was Francesca's smile that stunned him. Part amused, part grateful, it softened her watchful, anxious eyes and made them sparkle. Her whole face lit up with a beauty that deprived him of breath.

Fortunately, she turned away from him, so she couldn't have been suspecting the effect of her mere smile upon him.

Mere? There was nothing mere about it.

George liked to look at beauty. Beautiful women were no exception; they did not usually tongue-tie him. Some of his closest friends were beautiful women—Lady Hera, for example, his first true friend who had shown him the way to freedom and truth.

But this girl, this mother, was nothing like Hera. Nor any of the women who had moved him since. She was a widow, the wife of a great man, yet someone the villagers had felt free to play unkind tricks on. He should have been here, threatening her already precarious reputation, and yet the layers and facets of her character fascinated him.

Of course, he was given to obsessions. Once he had solved the puzzle, he revealed everything to his own satisfaction, he was usually prepared to move on to the next. For this woman's safety, he should move on *now*.

He was pacing between the shuttered window and a large, black piano that he had barely noticed before. He used it now as

er. Say deliberate distraction, running his hand over the smooth, polished
depressing the occasional key to appreciate the tone and timbre of a
him Sirnote, perfectly in tune.

im. He “Do you play, Sir Arthur?”

ept that Her voice from the doorway took him by surprise. He realized
closely sorry not to be Sir George to her still.

cle that “No.” He straightened. “I never learned. The pianoforte was always
n from drawing room. But I like to listen.”

She looked slightly confused by that but did not ask anything, for
he was grateful. He did not want to say to her, *I was an odd child
ne that embarrassed my parents in front of guests, so they kept me
pretending I was ill and then dead.* “Do you play?” he asked hastily.

as his “Sometimes.” Another flash of lightning penetrated the room, a
breath caught. Her shoulders tensed as she waited for the crash of thunder
used to be quite good.”

But it “Used to be?” He frowned. The rumble of thunder was quite distant
eful, it she relaxed visibly.

e being “Yes. I used to play all the time. Now, I need to be in a certain mood
has to practice constantly to keep the skill honed.”

egun to Something slotted into place in his mind. “You were a player, like
husband.”

She tilted her head with a hint of defiance, daring him to criticize.
ion, but how I met him. We performed at the same theatre in Naples, and then
s were together many times.”

ho had “But his death changed everything for you,” he guessed.

“Of course. But playing was already difficult by then.”

women “Why?” he asked.

usician, Her body jerked, very slightly, as though she would turn away from
ould not and he knew he had been too blunt. But before he could apologize, she
e many a rush, “War. Guns and panic that cleared the concert hall. Soldiers
rampage, shooting everywhere. Now I need peace in order to play
uzzle or stared at him, clearly appalled by her own words. “I’m sorry. I didn’t
o move say that, and you didn’t wish to hear it. Your honesty is catching.”

She snatched her hand off the piano, as though afraid it would shake
eautiful from impulse he caught it, holding it lightly but firmly, wishing
a quite comfort, because he too had been lonely and frightened in his life.

curves, fingers were soft and slender. They jumped in his, and then, before he could single release her and apologize, they gripped his hand hard while thunder rolled off into the distance.

"I have met soldiers who can no longer bear the sound of guns," he said as the thunder washed over him. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing. I hid beneath a harpsicord in a store cupboard until the soldiers were gone. Percival found me there. But I never forgot the fear, or the shame, because I thought I would never see him again. And now I never will."

"Does Mark see him? Or is he really just playing?"

Her eyes widened. She seemed to have forgotten her hand resting on the harpsicord. Her mouth, curiously vulnerable, opened to speak and then closed again.

Slowly, she drew her hand free. "He imagines he does. As if he were, and her wishing would make it true." She moved toward the sofa and sat down. "Almost exactly where Mark had been staring."

"Can he still remember what he looks like?" George asked.

"He seems to. He knew you were not Percival as soon as he saw you, but clearly, but he hopes. He is lonely."

He was not, George thought sadly, the only one. "Because the vicars are cruel?"

She nodded once.

"What is their problem with you? Just because you are *different* to the others?"

"That and...the vicar's wife cut me when she realized I had played public for money. *On the stage like a common actress*, I believe with precise words." She shrugged. "Often, the ordinary people take their anger from those they imagine are their betters. While Percival was alive, it was not so bad, but after his death, their hostility grew more open. Now I hear things like *foreign whore* spoken quite openly when I walk into the villa. I tell myself, I don't really care, but what if Mark hears and understands?"

George was appalled. "Intolerable!" He threw himself down on the floor beside her. "Who is the magistrate?"

"I will not involve the law and allow such accusations to be official." She said. "He closed his mouth, swallowing down his objections. He saw the dilemma, whatever the injustice. "So what *will* you do?"

"Pretend I do not hear or care. Show that they will never frighten me."

He met her gaze. "Do they?"

"Not when I do not care. I do not want to care."

he could “Not to care is not to be alive.”

umbled A frown flickered across her face and vanished, but he thought irritated her. “What or who do you care about, Sir Arthur, called George did. “Or He could not help smiling. “Many things now—many people that did not even know about.”

ey were She studied him until his eyes slid away. He liked her too much already, be comfortable with her displeasure.

’ But she did not sound displeased, just curious. “You are unworldly, are you not?”

g in his. “Yes,” he admitted. “I am only just discovering it. In reality, I do in. feel like a very well-educated child.”

though “Why? What is your story, Sir George? What dragons have you slain down, “Internal ones, largely.”

“You don’t want to tell me,” she said shrewdly. “Even though I have you my secrets.”

aw you “Not all of them. But you are right. I am wary of contempt.”

She looked gratifyingly startled. “Do you deserve it?”

illagers “My friends would say not.” From the corner of his eye, some motion distracted him, but when he glanced around, there was nothing there flickering candles. He felt again the shiver of memory, of an old, long them?” sensitivity.

ayed in “Someone walked over your grave,” she observed. “A peculiar here hersaying.”

ir cues “It is,” he agreed, and began a humorous debate on the derivation was not phrase. It made her laugh, as he intended, and for a little they r words compared English, Latin, and modern Italian oddities.

ge. For Inevitably, the conversation broadened and led down unexpected that were both intriguing and fun. Until he realized there had been no he sofa for an hour and the rain had receded. He rose with strange reluctance bowed.

l.” “Once again, my thanks for your kindness and for your company here evening. I will bid you goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” she responded, standing with him. “But if there were.” kindness on my part, I believe you have repaid it.”

“I wish I could.” He wanted to take her hand and kiss it, but circumstances, it would have been highly inappropriate. Even

appropriate than imposing on her hospitality unchaperoned.

Since there was nothing else to do, he walked away and crossed the passage to the stairs, where he lit one of the small candles and found his way into the bedchamber in which he had changed.

A fire had been lit there, taking the chill off the wet autumn evening. In addition to the thoughtfulness he had not expected from the ancient manservant, a little he prepared for bed.

Wondering about her life here, about her son and her talented late husband, he prepared for bed.

Only as he was about to blow out the final candle and lay his head on the pillow did he become aware of the tension within the room.

George was sensitive to what he thought of as “atmosphere,” something from his childhood, when he had so often failed to understand people’s expressions behind their words. Instead, he had relied on undercurrents he could not name, until he had found his way back to the safety of his comfortable space.

Only much later had he come to understand that the safety lay not in a physical room but in himself. Curiosity had outweighed fear and false bravado, enabling him to consider many more thoughts and actions and begin to understand what he always should have. However, some atmospheres were still best avoided—buried—like the raucous inn—because they jangled his nerves in acute discomfort.

There was no noise in the bedchamber except his own breathing, the English rustling of the bedclothes, the occasional gentle movement of the glowing coal in the guarded fireplace. And yet there was hostility here. Like the father’s when he was disappointed. Like Nurse when she could not get him to happily grin, or his brother Hugh when the numbers did not go as he wanted them to.

And yet there was no one but George in the room.

So who was angry with him?

His skin prickled. Was someone else in the room? One of the maids or servants? Mark?

No. No one had come in—the door creaked, and he would have heard it. He was alone.

But he did sense *something*: a presence, an emotion, perhaps? Was it any emotion.

A breeze blew over his skin, raising the hair on his arms and his hair. He almost leapt out of bed, except that he could see from the glow of the fire. Less there was no one else in the room.

Old houses were drafty.

the hall He closed his eyes and tried to relax. He could hear music. A
back to playing something wild yet elegant. Vivaldi? He smiled because it mu
been Francesca, even though her favored instrument was not the vic
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l on the from a room along the passage. It sounded too close, too intimate, in th
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The fire flared into a single flame that quickly died. And just
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Old houses were drafty.

He closed his eyes and tried to relax. He could hear music. A violin, playing something wild yet elegant. Vivaldi? He smiled because it must have been Francesca, even though her favored instrument was not the violin but the pianoforte.

His eyes flew open. Francesca had gone to her own chamber. He had heard her footsteps on the stairs and the passage, the closing of her bedroom door. The music was not loud, but it did not come from the room below, *or* from a room along the passage. It sounded too close, too intimate, in this very room...

Or perhaps just in his head. Was he as mad as his father had claimed?

The music was beautiful, the playing exquisite, and yet it came with some kind of threat. Anger. A warning. He stared toward the glow in the fireplace.

“Percival,” he murmured.

The fire flared into a single flame that quickly died. And just for an instant, a man’s figure seemed to form in the darkness, wispy and insubstantial.

“I won’t hurt her,” George said. “I won’t hurt either of them.”

Abruptly, the atmosphere eased, and the imagined figure vanished as though it had never been—which it probably hadn’t. George was alone in a warm, comfortable room. Even the wind no longer howled outside, and the rain was gentle, intermittent against the windowpanes.

He felt foolish, talking to an imaginary ghost. And yet in some ways it made sense that something of Percival lingered in this house, watching over his wife and child. It was as if Percival had identified himself to George with the music—however that was even possible—and made his warning plain. If George had intended any action against anyone in the house, he would undoubtedly have dropped it.

As it was, he felt a touch of guilt, because his attraction to Francesca was strong, and shame, because he was in danger of believing in the impossible.



Chapter Three

FRANCESCA LAY AWAKE for some time, thinking about her strangely ap-
guest.

She liked his serious expression and his sudden, sweet smile. She
his instinctive kindness and the way he focused on what she—or Mark
She liked that he never imposed.

And, if she was strictly honest, she liked the way he looked, v
bronzed skin and his distinguished, handsome features. From the
graying of the hair at his temples, she guessed he was around forty ye
a little older than her, pleasingly mature and yet with an air of
childlike innocence.

The admiration she read in his eyes had surprised her but not frig
her. And he had taken no liberties apart from holding her hand once, a
had been comfort, not attempted seduction. He seemed very open and
and yet mysterious too. She knew he was hiding something about his p

Well, everyone was entitled to privacy. She had not needed to t
about her fear of thunder and its association with the theatre attack... S
never told anyone before. She and Percival had rarely even discu
because it came so close to separating them forever. Percival ex
himself through music, and he had cared deeply. But he had been too
to be very observant.

George had *noticed* her fear, and he had seemed to admire rath
judge, understand rather than pretend. And curiously, it helped. I
stayed talking to her merely to distract her, out of kindness?

She liked kindness. But for the first time since Percival's dea
wanted to be *liked*. To be admired as a man admired a woman. She
George to desire her as, God help her, she desired him. Which was
dangerous in the circumstances.

But she had been a widow for two years, and she could not h

stirrings of her body or her odd tug of attraction to the intriguing s
She savored the feeling, reveling in the secret heat spreading thro
body, imagining his kiss, the touch of his hands...the intimate, deli
physical loving she had known only with Percival.

George would be a different kind of lover, gentler, sweeter, with
understanding and self-control of maturity. He would seek her p
always... Her body began to throb, making her shift restlessly, tangl
pealinglimbs in the sheets.

How wonderful would it be to seduce him from that self-discipli
ie likedoccasionally?

—said. She gasped at the sudden ferocity of need—and Mark’s laughter ra
instantly dousing the foolish fantasy. She leapt out of bed and felt her
with histhe connecting door to Mark’s room. A night light was always lef
e slightburning very low. In its faint glow, Mark was sitting up against the p
ars old,grinning at something at the foot of his bed. He laughed again, turn
almosthappy gaze toward Francesca.

“Look, Papa! Mama is here and can answer for herself.”

ghtened Pain twisted through her, along with a frisson she could not e
ind thatThere was guilt that he needed his father so much that he imagin
d blunt,presence, helplessness because she did not know what to do. At first, s
ast. thought it a phase that would pass and had said little to disillusion him
ell himshe wondered if she had done the right thing. Should she have nipped
She hadbud from the beginning?

essed it “She certainly can,” she said. “And so can you. Why are you not as
pressed “Papa woke me.”

selfish Deliberately, she sat at the foot of the bad, as close as she could to
he had been gazing when she first entered. For an instant, she imagi
er thanwarmth of another presence, familiar and welcome, and old grief r
Had hewith irritation at her own weakness.

“Marco,” she said gently, “Papa is always with us, in our hea
th, shememories. Wishing he was still alive does not make it so.”

wanted “Oh, I know that, but he is here. Right beside you.”

highly She blinked, trying to find the right response.

“We were just laughing at how wet poor Sir George was w
elp thearrived,” Mark said cheerfully. “Papa said he looked like a fountain!”

“Well, so would you if you had walked from the village in that

stranger. Although you would have been a much smaller one.”

ugh her Mark grinned, then his gaze slid to the side of her. “Papa says you can’t hear him.”

“I can’t.” She sat forward, reaching out her hand to him. “Marco—

all the “He wants to know if you like Sir George.”

pleasure Her hand fell back into her lap. “Why don’t you just ask me you want to know?”

ing his “Oh, I know. I can tell you like him. So do I. But Papa worries, because he is a stranger and because of the recent trouble.”

ne, just Francesca deliberately smoothed out her forming frown. There had been a series of annoying tricks this last month—mostly people knocking things out of the way to do so and hiding. She had blamed children, probably put up to it by her parents, either directly or indirectly. They died away when she had reacted. Though Martin had tottered after someone into the woods.

ing his Had the incidents worried Mark more than she had seen at the time? “We don’t need to worry about such jokes,” she said lightly. “And I believe Sir George is a perfect gentleman.”

explain. Again, Mark glanced away from her. After a pause, he said, “I need his better be—according to Papa.”

she had “He will be gone tomorrow,” Francesca said. Surprised by the stab of sadness, she focused on Mark’s imagination instead, and took a different approach. “Why is Papa here and not at rest?”

Mark’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. He glanced away in silence back to Francesca. “He says because he didn’t want to leave us. He says he’s watching over us.”

where “He is not God,” Francesca said, more tartly than she had intended perhaps because Mark’s answer did not sound like Mark. The words sounded more like... Percival’s.

She shivered. Something soft trailed across her cheek, like a breath and faintest of caresses, and her breath caught. She had felt this before, only half awake as she longed for Percival, dreamed, perhaps, that he was dead. And for those instants, she had believed it, before reality intruded with the tears.

then he Her hand flew to her cheek, but of course there was nothing there physically. But her own imagination was playing tricks, for she almost deluged his presence, warm, lively, and once so very necessary...

“You must sleep,” she said to Mark, rearranging the pillows and pushing him gently to lie down. He did not resist, although he smiled beyond her shoulder, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She only stopped herself from jerking around to look. “Papa would not wake me in the middle of the night.”

Even as she said the words, she remembered that he had done this on several occasions, returning from a tour of concerts or just because he wanted to see his son smile at him. She wasn’t surprised by Mark’s skepticism. Instead, it made her laugh.

She stroked the hair off his forehead and kissed him goodnight. Then she sat and waited for him to close his eyes and fall into the deep, even beyond their sleep. She rose silently and tiptoed from the room, leaving the con- necting door slightly ajar.

As she climbed back into bed, she wondered if it was her late husband’s presence she felt, or the faint excitement of guilty new interest.
Lieve Sir



He had

SHE WOKE WITH the realization that today was Hallowe’en. All Halloween sudden. Not that it made any difference to her life. She suspected it was merely a discussion with Mark about Percival’s presence that prompted her to think about it. Though to be sure, Percival was no demon!

For the first time, it seemed, she could smile at his memory, the warmth of affection uncontaminated by grief. The grief would never be completely, of course. He had been her first love, and much too young and untended. But for her own sake as much as Mark’s, she had to return to life. The loss of Percival himself was becoming a warning of what could happen to someone absorbed by the past and what should have been.

Since Mark was still asleep, she went downstairs alone and found him in bed, the kitchen.

“Sir Arthur’s gone to the village already,” Ada informed her. She went along. “Seems like a respectable gentleman. Courteous.”

“Indeed. Did he take his baggage with him?”

“No, he means to return, whether or not his chaise is repaired, to thank you for your hospitality.”

pushing This pleased Francesca far more than it should. She was glad to find her chosen to wear the lavender morning gown rather than the gray, which only just her look too much like the ghost she was becoming.

you in After breakfast, she harnessed the old pony to the trap, and she then made a quick tour of the tenant cottages to make sure none had been so badly damaged by lightning or the excessive rain. Fortunately, they found nothing worse than a couple of minor leaks, which she promised to have dealt with today.

On the way home, they halted, as they sometimes did, for a cup of tea with Mrs. Gates, whose husband rented the nearest farm and cottage. She had a daughter the same age as Mark and a son a couple of years older. They were friendly children, and for the first time, Francesca encouraged Mark to go outside and play with them. Aware of the hostility in the village, her husband kept him too much away from other children, but now she realized that it was doing.

On impulse, she asked Mrs. Gates about the children coming to Hazel House next week. Mrs. Gates looked genuinely pleased and agreed at once. Francesca returned to Hazel House feeling better, more hopeful than she had since Percival's death. They enjoyed a light luncheon while they chattered away about the Gates children.

When Mark sloped off to play with his toy soldiers in his garden, Francesca cleared up and, leaving the used crockery with Ada in the kitchen, went outside through the back door to fetch water from the well in the garden. Ada could no longer manage the heavy jobs. Nor could Martin, who was getting old. Francesca needed younger servants, and preferably a few more of them. The Martins had been with Percival's family forever, and she could not get them out. Besides, she was fond of them, and they were loyal.

Her thoughts fled with an unpleasant jolt. Two men stood by the well, one of them sniggering. She recognized them as Jack Forest and Bill Kell, two of the most offensive villagers. Bill held a wriggling cat, while Jack pulled up the bucket and rested it on the wall.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, her voice sharp with both irritation and suspicion.

They were not remotely alarmed. In fact, Jack grinned. Bill seemed concerned with holding on to the wriggling cat. With another unpleasant look, she recognized it as one of the stable cat's last litter of kittens.

she had “Afternoon,” Jack said, as though he had every right to be here.

h made “What are you doing?” she repeated, marching closer, her own empty pails in either hand.

d Mark Jack looked at the bucket in his grasp. “Fetching water. You don’t d beenus a drink of water, do you?”

nothing “Is something wrong with the village well? Your own taps?”

alt with “Long walk to the village,” Bill observed with blatant insolence.

“Which makes me wonder what brings you here,” she retorted.
of teagood as to release my cat. He clearly does want to be held.”

she had “Unlike the lady of the house,” Jack said slyly.

r. They Francesca’s face flamed with anger. “You will keep a civil tongue Mark tohead when you address me.”

she had This was where, in the past, they would laugh, as if it was just a jo
ie harmthen they would slouch off, snorting and cackling, making other hal
comments that she always chose to ignore. But it seemed they had
 Hazelbolder.

once. Bill did not release the cat. Neither of them laughed. Instead, Jack
hat shestep closer, meeting her gaze with open insolence.

e Mark “Or what?” he sneered.

Her fingers curled hard on the handles of her pails. She fought the
room,bring them up and crash them into his head, for in doing so, she wou
kitchen,what was left of her dignity, admit they could hurt her. In truth, the
ie yard.nothing she could do, and she could think of nothing to say. She ha
really.felt so helpless in her life.

em, but And they knew it. They saw it.

not turn “Well?” Bill said. He came closer, too, the cat still in his grasp.
grin broadened. “What *are* you going to do?”

ie well, “Ma’am,” said an unexpected male voice, causing Francesca and t
ie mostto jerk their heads around in surprise.

he well Sir Arthur Astley, George to his friends, dismounted from the ba
strange horse at the stable door and, abandoning it, strolled toward th
ritationFrancesca’s heart thudded with relief to have an ally, or at least a distra

“What?” Bill said, clearly confused, if not quite frightened.

ned too “What are you going to do, *ma’am*,” George corrected him with a
ant jolt,patience. “One treats a lady with courtesy.”

He continued toward them, a distinguished figure, although Fr

would never have called him an imposing one—until now. He had a large, attention of both the other men. The cat, taking advantage of distraction, lashed out suddenly with her claws and broke free with a grudging shooting back toward the safety of the stable.

“A *lady*,” Jack muttered, not quite beneath his breath. Clearly, he did not respect George either, which infuriated Francesca.

“Yes, a *lady*,” George snapped, holding his gaze. “And what that she does is none of your business unless she chooses to tell you. What you do with her property, however, is Mrs. Hazel’s business. And I believe she requires your immediate absence.”

As he walked past the men, not quite brushing against Jack, Francesca found herself holding her breath. But no one tripped or jostled him, and his manner was too authoritative. He stopped beside Francesca, facing the other two. Jack and Bill exchanged glances, and seemed to take courage from each other. Jack sneered openly once more. “So the question is for *you*? What are you going to do about it? What *can* you do?”

“In the short term, I really don’t advise you to find out. In the long term, I suspect a consultation with my old friend Mr. Paston would be more productive.”

Mr. Paston was the local magistrate, though how George had discovered it was beyond Francesca’s current ability to imagine.

Again, Jack laughed. “What are you going to charge me with? Stealing a bucket of water?”

“How could I?” George replied. “There is no water in the bucket, and I am thinking more along the lines of attempted murder.”

Francesca set down her pails. Jack and Bill stared at him open-mouthed.

“What were you planning?” George asked. “To put the poor cat in the bucket and lower it into the well so that it cried and frightened the horse for Hallowe’en? And if the creature drowned, the well would be poisoned for a week of a month. The idiots had clearly not thought of that. For the first time in their encounters, the fear was on their side, not hers.

“Rot!” Jack said aggressively. “I was just having a drink!”

“From an empty bucket?” George inquired. He turned his gaze to Jack. “And you?”

Bill swallowed. A trickle of blood ran down his cheek where Francesca had scratched him. “I like cats,” he said lamely.

eld the “They clearly don’t like you,” George observed with a
Bill’s amusement. “You may go, and do not return without invitation.”
a yowl, There was a short, surprised silence. Then Jack pushed the bucket
wall and slouched away, Bill at his side. Jack tried to give a laugh of t
did not as he went, but it was a poor effort.

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“They clearly don’t like you,” George observed with apparent amusement. “You may go, and do not return without invitation.”

There was a short, surprised silence. Then Jack pushed the bucket off the wall and slouched away, Bill at his side. Jack tried to give a laugh of bravado as he went, but it was a poor effort.



Chapter Four

WHILE FRANCESCA, DAZED, watched them go, George wound the well down to collect water. He was pouring it into the bucket at her feet before he found her voice.

“Thank you.”

“How long has their harassment been as bad as this?” He didn’t touch her but lowered the bucket into the well once more.

She swallowed. “They have never been so blatantly threatening before.”

“I hope I have not made it worse. I wanted to frighten them a little and push them back into some semblance of reality.”

She frowned. “How do you know Mr. Paston?”

“Never met him in my life, though I do intend to speak to him when I discovered in the village that he is the magistrate. Have you spoken to him before?”

“About those two and their ilk? And charge them with what? Calling names?”

“There are suitable laws,” George assured her.

“I would rather it did not come to that. I have to live here. All the families have to live.”

“Not at the expense of yours,” George said, unloading the second bucket and returning it to the well. “They are bullies of the worst kind. But a warning from Mr. Paston should be enough. They think you are alone and unprotected.”

I am. Worse, she was Mark’s only protection. She shivered. “Perhaps my pride has got in the way. And Mrs. Paston is a friend of the vicar’s wife.”

“Who insulted you in the first place?”

Both her pails were filled now. He covered the well and, as she bent to pick up the buckets, he picked them up instead.

She walked beside him with a murmur of thanks. Her hand

shaking. "They were frightened of you."

"Not at first." He gave a quick, rueful smile. "Jack was in the night when I asked for a room. I did not cut a brave figure."

"You certainly made up for it this afternoon," she said warmly. she began to see the funny side of the encounter. "I have never seen so haughty, so perfectly, politely, in command."

"I learned it from a friend of mine who plays the supercilious no bucketto perfection. Of course, he is a nobleman, which helps."

fore she She laughed, and he smiled back. Unexpected happiness surged t her. What a shame he would leave. She would never see him again. I would never regret knowing him.

look at "How is your chaise?" she asked.

He wrinkled his nose. "The wheelwright is busy on it. It will not b fore." today. Apparently, the inn can supply a replacement vehicle, but not ;, shocktomorrow morning. By which time, I hope my own chaise will be rea at least the inn is emptying. I can have a room there tonight."

"Or you may stay here," she blurted, glad only that he would no him. Itoday. She cleared her throat. "Mark will be glad of your company." to him



ling me

WAS IT POSSIBLE she would be too? He had been appalled by the thre behavior of those two louts by the well, and in truth, he was reluctant t and theirher without resolving the issue with some certainty.

He had seen how shaken she was, how helpless. The louts had seen bucketunfortunately. He only hoped his own intervention had been enc word ofconvince them she was *not* helpless. Or unprotected.

one and Accordingly, after a quick cup of tea and detailed directio remounted his hired horse and rode up to Paston Hall, where he sen aps mycard with a request for an immediate interview with the magistrate.

e." He was shown at once into the study, where Paston welcomed hi every courtesy. He was a distinguished man of middle years, a litt it to liftimportant in his speech, perhaps, but attentive and clearly concerne gentleman traveler should be in need of his services.

s were "It is not really on my own behalf I have come," George said, settl:

the chair he was offered. "I was merely forced by a carriage accident
inn last in the village last night. You may or may not have been aware
prizefight took place in the vicinity this morning?"

In fact, Mr. Paston blushed slightly, and George said at once, "No, no, the
any enemy complaint. My problem was merely that there were no rooms avail-
the inn, and some of the locals directed me—maliciously, I now susp-
bleman Hazel House. In my naiveté, I imagined it to be a lodging house of
kind, not the private residence of a gentleman's widow and her child."

through "Ah," Mr. Paston said. "I trust Mrs. Hazel has not caused you offer
But she George felt his jaw drop. "*Mrs. Hazel?* Of course not. Because
storm and my own semi-drowned condition by the time I got there,
obliged to give me shelter. Sir, my concern is that I was sent there a
e ready kind of trick. These tricks seem to have become a habit with certain el-
before within the village. What is more, those same people subject Mrs. H-
dy. But insult and inuendo on an almost daily basis. And they are growing bold

"Mrs. Hazel's reputation—" Paston began apologetically.
ot leave "Is being slandered daily," George interrupted. "I am aware of it.
you can be, sir, for I am aware the lady has made no complaint
However, when I returned to the house this afternoon, with the inter-
collecting my baggage and removing to the inn, I found two of the
villagers who had sent me there last night, in the midst of some ploy o-
atening They seemed to be trying to put Mrs. Hazel's cat down the well in ho-
o leave no doubt with the aim of frightening her. And when she attempted
them about their business, their manner was undoubtedly threatening
n it too, to imagine what might have happened had I not arrived on the scene."

ough to "I'm sure you are worrying unnecessarily," Paston said, with just
of anxiety. "Who were these men?"

ons, he "One Jack Forest and Bill Kell, I believe."

t in his "Ah. Wastrels, to be honest. But not dangerous, I assure you."

"I hope you are right," George said at once. "Because I very much
m with that if your wife was left a widow—God forbid—you would like to t-
le self-her being harassed, insulted, and jostled by such apparently non-dar-
l that wastrels."

Paston blinked rapidly. George could almost see him weighing v-
ing into knew against the gossip of his wife and, hopefully, imagining her in a
situation. Certainly, he looked alarmed for the first time. George pus-

to staypoint home.

that a “As you know,” he said mildly, “the fact that she once played m the stage does not deprive her of the protection of the law. My own fe it is notthat the matter need not progress to formal complaints if informal st lable attaken now. If they are not, I fear a genuine tragedy that will affect the ect—tocommunity.”

of some Again, Paston looked startled. He licked his lips. “These m bullies,” he replied. “I’ll have a word with them and with a few use?” tomorrow. It should be enough.”

of the “Thank you,” George said. “I believe it will be.” He rose to h she felt“Ordinary people often follow the lead of their betters. Perhaps if th is somegentlemen’s wives were to call on her and include her occasionally...”

lements Mr. Paston looked appalled.

lazel to “Ah. You have forbidden your wife from calling on Mrs. Hazel?” der.” said innocently.

“Of course not,” Paston said, looking genuinely shocked. “M I doubtchooses her own friends, and I have never interfered. In fact, when Ha to you.alive, he and his wife dined here more than once.”

tion of And the fact that she had clearly not been invited since would n e samebeen lost on the villagers.

r other. Paston must have realized that, for he cleared his throat. “Thank er yard,bringing the matter to my attention.”

to send “I believe Mrs. Hazel was too proud to ask for your help. But I co . I hatein all conscience leave the area without making you aware of her pligh

“When do you leave us, sir?”

a shade “Tomorrow, when my chaise should be fully repaired. circumstances, I shall stay tonight at Hazel House. My faith is in quash any unseemly rumors of my reasons.”

“Oh, quite, Sir Arthur. Quite.”

h doubt George offered his hand. “Good day!”

hink of Mr. Paston gravely shook his hand.

ngerous



what he

similarBY THE TIME George came back, Francesca had pulled herself together, hed his

concentrate on the humor of the confrontation at the well rather than
music on own terrible feeling of powerlessness.

eling is He came in through the kitchen, as if he had known that was wh
eps are would be. It was odd the way her mood instantly brightened, not on
e whole relief but with a curious sense of ease, as if now everything was right
not, of course. He would leave tomorrow.

en are “Paston will have a quiet word in the first instance,” he said at on
others might even persuade his wife to call upon you later. I doubt you wis
friends with her, but you should probably accept her for the good
his feet. reputation in the neighborhood. She owes you that much and more.”

ie local Francesca laid down the knife with which she was cutting vegetab
wiped her hands on her apron before pulling it off. “How did you
that?” she asked cynically.

George “I think I got him to consider his own wife in such a situation.
found that many people lack the empathy to imagine themselves in ar
ly wife position. I used to be one of them. I have learned. Others can too. To s
zel was course, it is an inconvenience because they wish to believe someone le
they are. I call it dehumanizing.”

ot have Francesca sank onto the nearest stool, indicating he should sit a
did, and Ada brought them each a cup of tea before retreating to her sto
you for “I have become inhuman?” Francesca asked, wondering if she sh
offended.

ould not “To people like Jack and Bill, yes. Probably also to the vicar’s w
t.” Mrs. Paston, even Mr. Paston. They will have convinced themsel
because you once played on the stage you are not respectable a
In the therefore unworthy of normal, human consideration. It is not right
you to happens.”

Something in his voice made her peer more closely. “Did it ha
you?”

His eyes slid away. But he nodded. And then he moved his gaze
hers, as though with conscious bravery. She wanted to take his ha
assure him he was one of the finest human beings she had ever met.

He said, “As a child, I did not always understand what was expe
me. And no one seemed to understand me. Except my little broth
able to father thought I was stupid, then mad. Then one day he explained to
Hugh, my brother, would make a better heir to his land and title. I b

on herhim and promised to help Hugh in every way I could. In due time, my
died and Hugh inherited according to plan. I was happy to help him m
ere sheland profitable, and to invest wisely and cleverly on the Exchange.
ly withonly gradually that I realized he was taking everything, and I had noth
. It wastwo rooms and a garden in the house that should by rights have been m

Francesca set down her cup. "But that is monstrous and surely illeg
ce. "He George smiled sadly. "I had become less than human to my brothe
h to be a tool, a machine, to be guarded but not cared for."

of your "What happened?"

"I had little to do but read. I longed to see the world I learned of in
les andto meet people other than Hugh and his wife and our old nurse. Hu
manageCaroline had ambitions too, and to further them, he hired a lady, osten
be a companion to Caroline but really to help look after me so that the
I havego away together for longer periods of time. That lady, Hera, became
mother's friend. The man she married, a doctor, was my second. They helpe
ome, ofsee my worth and to understand that *I* was the better man to have the li
ss thanthe title. So I took them back."

She searched his eyes, aching for the pain of betrayal he mu
lso. Hesuffered, admiring the spirit that had made him into the assured, gen
ove. who sat across the table, quietly drinking his tea in her kitchen.

ould be "Good," she said. "And you are telling me this because I should tal
control of my life, too?"

life and "The situations are different. But I would like to help you in an
res thatway I can. As Hera helped me."

and are "You already have," she said, through a peculiar tightness in her th
, but it He poured some more tea from the pot into both their cups. '
another confession."

ppen to "You have?"

He cast her a slightly crooked smile. "When I was in the villa
back tomorrow, I posted a letter to some friends in London. It is possible y
nd andreceive a visit from the Duchess of Cuttyngham. She is Hera's sister-

You should not look surprised if she greets you as though you
cted offriends."

er. My After a stunned moment, she began to laugh. "You are like
me thatgodmother! Or should I say godfather?"

elieved "Neither, if you please," he said, and she laughed harder—which

My father have accounted for the tears she had to wipe from her face.
I take the

It was
coming but



line.” DINNER WAS A very pleasant meal. They dined early so that Mark could
“Oh, yes!” they said, but the autumn nights were drawing in and it was already dark.
I was and Martin both served at a very slow pace and then departed, leaving
to help themselves thereafter.

“I think you need younger servants,” George observed.
“We might be able to afford them this year,” Mark piped up, with a
concept of discretion, repeating only what Francesca had once said
sensibly to “Then Ada and Martin can retire with a pension.”
“I see. Very proper,” George said, leaving her to wonder what on earth
my first made of it in reality. But he changed the subject, and the rest of the time
I spent in lively conversation and laughter.

and and Afterward, Francesca took Mark upstairs to bed.

“You will write to me, won’t you, sir?” Mark said anxiously from
the drawing room door.

George, who was pouring himself a glass of brandy, at Francesca’s
invitation, glanced at him. “Of course I will. But we will meet again in
the back morning.”

Mark grinned and allowed himself to be led off. “I like Sir George
very much, sir.”

“Yes, very much.”

“That is what I told Papa. He likes him too, now.”

Francesca glanced at him doubtfully, wondering how she should respond.
“Why?” she asked at last.

“Because he stood up for you.”

“When?” she asked.

“At the well this afternoon.”

Mark had not seen the incident at the well. She knew from Martin
that he had been tending to the bedroom fires at the time, that Mark had been
in his own room at the other side of the house.

“Who told you about that?” she asked.

“Papa, of course.”

It might

A ripple of unease twisted through her. Could something of I really have remained here after all? She wanted him to be resting in pe

Yet as they entered Mark's room, it struck her that her late hu presence, even if only in memory, had grown stronger in the last few c uld join Mark's imagination and her own. Which was odd when Sir George w rk. Adaand causing her to think of so many other possibilities in her life.

When she returned to the drawing room, George was seated w ig them brandy on the table beside him, a book open on his knee. He rose a asking if he could fetch anything for her. She smiled and shook her he with noevening would pass all too quickly without adding her wits with mor to him. And tomorrow he would go. An ache within her intensified and spread

Eager to learn all she could of him, she asked him more about his earth heestates in Lincolnshire. She was intrigued to learn he had been in E me wasduring the Waterloo campaign and met the Duke of Wellington hims did not dwell on the aftermath of the great battle where so many had d she gathered he had played his part in transporting the wounded and 1 om theexperience still pained him. Having seen something of war herse understood.

Deliberately, he lightened the conversation, but she could th cesca's n in thenothing to say except, *"Tomorrow you will be gone and I will be again. It will be so much worse than before, because now I have know ge,"* heAnd she could not say that. How could she even believe it herself w had known him barely twenty-four hours?

Silence stretched between them. She wanted to break it yet was a saying something stupid just to keep him here, something that would espond,her sudden vulnerability. But somehow, his presence was so comforta her tension eased and she simply enjoyed his silence.

"I have to thank you for another delightful evening," he said at last to his feet. "In fact, for all your kindness."

"Nonsense. You have returned any kindness tenfold." She stoc in, whofacing him with too much space between then. "May we not sim playingfriends?"

She was slightly hurt when he appeared to think about it answering. "Simply, I doubt," he said. "But friends, most definitel sensitive mouth twitched into a half-smile. "I would like us to meet ag,

Her heart beat faster. "So would I," she admitted, and his

Percival broadened. She caught her breath.

She wanted him to take her hand. She wanted to touch him, his cheek, anything to show friendship, to bring them closer. She knew instinctively that he would not take advantage. And he would not touch her as here. Before she could gather her courage, he murmured, "Goodnight.

He bowed and walked away, much as he had done last night. It seemed so long ago.

Restlessly, she moved toward the piano, and the urge to play overwhelmed her. She wanted to express this sudden emotion and soothe her nerves. The same time. And it was better than thinking, even with her nerves jumping.

She sat on the stool with something of a bump, instantly spread her hands across the keys, and began to play, letting her fingers go where they would. After a little, she fell into Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, and played her heart out. She knew it was for him, even if he could not hear her.

But someone was listening. She felt the presence, the shadow in the doorway. For an instant, she wondered if it were Percival haunting her, her faithlessness. But of course it was not.

It moved, and she stopped abruptly, stumbling to her feet, staring at George as he crossed the room. Even before he came to a halt right in front of her, she could see the admiration in his eyes, the dancing spark of excitement and knowledge. As though he had read her feelings in the music.

She had always played from the heart.

Her throat constricted. She had not realized quite how beautiful he was, or how expressive. For such a gentle man, his naked feelings were so fierce, melting her very bones. And that was before he even touched her. When would he touch her?

His eyes devoured her, settled on her mouth, and butterflies came racing through her stomach. She could not breathe for the thrill of hunger, could not speak.

She did not even know if it was his or her own.

Why did he not speak?

Because his eyes said everything. The man had always communicated with his eyes, and she doubted many people ever noticed. She did not know how long he had been looking at her.

Very slowly, he lifted one hand and brushed his fingertips across her cheek, a soft, wandering caress. His parted lips quirked into a smile.

What would his kiss feel like? It would be sweet, so

so...*necessary*.

kiss his His hand fell away. He took a step backward, turned, and strode out
of the room.

to her.

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His hand fell away. He took a step backward, turned, and strode out of the room.



Chapter Five

BY THE TIME she climbed into bed, Francesca realized it was not desire that kept him from her but respect for her situation. George never take advantage. He was that rare breed, a true gentleman. And peace of her own bedchamber, reflecting on the disrespect she had r from the villagers since Percival's death, she was grateful. His care m feel precious.

And yet her body clamored for love. Even while the rest of her reje the emotion within her, and within him. She smiled and closed he meaning to think of him a lot more before sleep claimed her.

However, she fell asleep almost at once, and dreamed not of Geo of Percival.

He stood at the foot of her bed, managing to look both sad and ex he did when he was leaving her for a few days or weeks. She smile because she understood he would be happy for her. He would want move forward with her life, find renewed happiness. He would have d same had she been the one to die.

She was content with that, though sad because she had loved much, and he was never coming back.

And then everything changed. The curtains of the bed burst into and Percival was no longer smiling but shouting at her.

“Francesca! Fran! Francesca!”

She could not move. She was paralyzed by sleep.

“Francesca! Can't you see the fire? Get *up!*”

She woke with a gasp, her heart hammering. Of course the bed v on fire, but she could still imagine she smelled smoke, heard the crack flames. A quick glance showed her the guard still before the smc embers in the fireplace. But the sense of urgency, of panic, remained.

She leapt out of bed, pulled back the curtains, and opened the shu

peer out of the window. An ominous glow came from the end of the hallway.
“Dear God,” she whispered.

She bolted across the floor, pausing only to shove her bare feet into her slippers and seize a shawl from the end of the bed before dashing through the connecting door to Mark’s room.

She touched his shoulder, forcing herself to shake him gently. A peaceful child would be less easy to control. “Marco, wake up, sweetheart. We must leave the house for a little. Come, out of bed.”

With shaking hands she forced slippers onto his feet and seized the night lamp in the hand before snatching the night lamp. “Take your coat,” she said and passed it hung on the back of a chair. She had no hands free to carry her child.

George. She had to wake George.

He opened his eyes,



George but GEORGE HAD NOT meant to fall asleep. He had lain down on his back, clothed, smiling because he had read the beginnings of love in Francesca’s eyes, and she was a happiness he had never thought possible.

Afterward, he never knew if it was dream or reality, but a man had been shaking him. Percival Hazel was shaking him. “Fire,” he shouted. “It is up to you to save them!”

With a jolt, reality swamped him. The smell of burning, the bright light from the window he had not shuttered, the sound, surely of crackling flames. And not in his hearth. That fire had gone out. He leapt up, seized the still-burning lamp from his bedside table, and burst out into the passage, ran toward the main stairs to bang hard on Francesca’s door.

From here, he could see the smoke billowing downstairs. And further toward the servants’ stairs. He was just about to burst into Francesca’s room when she emerged from the next door along, grasping Mark in one hand and a small lamp in the other.

“George!” she cried in relief. “We must get out! I don’t know how to get out!”

“Stay with me,” he said grimly, and led the way down the stairs. Increasingly, smoke made him cough, but at least there seemed to be

ouse. path to the front door.

“Oh, God, Ada and Martin!” she exclaimed.

et into “Where are they? Where do they sleep?”

ugh the “Downstairs, the room to the left of the kitchen—”

“Hopefully they’re outside already, but I’ll make sure. You tak
anickedstraight out and well away from the house.”

have to To his relief, she did not argue. Mark had to be her first concern. /

starting toward the front door, she cried out over her shoulder, “Be
him byGeorge!”

as they The desperate concern in her voice spurred him on through th
y it fordoor. Here, the smoke almost choked him. No wonder. The kitch
ablaze, especially to the right, blocking the way to the back door i
yard.

Ignoring that for now, he located the room off the kitchen’s le
side. Noticing a towel, he dunked it in the pail of water he passed, ar
into the old couple’s bedchamber. He peered through the thick smoke,
d fullyhis lamp and holding the wet towel over his nose and mouth.

cesca’s They lay side by side, perfectly still.

e knew



you to

FRANCESCA THREW BACK the bolts of the front door. They felt warm, as
orangethe whole house was heated by direct sunshine. She wrenched open th
rackingstill grasping the silent Mark by one hand, and all but staggered into th
zing the Even the outside air stank of smoke, and she could see at once t
age. Heside of the house was in flames.

“Oh dear God,” she whispered. She grasped Mark’s hand more
on thisand ran down the path toward the garden.

rst into “There! Undressed!” a gleeful voice cried out of nowhere.

rasping Startled—could it be help arrived from neighbors?—she halt
peered at the two men on either side of the old oak tree, behind whi
v bad ithad apparently been hiding.

“What d’you expect?” the second man said derisively. “It’s the mi
stairs.the night. The question is, is *he* in his nightclothes too? And you must
a clearhe ain’t with her.”

Francesca stared at them, her jaw dropping. It was Jack Forest and Kell. “You are betting on the fire in my house? Instead of helping?” she said in disbelief. “My son could have died! My servants, whom you have taken all your lives, still might.” *George. Oh God, George...*

And then, seeing Jack’s forceful nudge before they backed away, an even uglier suspicion hit her.

They had started the fire.

As a bet to see if she and George emerged together as lovers. No doubt as revenge for the thwarting of their well-trick this afternoon.

“Dear God,” she whispered with utter contempt.

en was
nto the



MARTIN SAT BOLT upright like a stage ghost, without using his hands. He burst coughed.

Flooded with relief, George could hardly speak. “Fire, Martin. Wake Ada. Wake Ada.”

The room was already unbearably hot and the old couple could not overcome. There was no time or strength to search for other exits. George made a swift decision and broke the window, battering the glass out, so that the wind would not cut them to ribbons.

“Hello!” shouted a voice outside. “Anyone in there?”

“The Martins!” George gasped back as loudly as he could. “I’ll pass them out to you!”

Only Ada’s choking sounds told him she was still alive. He picked her up bodily from the bed and passed her through the window. Somehow he registered that it was the innkeeper from the village who took her at that side. Martin staggered toward him in his nightshirt, and George hefted her over the sill. Eager hands took the old man from his grip. Hastily, George dragged the covers off the bed and pushed them through, too. They were what they needed.

The fire was spreading rapidly toward him, licking under the bed and in the middle of the door. From long-ingrained habit, George doused the lamp he had seen on the dressing table, and laughed at himself as he jumped and threw it through the window.

nd Bill Helping hands caught him, dragging him away from the heat
he said building. He could see the old couple, wrapped in blankets, and several
known people, including the innkeeper and the blacksmith. Desperately, he
Francesca and Mark, but he could not speak to ask.

mother, And then, like a whirlwind, she landed in his arms, sobbing, “Oh
God, thank God!” And for one blissful moment, her lips pressed to his
his mouth, and his arms closed hard around her.

And no It was only an instant before he realized the innkeeper and his wife
subtly sheltering them from view. Which at least brought enough sense
to George to draw her away from him.

“Mark?” he said urgently.

“Safe with Mrs. Gates. You brought the Martins out alive, George
you!”

ls. And And then she fled toward the Martins, who might have been alive
were still struggling to breathe.

he have George realized that the hands helping him away from the building
belonged to Mr. Paston, the magistrate.

all but “Thank God you’re all safe,” Paston said fervently. “I’ll never
George myself for not warning those two today as I should! If I had not thought
o that it tell the constables to patrol past the house tonight, it could have been so
worse.”

George wrestled his foggy brain into understanding. He stared at
l while “You are saying the fire was started deliberately?”

Paston nodded. “By Forest and Kell. Not with intention to injure
ked hersure. They’re just too ignorant to realize how quickly a fire can spread
ere, he believe the aim was to see if you and Mrs. Hazel emerged together. A
ie other dangerous wager. And yet if you hadn’t been there, the Martins would
ed him dead.”

George George shivered with memory, gazing toward the burning house. It
ould he never recover from this. All Francesca’s married life, her home and her
were burning to the ground. Had some shade of her husband really
hamber him? If he had not, would George ever have awakened? Would Francis
dier set Mark have?

himself “Where are they?” he asked Paston with rare savagery.

“In custody. They’ll be locked up until charges are brought.”

George swallowed. His throat felt as if it was full of hot razors. “Do

of the Hazel know?"

al local "Most of it. You must all come up to Paston Hall. My wife is ex-
sought you, and the doctor has been summoned there."

Paston was tugging him toward a carriage. But George could not
stand, thank looking back at the blazing house. Was the remnant of Percival Har-
dison's cheek, there? Peering hard, he could almost imagine a ghostly figure in the flame.

Thank you, he mouthed silently.

He were And it seemed as if a voice answered directly into his head. Al-
most he backed. *Thank you*.

and, thank

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Paston.

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Hazel know?”

“Most of it. You must all come up to Paston Hall. My wife is expecting you, and the doctor has been summoned there.”

Paston was tugging him toward a carriage. But George could not help looking back at the blazing house. Was the remnant of Percival Hazel still there? Peering hard, he could almost imagine a ghostly figure in the flames.

Thank you, he mouthed silently.

And it seemed as if a voice answered directly into his head. Almost an echo. *Thank you*.



Chapter Six

THE AIR WAS still thick with smoke the following morning when Frank returned to Hazel House. What was left of it.

That the consequences could have been so much worse did not incline her to forgive Jack and Bill for what they had done. Under no circumstances was it acceptable, whatever the damage or whoever did or did not die. She would have nightmares forever about losing her son, her servants, and her friends in such a horrendous death. And so she had told Mr. Paston, who seemed more than happy to see the pair charged with arson and the attempted murder of five people.

As she gazed at the still-smoldering ruin of her home, she still wept. She was too shocked and angry. But she walked inexorably toward the ruins. She guessed nothing could be salvaged, but it hardly mattered because of the hugeness of the saved lives.

She had left Mark warily getting to know one of the Paston grandchildren. She had not seen George since last night, when they had met numbly, in the Pastons' house, before being led away to different barracks for clean beds and the ministrations of the local doctor. But she knew George well enough to go into the village. Perhaps he had left already in his carriage post-chaise. She could hardly blame him. His journey home had gotten so bad to worse.

She surveyed the wreckage of her home. Among the blackened rubble she could recognize the odd piece of furniture, a few ivory keys from the pocket of a piece of molded plaster from the drawing room, a mantelpiece ornament that miraculously survived Venetian glass vase.

Something caught her eye, and she climbed over a pile of mostly broken stones to get to it. She picked it up slowly. Another miraculous survivor was the broken neck of Percival's violin, strings hanging loose.

She suspected it had not been burned in the fire but stood on the

who had tried so hard in the beginning to put it out. Which for some seemed even sadder.

She sat slowly down on the stones, still holding the piece of instrument in her hand. It grew blurry before her eyes.

“Your poor, beautiful violin,” she whispered, and discovered herself weeping after all—for what had happened and what might have, for Percival and her home, for her own loneliness, and the pointless, reasonless hatred that had brought about this whole mess.

Something brushed against her cheek. She knew his touch as she knew her own. “I’m sorry,” she gasped. “Percival, I am so sorry.”

For an instant, it felt like his arm around her, and she had to look. There would have been swirling smoke, but it looked like him. Her hair might have been around her lips, or he might have kissed them. But he was not sad. He was more glad.

And abruptly, so was she. He was going at last to his rest. Not because the fools had burned his home but because she was strong enough to cope with what she was. She knew that. And yet still she wept and wept. She didn’t know how long, until a strong, much more solid arm came around her, and she turned into George’s chest with a deep, low sob.

He sat beside her in silence, holding her, stroking her hair until the hours passed.

“He has gone,” she said into George’s neck. “He woke me last night and because of the fire, and now he has gone.”

“May he rest in peace. Do you mind?”

The question was asked so carefully that she raised her head, tears in her eyes, and searched his face. “You don’t think I am mad?”

“I think he woke me, too. He trusted me to help. And Mark has been able to chat with him since I arrived.”

“And before,” she admitted. She met his gaze and finally answered his question. “No, I don’t mind. I am glad because he has gone where he belongs.”

He nodded. “You loved him very much.”

“I did.” Raising her hand, she touched his cheek. He had shaved recently and did not smell of smoke, just of soap and cleanliness and George. “The worst of those is not over. Even for this—*especially* not for this.”

Somewhere not too far away, birds were singing. She could hear

reasoning and chickens making a racket. She wondered vaguely what happened to hers.

George said, "Do you think you might ever love again?"

"Yes," she said softly. "I think I might."

His breath caught. "Do you think that you might ever fall in love with me?"

Her heart thudded. "You might try to convince me."

He smiled with his lips and his eyes, and then just with his eyes as he knew his head and finally kissed her mouth.

The kiss was everything she had imagined and more. Gentle and tender. She clung to his lips, and when it ended, she kissed him back. This time it was lazily sensual, exploring, arousing.

"Sir George," she whispered against his lips. "I have not known you for many days, but I think I am already half in love with you."

"Good," he said. "For I might be wholly in love with you."

"How will we know?"

"A little more kissing might help."

It did.

The storm



Two days later, Mrs. Paston was "at home" to her gently born neighbors. Whether because of Francesca's misfortune or Mr. Paston's influence, she was now distantly kind to Francesca. If not friendly, she was at least hospitable in a condescending sort of a way. Francesca, grateful for the shelter over her head and Mark's, and delighted that it was the same room as she had currently harbored George, did not resent the condescension. It was a truce.

Naturally, since the Hazel House fire was the main topic of speculation in the village, the "at home" was well attended. Francesca was there, and guests were quite avid to see her. She was sure they were disappointed that she and George sat on opposite sides of the room, but they asked innumerable questions.

She repeated several times that the hall was completely ruined, that Mark had been unharmed in the fire, and that the Martins were safe with their cattle.

at had recovering, having been rescued by Sir Arthur Astley. And yes, Jack and
were bound over to stand trial. The vicar's wife listened without
speaking to her. The vicar himself had called on her the day before with
sympathies and good wishes.

ve with A footman entered once more and presented Mrs. Paston with a
card on a silver salver. She picked it up, blinked, and blurted, "The Duke
of Cuttyngham! Of course, show Her Grace in at once."

he bent Francesca's gaze flew to George's face, but he was deliberately
looking at her.

l sweet "You are acquainted with the duchess?" the vicar's wife asked
ck, and gasp.

A war waged visibly across Mrs. Paston's face, but reluctant truth
you two out. "Why, no, though I suppose Cuttyngham is not so very far away.
rose to greet her august guest, nervously smoothing out her skirts.

An instant later, two young, fashionably dressed ladies swept into the
room. The first lady held out her hand as she approached Mrs. Paston
curtseyed before taking the hand in a bemused kind of way.

"Your Grace is most welcome. I am Mrs. Paston."

"Olivia Cuttyngham," said the duchess informally. "My sister-
Lady Hera Rivers. I hope you will forgive the intrusion, but I have been
searching for my friend, Mrs. Hazel, and just learned that her home
ghbors burned down! Could you possibly direct me to her?"

ice, she Francesca was stunned. She had forgotten George's plan, which
at least mattered now.

he roof "But of course," Mrs. Paston said, clearly torn between shock
of that discovering Francesca's connection to a duchess, and delight at being
sort of oblige Her Grace. "Mrs. Hazel is staying with us while she decides the
way to go forward."

ation in Now George was looking at Francesca, his gaze oddly commanding
and then inward shrug she rose and went to Her Grace. "How pleasant to see
to find Duchess," she said. "I should have written to you..."

r asked "Oh, stuff," said the duchess graciously.

"Lady Hera," Francesca murmured, curtseying also to George's friend,
hat she friend, who was eying her with rather sharp curiosity. Nevertheless
slowly smiled and shook hands as though they too were old friends. "And Sir
is here, too!"

and Bill “George, how delightful!” Hera said, going to him at once. “I did actually you, standing there so quietly.”

with his The duchess caught Francesca’s gaze and, shockingly, closed her eyes. “I’ve come to rush you away, my dear! Bring your lovely little boy and his wife visiting with us to London for a fortnight. After which, Hera wishes to bear you to the Duchess of Lincolnshire. I might come too, if Cuttyngham is willing. A fresh start, don’t you think?”

ely not The vicar’s wife’s jaw seemed about to hit the floor. She had publicly frequently insulted the friend of a duchess. Mrs. Paston began to look surprised with a “Perhaps you have an announcement, George?” Lady Hera said clearly. “Actually, I do. Mrs. Hazel has agreed to be my wife.” George looked directly into Francesca’s eyes, and she smiled back with all the love she could give. “..” She the laughter surging inside her.

“You see him,” Lady Hera said in surprise. “You really do see him, don’t you?”

“I love him for what he is,” Francesca said proudly, and the happiness on George’s face dazzled like the sun in winter.

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The End

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“George, how delightful!” Hera said, going to him at once. “I didn’t see you, standing there so quietly.”

The duchess caught Francesca’s gaze and, shockingly, closed one eye. “I’ve come to rush you away, my dear! Bring your lovely little boy and come with us to London for a fortnight. After which, Hera wishes to bear you off to Lincolnshire. I might come too, if Cuttyingham is willing. A fresh start, I think?”

The vicar’s wife’s jaw seemed about to hit the floor. She had publicly and frequently insulted the friend of a duchess. Mrs. Paston began to look smug.

“Perhaps you have an announcement, George?” Lady Hera said clearly.

“Actually, I do. Mrs. Hazel has agreed to be my wife.” George smiled directly into Francesca’s eyes, and she smiled back with all the love and all the laughter surging inside her.

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The End

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About Mary Lancaster

Mary Lancaster lives in Scotland with her husband, three mostly grown kids and a small, crazy dog.

Her first literary love was historical fiction, a genre which she is mixing up with romance and adventure in her own writing. Her most recent books are light, fun Regency romances written for Dragonblade Publishing. Her *The Imperial Season* series set at the Congress of Vienna; and the *Blackhaven Brides* series, which is set in a fashionable English spa town frequented by the great and the bad of Regency society.

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Once Upon a Highland Mist

Maeve Greyson

Once Upon a Highland Mist

Maeve Greyson



Chapter One

*Castle MacDanua
Tarbat Ness Point, Scotland
Midsummer 1399*

“CHIEFTAIN, YE MUST come! Lady Aria escaped her rooms. I locked just as ye ordered, but she must have found her key she claimed lost. She went to the east tower, out on the parapet, and willna come back inside.” Mrs. MacDanua, the housekeeper to Castle MacDanua, stood in the doorway of his solar, with her hands.

Wolfe MacDanua charged out from behind his desk and stormed through the halls to the east tower’s stairwell. What a fool he was. Why had he not ordered his poor, unsettled wife more securely guarded for her own protection? But dearest Aria had seemed more at peace of late. As if she had found the strength to manage the unbearable pain of their precious daughter’s death.

He took the tower steps three at a time, loping up them like a bear clawing its way up a mountainside. If he could just make her hear him, if he could just get her into his arms and hold her tight until her terrible demons loosened their hold and allowed her to see reason.

“Aria!” His bellow echoed up into the endless spiral of stone steps. “Daren’t ye move. I am coming.” He reached the top and shouldered open the door. Every torch in the circular arrow room blazed even though the brilliance of the sun streamed in through the arched windows. A flash of the whitest white caught his eye. “Aria!”

His precious bride stood barefoot in her shift, balanced atop the high wall that bordered the narrow walkway circling the top of the tower. Her arms raised as though she were ready to take flight. Her long hair fanned behind her like great golden wings. She cast a loving smile up into the clouds, reaching for something only she could see. “I must go to h

calls me. My precious wee lassie cries for me.”

Wolfe eased out onto the walkway just wide enough for a man bow. As he sidled his way to her, he ran his hand along the top of the wall. He could just get close enough to latch on to her and pull her to safety—

Her gaze lowered from the clouds and turned to him, hardening into a flintiness that cut his heart. She bared her teeth like a crazed animal going to her, Wolfe. Ye canna stop me. She is frightened and needs her mother.”

“She rests in the care of the angels, Aria. Happy and free of this world’s worries.” He edged another step closer. “Stay with me, dear wife. I’ll help ye.”

“I will not.” Resentment sharpened the madness in her glare. “I’ve been your intimate ye said ye would help, that witch killed our sweet daughter. Feared for you, Tarrel, Morrigan for yerself this time. Go back to her bed, ye unfaithful man. I have no need of her or yerself.” Then she stepped off the wall while reaching for the clouds. “Mama is coming, dear one!”

“No!” Wolfe lunged too late, missing his last opportunity to save her. The horror of what she had done sent him barreling back down the steps, seeking safety. His grandsire for building the tower to such a great height.

“Aria!” he bellowed again and again, refusing to accept what he knew he would find when he reached the bottom.

Castle MacDanua perched on a cliff of stone, a tall, proud tower overlooking the North Sea. The east tower of the fortress watched over a merciless strand of jagged rocks and slabs of squared-off boulders. They had found her. On her back. Arms outspread. Draped across a weather-beaten shelf of unrelenting hardness. Her eyes remained open in an unholy stare. “Aria!” at the clouds. Blood slowly pooled around her, staining the light gray stone with the darkness of her death.

A ragged cry tore from him as he caught her up and held her. On his knees, he clutched her to his chest, rocking and roaring his regret over his arrogant ways and all he had cost this dear, sweet lass.

“I told ye to wed a stronger woman. Ye should have wed me.” The voice behind him burned like a brand of hot iron sizzling into his flesh.

A furious rage rose from the depths of his soul. He didn’t bother to look at the evil woman he knew he would see. “Take care, Morrigan, lest I see ye again. She back to the hell that spat ye out.”

The ebony-haired beauty rounded the stone and smiled up at him and his malicious glee sparkled in her dark eyes. "Such harsh words for yer wall. If Shame on ye, my chieftain. After the many nights we enjoyed — sauntered closer, her head slowly tilting as she studied his poor, lost wife. "Why so sad? Ye said the dowry was the only good thing about the dead. "I am with this one." She swiped her fingers through the pooling blood, then pressed her hands together as though finding the terrible slickness pleasurable. Her taunting focus returned to him. "Dinna tell me ye grew fond of yer wee wife in yer life's time." "She did not deserve this," he forced through clenched teeth. Yet let me unsteady touch, he gently closed his wife's eyes. "I think—" He stepped toward himself and bowed his head, silently begging for his poor, lost wife's soul. "The last in her soul to forgive him. "Before our wee one died, I think—" "Catch the—" "Ye think what?" Morrigan tossed her head, resettling her shimmering I've notresses down her back like a raven resettling its wings. "Ye think ye think for the her? Ye think she might have *loved* ye?" She flipped a hand and filled the air with a burst of cruel laughter. "I *think* a more arrogant fool does not exist in the land of Scotland."

He cursed. "She was precious and good." He lifted his head and thundered down at the witch who had been his greatest mistake. "She was not like any other woman I've ever known." Morrigan smiled even brighter. "Aye, but ye found pleasure in her wickedness, did ye not?" She leaned on the boulder and gave a sad smile as she sentry her head as she trailed her fingertips through the blood again. "But I've never over aye were always honest about it." She bared her arm and used the boulder as a palette, painting strange markings across her pale flesh. "In honor of such rare honor, I have an offer for ye." She cut a sly look up at him as she dabbed her fingers, staring up in the shimmering puddle again and smeared more bloody symbols across the white swells of her breasts peeping above the neckline of her kirtle. She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "Bind your soul to mine. On my will bring her back to ye."

For his part, Wolfe swallowed hard and clutched his dead wife tighter. He knew the rumors about Morrigan but had ignored them, even though the dead wife's sultry eyes told him they were true. The wicked woman was a gifted healer and an insatiable lover. But what she suggested now went far beyond everything he had ever heard of witchery told about her. "Begone, Morrigan. And stay gone. I never want to set eyes on ye again."

She twitched a shrug. "As ye wish, my chieftain. Although I assure ye, I will find a way to bring her back to ye."

at him might wish it because of the bairn in her belly. A precious son this time: lover? “A son.” The words escaped him before he could catch them back. “? ” She daughter had been naught but two winters old when the fever stole her first wife. He and Aria had sought comfort in each other’s arms before his pairinggrieving madness gained complete control. She begged him to go and rubbed another babe, and they had made love. True love this time, with a passion. He never before—not the mere cold coupling for an heir. The witch could she pet?” speaking the truth of a new bairn. Or not.

With an “Ye lie,” he challenged. He pushed himself to his feet, still holding her, stopped tight.

to find it Morrigan shrugged again and turned to leave. “It matters not to me,” she said without looking back.

merging “Wait!” A new child. A new beginning. “What happens if I bind myself to you? e loved to yours? How is it done and what is the cost?”

l the air The witch’s chilling smile made him wish he had never asked. “You exist in mine for eternity, pet.” She dipped a nod at Aria’s limp form. “When you returns, yer son is born, and Clan MacDanua gains an heir.”

a scowl “What do ye mean by *I be yers*? How would it be so?” He didn’t know. e ye.” Morrigan. There had to be a sacrifice. Pain. Something tortuous. Morrigan thrived on such. “Would I know my son? Be able to train him up to be a hake of chieftain? Watch over him and live as a truly loving husband to my wife. I will say “Of course.” Her seductive tone pulled him in, daring him to believe. He would to he wanted so badly to be true. She drew a long, slender dagger from her nesty, Isheath at her belt, brought forth blood from her palm, then held out her fingers “I need naught but a few drops of yer own lifeblood, my lover. To make a cross themy own.”

ragged Ever so gently, Wolfe rested Aria back across the rock and stepped down beside Morrigan. He held out his hand. An uneasiness sent a warning down his spine, making him tighten his buttocks and brace himself for whatever was to come.

ness in She nicked his palm, pressed their bleeding hands together, and held them tightly. “Ye shouldha been mine, and now ye are,” she warned in a deadly whisper. “Body and soul. Blood and bone. Heart. Spirit. Mine. I wish especially all yer hopes and dreams.”

Black clouds rolled in, blotting out the sun. The wind roared, and the waves med ye Wolfe so hard that he nearly lost his footing. Waves thundered against the shore.

e.” shore, and a heavy fog, a blinding mist, rolled in from the sea, c
κ. Their everything in murky grayness.

r away. Morrigan reached up and raked her nails down his face, blinding
lady’s eye with searing pain and sending blood streaming down his che
ive her indescribable weight shoved down on his shoulders, making his back
ion like and twist from the base of his skull to his tailbone. He caught
ould be Morrigan by the shoulders and held fast to remain standing thro
agonizing torture. “What have ye done to me?”

ng Aria “Helped ye give birth to a legend, my unfaithful lover. Righted
personal wrongs.” She jerked away, cackling when he stumbled
ie,” she ground. “Ye shouldha chose me as your wife, Wolfe MacDanua. But
when ye were not in my bed, ye scorned me. As did those of yer cla
ny soul ye shall pay. All shall pay. There will be no Lady Aria. No heir fo
MacDanua. And to complete my revenge, I place this curse upon ye
“Ye be all those dwelling in this land. Every mother’s child best heed these
er wife and pass them on to their children and their children’s children.”

She circled him, her unholy chant roaring louder than the wind
i’t trust sea. “When nightfall comes and the haar blows in, bar yer doors and
Morrigan yer heads. For the vengeful fog of Tarbat Ness comes to coax MacI
a good pipes to play for the pleasure of she who ye scorned. If ye hear the me
fe?” full, fall to yer knees and bid yer life farewell. For tragedy comes to t
ve what soul before the toll of the year’s last bell.”

rom its With a cruel laugh, she ran her hand through the fog, then hit Wol
er hand, the set of bagpipes she pulled from the mist. “Play for me! Now!”

ix with “A blood oath must be honored,” he bellowed, trying to rise fr
knees. “Ye canna base a curse upon a falsehood.”

d down She cackled as she swept the fog away from the boulder and r
g tingle Lady Aria’s body vanished. “Ye obviously know nothing of curses, n
self for Lightning crackled all around. The air stung with its power. She thi
pipes back into his face. “Now, stand and play.” She stepped close and
clasped ran her nails through the blood on his face. “And dinna fash yours
ed in a once handsome lover. While the mist dances to yer mournful song, ye
id. And made whole again. Strong and virile as always. But once the sun ri
burns my precious mist away, my lovely curse will return ye to the f
hitting the ill-sighted cripple—the image of yer true soul.”

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Chapter Two

Tarbat Ness Point, Scotland
Midsummer 1599

“**S**AME BLOOD BUT a pure soul sacrificed for the lie told.”

“I know, Mama.” Ethne tried to coax another spoonful of gruel into the poor, addled mother’s mouth. She had no idea what the old woman’s meant, and it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that the dear soul need eat. Mama was wasting away to nothing. “A bit more, aye? Ye’ve grown weak with not eating. I shall have to take in yer shift yet again.”

Her mother turned away from the food, then stole a look back at Ethne and lifted a knobby finger. “I be Morrigan-the-least. Daughter of MacMorragh-the-lesser. Granddaughter to the vile Morrigan-the-wicked. Hear me, child.”

“I know, Mama,” Ethne patiently agreed, determined to keep her calm. With a heavy sigh, she set the wooden bowl aside. Whenever her mother chanted her ancestry, all hope of getting her to eat was lost.

Her mother offered a weak smile. Her weary eyes crinkled at the corners. “But I didna curse ye with the witch’s name.” She lovingly rested her calloused hand on Ethne’s cheek. “Not for ye. My precious Ethne. My good girl. Good for our vile bloodline.”

“Ye saved me, Mama.” Ethne carefully eased her mother back down onto the threadbare pillows of the narrow bed. “Ye are the good one. Taken care of when my own blood abandoned me.” Ethne didn’t know the truth about her ancestry. Superstition and fear had caused her kin to leave her on the moor because of her different-colored eyes, one blue, one green. The red mark on her throat, a jagged red splotch that her dear mother had said resembled the North Star—a truer point never to be lost. “Now rest, aye? Rhona will be here soon so I can tend to my errands.”

“Ye mean to leave the offering at the ruins?” Ethne’s mother offered a hopeful smile. “I am glad for it. Each day ye go. Never shirking the

right a terrible wrong.” She caught hold of Ethne’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “Promise ye will go until yer wee legs can carry ye there no more. Ye will never forget, aye?”

“I will never forget, Mama. Today, I’ll take a bit of the fried bread from supper. And the last of the spring herbs.” Ethne pulled the covers around the thin woman’s shoulders, then gauged the amount of life left in the dwindling fire in the hearth. Perhaps another stick of wood. The tiny daisies seemed overly warm, but with not an ounce of fat on her bones, her mother shivered and complained of being cold on the balmiest of days.

The length of the shadows creeping across the floor concerned Rhona. She had promised she would finish with the man from the village in plenty of time to spare. Bless Rhona’s generous soul. If not for her bit of words for the use of their only other room, Ethne doubted the three of them would have survived. Those from Tarbat Ness shirked them because of the wicked curse from almost two hundred years ago. Well, the men didn’t shirk because she was the village harlot. But all of them hated Ethne and her mother. And Ethne supposed it was rightly so after so many had fallen to the rrigian-curse and met their tragic end after hearing the haunted mist’s pipes.

“Child.” Their hatred and threats to stone her forced Ethne to make the long journey to the next settlement to fetch the things they needed with what her mother earned. It was a hard journey alone. Especially in winter. But with

hiding one of her eyes, Ethne made it without complaining. When the corners took Mama away, she would leave Tarbat Ness, but not before. Only her mother had begged her to stay. Begged her to make the wrong right. Much to her mother’s belief in her made her smile. Make the wrong right? In

heaven’s name could she bring peace to a haunted mist and free Tarbat Ness from the curse?

“Forgive me, Ethne. I know I’m late, love.” Rhona held tight to the tattered curtain covering the doorway, all the while tugging her kirtle to the fairyplace. She paused and glanced back, staring at something in the other room. The hinges of the rear door to the cottage creaked, then it rattled shut with a solid thud. Only then did Rhona relax and turn back to Ethne. “His brother came too.” She smiled and opened her fist, revealing three pieces of silver. “Now ye can buy that wool to make Mama a heavier before winter.”

“Bless ye, Rhona. Ye are as good as gold.” Ethne added the coin

a weak drawstring bag she kept hidden behind a loose stone in the hearth. She
more? that her dear friend had to submit to men who would never treat her the
she deserved, but without Rhona's sacrifice, they would all die a slow
head left of want. She hurried over to the only table in the meagerly furnished room
higher "And there's still plenty of time for me to go." Ethne glanced back
it in the sleeping mother. "I can make it to the ruins and give him his supper
willing before nightfall." Anticipation at seeing him again lifted her heart, made
er poor flutter.

"Why do ye love that cripple ye discovered living among the
Ethne. Rhona gave her a teasing nudge. "Ye nearly fretted yourself sick over
ge with this past winter."
of coin "I did no such thing." Ethne placed as much of the fried bread as
it would that she thought they could spare into her errands basket, wishing there
d one's more. His face was so gaunt. He needed a joint of meat, a keg of ale
Rhona kettle brimming with boiled vegetables and gravy. But that was not to
and her he always seemed so grateful for what she brought. It made her heart
n to have so little for him.

Along with the food, she packed an old blanket she had mended. It
big walk much, but it might shield him from the wind that never stopped
Rhona through the ruins of Castle MacDanua. After a moment's hesitation
a patch tucked another flat of bread inside the folded cloth. She had eaten once
angel's That was enough. He needed her share more than she did.
because "Ye must eat too," Rhona quietly scolded, reading her thoughts aloud.
ht. Her as a book.

How in "He needs it more," Ethne said, tucking everything snug into the
at Ness "I feel bad for him. He is like us, I think. But worse because he has no

"An outcast too, then." Rhona perched on a stool beside the
to the propped her elbow on it, and rested her chin in her hand. "If ye w
back in could stay in the other room this winter." She nodded faster, as
r room. warming to the idea. "Leastways, he'd be out of the wind that way."

with a "Ye need the other room," Ethne gently reminded her, wishing it
son and so.

shining "Oh, he'd have to come to this side whenever the men came,"
r shawl said. "Long as he did that, we'd all get along just fine." She perked up

after a wee mousie. "Ye said he finally quit hiding whenever ye went
s to the ye?"

He hated Heartwarming satisfaction at finally winning him over made Ethne the way “Aye. We even talk now. Some days not much, but we always visit death Seems like more each time.” The same warm contentment she felt when she was with him filled her. Maybe she did love him because he eased her ache at her loneliness. He was the kindest man she had ever met.

Her well “Then ask him to come and stay,” Rhona urged.

making it Ethne glanced over at her mother again and shook her head. “It would upset Mama worse than ever. She is saying the words more of lies and ruins?” “Same blood but a pure soul sacrificed for the lie told,” Rhona repeated while settling a worried look on Ethne’s mother. “Poor Mama, does it mean? Do ye ken?”

and herbs Ethne shook her head. “Only Mama knows. She said her mother tore her washer right before they hanged her from the same tree where they hanged a Morrigan-the-wicked.”

be, and “’Tis a wonder they didna hang Mama,” Rhona whispered.

ache to Ethne fisted her hands atop the table, stricken with the urge to run and hug Mama against all the evils in the world. Bitterness soured in her mouth as she eyed the horrible, puckered scar covering the left side of Mama’s face. “They said she was too simple to be as evil as the others. But they feared the Morrigan bloodline enough to burn their hatred into her face so none would ever forget her ancestry.”

“Cruel bastards thinking themselves so holy.” Rhona stood and jabbed her finger at the next room. “The same ones who sneak to my door and threaten what their wives willna do. ’Tis a wonder they didna burn ye as well.”

basket. Ethne touched the mark on her throat. “They said the devil had branded me as one of his own with this and my eyes.” She huffed a laugh. “So now they simply threaten to stone me to keep me away from the village.”

though “Ye should throw the rocks back at them.”

“Aye, and then we would all be burned alive here inside our cottage.” Ethne tucked the handle of the basket into the crook of her arm.

“Better to keep our lives and a roof over our heads, ye ken?” She poured the bowl of gruel on the floor beside the bed. “If she wakes before I take a catty to get her to eat more. She’d had naught but a small sip when he was there, wandered.”

Rhona nodded, then cast a concerned glance out the window. “M

the smile. "I dinna want ye out there when the mist comes."

"I'll be fine. The days are longer, with it being midsummer."

"Mind the hour," Rhona repeated in a sterner tone, then gathered her up and gave her the fierce hug. "We canna lose ye, Ethne. Mama and I could never bear it."

"Ye willna lose me. Keep the fire going for Mama, aye?" Ethne eased her away free, then hurried out the door. A glance at the horizon gave her

no fear. The sun was much lower than she'd first thought. But she had to go. Her friend needed his supper just as Mama had needed hers. The poor man's

softly name he kept to himself would blow away if a stout wind hit. And the winds raked across what remained of Castle MacDanua all the time. She

decided that was why her reclusive friend held so tightly to his staff when he

held it in his hands. He was half bent and with one eye covered with a rag wrapped

around his head, it was hard to know his age. His dark, shaggy hair held little

silver, but very little. But it didn't matter his age. His one good eye held kindness and maybe even a glimmer of caring.

She smiled and pressed her hand to her chest. She hungered for her soul's kindness and caring. It was a rare treat compared to the hatred and fear

she always received from others.

After a quick glance up and down the narrow road, she broke into a run. At least she had the way all to herself by waiting until this late in the

day. Nary a soul braved the outdoors when dusk neared and brought the thick

fogged atmosphere with it. The villagers stayed inside with their windows

shuttered and their doors barred until dawn.

Ethne scurried down the path unafraid. Years ago, she had caught a few

strains of the mist's lonely song. The eerie pipes had entranced her, but a bitter

troubled melody broke her heart and made her ache to hear the rest. She

wept for the ghost of the poor chieftain of Castle MacDanua and his horrid Morrigan-the-wicked even more.

Then Mama had yanked her away from the window, sealed it tight with the board on the ledge, and sang ancient words that Ethne didn't understand. She had circled Ethne, chanting them over and over until well after she

had returned, frightened at the way Mama in such a way had made her feel so terrible that she

was the keep, although part of its roof was long gone. Time had shorn other towers, collapsing them into nothing more than mounds of rubble. "Friend?" she called louder. She strained to hear above the incessant rain and the sea's crashing waves. "Are ye here?"

"It is late, Ethne. Ye shouldna be here."

His deep voice made her heart beat faster. It always did. It was as if her dearer soul recognized his and leapt for joy. She turned and spotted him in the shadowy doorway of what might have once been the family kirk. She ran over to him, lifting her basket for him to see. "Ye had to have yer staff. I couldna bear the thought of ye going hungry."

"I would be fine, lass," he reassured her gently but firmly. "Nae need around yerself back to yer home. The haar comes soon." He didn't look at her. He glared downward with his jaw set and his knuckles white from his grip on the staff. Had she angered him by being late?

"I've plenty of time." She took the blanket from the basket, shook it out, and draped it around his bent shoulders. "I mended this for ye. It's no use, but I thought it might help keep the wind from cutting ye so."

His sad smile made her want to pull him close and console him. She held herself back, fearing she might upset him even more. He still didn't lift his gaze and allow her to look into his blue eye, which always held the kindness she needed.

Leaning against the wall, he took one hand off his staff and tugged it closer around his neck. "I thank ye, lass. 'Tis a verra fine gift. I can't repay." Then he tilted his head and looked at her, surprising her with a tender touch to her cheek. "Hie yerself home, dear Ethne. I beg ye."

"Come with me." The words tumbled out of their own accord. She had hoped her Mama would be all right with such an act of kindness. "Come with me," he repeated, covering his hand with hers and holding it tighter to her cheek.

His smile faded, and he sadly shook his head. "Go. Ye would never catch up to me in time with me at yer side."

She cast another quick look at the horizon. He was right. She would never get home before the sun dipped out of sight. A glance at the shore revealed the mist creeping toward the shore. "I could stay here and help with the gears with my fingers."

"No." The word rumbled from him like the snarl of a cornered animal. He backed deeper into the shadows, shaking his head. "Ye will go to yer

off theNow. Ye ken?”

stone. It hurt to see him so upset, so unsettled. Ethne hurried to empty the windbasket, placing the bundles of bread and herbs in the cracked holy wall beside the door. “Daren’t ye fret. I’ll make it home safe, and tomorrow I’ll come early enough so we might have a longer visit, aye? And I’ll bring you some of the berries I found.”

Shuffling even deeper into the shadows, he shooed her away with the end of his staff. “Aye. Now go. Run for yer life, Ethne. The mist is almost upon us. I

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Now. Ye ken?”

It hurt to see him so upset, so unsettled. Ethne hurried to empty her basket, placing the bundles of bread and herbs in the cracked holy water font beside the door. “Daren’t ye fret. I’ll make it home safe, and tomorrow I shall come early enough so we might have a longer visit, aye? And I’ll bring ye some of the berries I found.”

Shuffling even deeper into the shadows, he shooed her away with a wave of his staff. “Aye. Now go. Run for yer life, Ethne. The mist is almost here.”



Chapter Three

“WHEN WILL YE tell her?” Mrs. Tarrel, as stubborn in death as she had been in life, shimmered into view.

Wolfe sagged into the tattered chair behind his broken-down desk, propped his staff against his knee. “When will ye relent and go to heaven for a heavenly reward?” He already knew the answer, but the selfish part of him loved hearing it.

“When the curse is broken and yer life is returned to ye.” She stepped closer, clutching her pale hands across her broad middle, even though she was much like the mist. If he peered hard enough, he could see right through her.

She wore the same clothes she had on the day she died. A dark kirtan and apron to keep it clean, and shoes with stubby heels that sounded like thunder whenever she hurried down the halls. Over the years since her death, Wolfe had learned how to make the same racket throughout the keep, even though he no longer had a solid body to aid in her noisemaking. He had laid her out in what was left of the chapel, regretting he couldn’t do better by the time she was a woman who had shown him so much loyalty and motherly love.

“When will ye tell her?” she repeated, moving so close she hovered over his desk.

He glared up at her. “Ye should ken that without even asking, I know many things, Mrs. Tarrel, but simple is not one of them.”

“Mistress Ethne willna run from ye.” The housekeeper moved to the shattered window and peered out at the sea. Her wispy hair fluttered around her face as though dancing in the wind. “I told ye what I overheard at the pub. Who her mother is—or her foster mother, I should say. I dinna ken who her true family is. Although some say she might be from the next set of hills over.” After a judicious nod in his direction, she turned back to the window. “And there are those who hate what they did to that poor mc

hers because she bore the Morrigan blood.”

“And yet they didn’t lift a hand to stop it. Ye heard her screams the same as I.” Wolfe didn’t fault the villagers for hanging Morrigan-the-or her daughter, Morrigan-the-lesser. But according to Mrs. Tarrel, Mc the-least, Ethne’s foster mother, had never been right in the head since the day the wicked ones had nearly beaten her to death for freeing the doves used for blood sacrifices. And he felt sure that the torture of having his head been face burned away hadn’t helped her sanity either. “Ethne should take her mother and move from this accursed place.” Two centuries of bitterness and pain had burned hotter within him.

“Mistress Ethne canna leave here anymore than ye can.” Mrs. Tarrel floated back to him. “She takes care of her poor, troubled mother. Keeps the house and all the duties required while Mistress Rhona does what this world has forced some women to do for centuries just to survive.”

“When ye lived, I dinna recall such a generous nature toward whoever teased.”

“At least Mistress Rhona doesna curse those who spurn her because of her little, unretorted.”

He flinched as though she had struck him. The housekeeper had said she had been musing her words well over a hundred years ago. In times like this, though she wished she would resume the habit. He lowered his gaze and worked to rest his thumb across the gnarled knots in his twisted staff. “Mistress Ethne did the dear better than me.”

“Ye have learned much in the last two hundred years,” Mrs. Tarrel observed. “Loneliness and pain are cruel taskmasters.” She floated down to his desk and perched on it like a plump, wingless fairy. “Ye are a better man now than the one I served all those many years ago.”

“And yet I send many to their deaths. Just as I sent Lady Aria to her death.” “The curse sends them to their deaths.” Mrs. Tarrel shifted with a heavy sigh as though she still possessed the need to breathe. “And the agony of losing her only child sent Lady Aria to hers.” She crossed herself and then whopped upward. “God rest her soul.”

“God rest her soul,” he echoed, meaning every word more than he would ever know. “I hope the saints let her into heaven even though she died for her own life. She didn’t know what she was doing.”

“She will be judged fairly.” Mrs. Tarrel leaned forward and said

peered into his face. "As will you. By both God and Mistress Ethne, if
at day, but give the lass a chance."

wicked "Why after all these years—"

orrigan- "Friend?"

nce the The lilting voice that always lifted his weary heart reached him t
es theythe ruins. It was Ethne. Earlier than usual. Just as she had promised.

alf her Mrs. Tarrel disappeared, but she wasn't gone completely. Th
ake herhousekeeper couldn't help herself.

tterness He struggled to stand, then hobbled outside with slow, painful ste
set his spine on fire. But the knowledge that Ethne waited for him so

Tarrelmade the misery more bearable. That was why she must never find c
eps thehe really was. If she discovered him to be the cursed chieftain c
s worldMacDanua, he felt sure he would never see her again.

"Friend? Are ye here?" Her call was louder this time, but her tone
res," hehint of something he couldn't quite place. Fear? Leeriness? A s
urgency? What was it?

d," she He forced his twisted body to move faster. "I am here, Ethne! I am

Just as he cleared the door and spied her, she shrieked and fell out
stoppedbehind a broken section of the skirting wall.

this, he "That'll learn ye to stay away, ye vile witch!" shouted a lad as he
ied hisout from behind a tree on the other side of the road. "And here's ano
eservesgood measure!" He hurled a fist-sized rock at the spot where Ethne ha
out of view.

Tarrel "Leave her be!" Wolfe roared. Ignoring the excruciating pain, he s
lown toup a stone and fired it at the boy. "Get out from here or I'll pipe th
ter manupon ye without the aid of the mist."

The lad's eyes went as wide as shields as he backed away. Then he
rs." and ran as though the devil himself had risen from the depths of hell t
a deephim.

gony of Heart pounding, growling with every infuriatingly slow step,
lookedhurried past the crumbling wall and dropped to his knees beside Ethne

God in heaven, they've killed ye."

anyone "She is not dead," Mrs. Tarrel said without showing herself.

he took "Chase after that wee bastard and scare the life out of him, aye?"

gently, Wolfe leaned over and raised Ethne's head, cringing at the p
arnestlyswelling above her right eye. Somehow, he had to get her inside. Wit

ye will protection of the castle. If he left her in the ditch, who knew what heartless bastards would do if they found her?

“I made the wee demon shite himself,” Mrs. Tarrel reported with a chuckle from somewhere above him.

“Well done, Mrs. Tarrel. Well done indeed.” Balanced on his shoulder, Wolfe caught hold of Ethne’s arms and pulled her across his shoulders as if she were a wayward sheep and he her shepherd.

“How can I help ye, my chieftain?” The housekeeper shimmered as she viewed, flitting all around him.

“Ye can stop behaving like a feckin’ moth.” He grunted as he pushed forward but kept himself from going back down on his knees by slapping his shoulder into the part of the wall still standing. “Did ye ever figure out how to pick things up?”

“Aye, I’m getting better at it.” She floated closer and fixed him with a concerned look. “But I dinna think I should risk trying to carry Mistress Ethne.”

“I shall carry Mistress Ethne. Somehow.” The horrific pain already in his head made him tremble, and sweat nearly blinded him, burning his one good eye.

“Fetch my stick, aye?”

“Aye, my chieftain.”

With his focus locked on forcing one foot in front of the other, Wolfe let Ethne slip from his shoulders, and he slowly hitched his way toward the chapel. It took forever, moving at a snail’s pace, and having to stop every few steps to gird himself against the excruciating pain. But he had to reach the small kirk was his only hope. Not only were a few of its benches solid enough to support his precious burden, but he doubted he had the strength to make it to the keep and up the front steps. Damn the vile Mags for cursing him into such a weakened form.

With the greatest of care, he eased her down onto the bench closest to the altar. A dusty pillow floated toward him.

“Dear,” “It was in the corner,” Mrs. Tarrel said. “Brush the filth from it and put it under her head, aye?”

Crouching beside Ethne, Wolfe dusted it off as best he could, then tucked it under her head. “She’s fearsome pale, Mrs. Tarrel. That stone curse killed her. Might kill her yet.” He untied the blanket from around his waist, took the gift from the sweet lass, and spread it across her. Then he sank

it those floor and rested his forehead on the edge of the bench. He closed his eyes and begged the Almighty to save her.

a proud “I said a prayer for her,” Mrs. Tarrel whispered without showing her face. “As did I, but I dinna ken if mine are heard anymore.” He lifted his hands, and stared at Ethne, begging her to open her eyes.

ers as if “Water might help,” the housekeeper suggested. “I canna manage just yet, I fear. Forgive me, my chieftain.”

ed into “There is nothing to forgive, Mrs. Tarrel.” With his staff securely tucked in a crack in the stone floor, Wolfe pushed himself to his feet and lurched over to the table behind the altar, the place where he sometimes innocently enjoyed the food that dear Ethne brought him. He didn’t need to eat to survive. The curse took care of that. But he could still taste. So he enjoyed whatever she brought. Especially when she flavored it so nicely with a kindness and caring. He filled his only cup from the pitcher of fresh water. Mistress Mrs. Tarrel insisted he keep on the table. Thank the saints for the woman and her odd beliefs.

idy had He made his way back to the bench and scowled down at the cup and the dead eye at Ethne. Damned fool. What good was a cup of water when she lay so cold and stone?

and not bring her back to us.” Mrs. Tarrel whispered. “It might not bring her back to us.”

toward He lowered himself to the floor, biting back the pained groan with every movement always tore from him. But then he went as still as the lass who had mesmerized by the simple perfection of her pure loveliness. Her long, dark lashes rested on her pale skin. Her ruddy curls—nay, not ruddy, but a rich reddish brown, a rich shade like the coat of a purebred, chestnut mare—tumbled across the bench and reached the floor. The odd red mark on her throat reminded him of the North Star he had always trusted to guide the courses when out to sea. Her ill-fitting kirtle hid her comely shape, but he wished things were different and he could provide better for her. Before ye awakened feelings in him he thought to be long dead. Not lust but the care and be cared for, the ache to be needed. Shaking himself free of the thought, he slipped and he dipped his fingers in the water and gently wet her cheeks and then his forehead.

s neck, “I need a cloth,” he whispered, more to himself than the invisible woman to the Tarrel.

yes and “Tear it from the hem of yer léine,” the housekeeper said.

Of course. Again, he was a complete fool. Others had always taken care of himself. Never had he taken care of others. But he would do this and do it for his head—for his precious Ethne. After ripping free a hank of the cleanest part of the hem and wetting it, he carefully pressed its coolness to her throat and forehead. The faster rise and fall of her chest encouraged him. She breathed—a sure sign she was fighting her way back to opening her eyes. Her eyelids fluttered, giving him hope. Then she opened them. A rare pair of jewels glimmered—a brilliant sapphire. The other a sparkling emerald.

“Friend?” Her brows drew together, but then she flinched and touched her forehead. “I remember now,” she said in a tremulous whisper. Her eyes were always with tears. “I am so sorry. Soon as I am a wee bit steadier, I will go and never trouble ye again. I swear it.”

“Ye will not,” he said, probably louder than he should have by the way his old eyes flared open wider. “Ye will not,” he repeated in a more measured tone. “That wee bastard should be thrashed for what he did to ye.”

“They canna help it. They fear I am a witch.” Her voice broke, and she turned her gaze from his, turning away and staring at the back of the bench. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye and trickled down into her hair. “I hope ye know about me and all I had hoped to hide from ye.”

“I know ye are the kindest—loveliest...” He struggled to tell her what she made him feel, all the ways she eased his terrible loneliness. He himself couldn’t. To describe such unbelievable relief from the starkness of the dark torture was almost impossible. But he had to try. “Yer generous spirit and a deep purity of yer caring heart. My precious Ethne, ye make my existence seem a little easier to bear.” He brushed the backs of his fingers across the soft cheek and marked her cheek. But for her own safety, he needed to convince her never to let him see her. Yet he couldn’t make himself say the words. “Ye have brought so much comfort to this old cripple.”

er. She turned back and faced him, her eyes still shining with tears. “I need to not be an old cripple.” With the hesitancy of a skittish fawn, she reached out and touched his cheek below the rag covering his eye. “All I see is a cour-ten her caring man. Ye’ve treated me with more kindness than I have ever known.”

Her smile faltered. “Who else would risk giving a witch shelter? Mrs. watching her stoned?” Her bottom lip, so tempting, so kissable, quivered as she hitched in a teary sniff. “And the berries I promised

spilled out. I'm sure they're trampled by now."

en care "They dinna matter." He clenched his teeth to keep from growling
o it wellpain as he shifted from his aching knees and sat beside her. A relief
t of hisescaped him as he leaned against the bench, took her hand, and ga
'ace. reassuring squeeze. "All that matters is that ye are safe."

deeper "But they were the sweetest berries—"

r lashes "Yer sweetness is all I need, dear lass."

ls. One Her pallor disappeared and a lovely blush lent color to her cheek
are such a fine man," she whispered. "Will ye still not share yer name
hed herme? I dinna ken what to call ye."

as filled "I have been alone so many years, I dinna remember it," he lied.

d never She squeezed his hand and smiled. "Then we shall choose another
name should ye have?"

he way "Aonar comes to mind." The Gaelic for alone. More appropriate than
annerlywould ever know. And he didn't care what she called him as long as she
coming to see him.

and she Her expression shifted to a gently scolding look that lightened his
uch as amuch he almost laughed. "Ye dinna have to be alone anymore," she
r. "Andmeant what I said about ye coming home with me." She blushed deeper
lowered her gaze. "Mama is there, and Rhona too, but ye can sleep in
all that spare room so ye willna be bothered by the rest of us." She gave a soft
But hethat sounded like the sweetest music. "Rhona snores something fierce
of hissays it's me. But it's her doing it."

rit. The How he wished he could. But the curse forbade it. The last time
o muchtried to leave the ruins, even more excruciating pain than he already e
urve ofhad sent him crawling back. Trying not to show his struggles with
return.misshapen body, he pushed himself to his feet and retrieved her cup. "I
o muchfetch ye some fresh water for a drink. Ye dinna need to sip from what
to wash yer face."

"Ye are "Why do ye always do that?" Ethne rolled to her side, then eased
out andup to a sitting position.

ageous, "Do what, lass?" He daren't look at her. She might see into his
nown."learn even more about his lonely soul.

er after "When ye dinna wish to answer something, ye act as though
barelyasked it." Her tone held a soft accusation.

l ye all He returned with the water and held it out. "I willna become even more

a burden to ye, Ethne. My place is here. Ye already risk yer life coming withto bring me food.” His heart ached and dropped like a stone to the puffed huffstomach. This dear lass deserved so much more. More than tending to ailing mother. More than being stoned if the villagers saw her on the

And it was all because of him. The selfish bastard who had brought down the anger of a demoness upon them all. “Drink, lass, and know ye bring the comfort I deserve by brightening these shadows with yer light.”

ks. “Ye She frowned up at him, ignoring the cup. “Ye are a good man, fine withknow it had to have caused ye unbearable pain to get me in here. She came from the side of the road and from being stoned even more. I am not a coward. I see yer terrible suffering when ye’re merely trying to stand in place. Whatdeserve better than living like a rat in the ruins.”

The caring in her eyes begged him to unburden his soul. The tentative smile shein her smile coaxed him to tell all. He fought it, for her sake and the sake of his own selfish need not to lose her. “Ye deserve better than me.”

He set the cup on the bench beside her and hobbled over to the window to check the horizon. The sun had just touched the sea. She said. “Ito leave, and soon. A soft touch on his arm made him turn. She stood steady and—smiling up at him and muddling his mind with her gentle persistence. “Please come home with me,” she whispered. “I need ye as badly as ye need me.”

ce. She He almost choked on a sob as he cradled her cheek in his hand. “Ye have no idea what ye ask, dear one. For yer sake, I canna do so.” He let her go and he haddrop and turned his gaze back to the horizon. “I see ye are much respected. ’Tis a good thing. For now, ye must go.”

with his “I willna go without ye.” She took his hand, moved closer, and brought her lips to his cheek. “Let meheart-stopping kiss to his cheek. “Come with me now. I shall help ye. I usedpulled his arm across her shoulders, hugged his waist, and turned him toward the door.

herself It took every ounce of decency he possessed to pull away and stand back. He didn’t want to send her away forever, but there appeared to be no other way. His selfishness had hurt others. Never would he hurt her. “I willna have it. Go now, Ethne. And dinna come back. Not ever. I dinna want to hurt ye. I neverye hurt any more than ye’ve already been.”

“Ye dinna mean that.” She jutted her chin upward, defiance flashing in her eyes. “Ye need me. Just as I need ye.”

ng here “I dinna need ye,” he forced out, doing his best to sound angry. “I
t of hisfrom here, witch!”

g to an His heart shattered as her mouth dropped open and she stared at hi
ie road.and disbelief shouting from her. He turned away, unable to bear the
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The chapel echoed with her hurried footsteps as she left him. Al
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“I dinna need ye,” he forced out, doing his best to sound angry. “Now go from here, witch!”

His heart shattered as her mouth dropped open and she stared at him, hurt and disbelief shouting from her. He turned away, unable to bear the pain he had caused, the pain he deserved. He fixed his gaze on the horizon, knowing the mist and the accursed pipes would come to him soon.

The chapel echoed with her hurried footsteps as she left him. Alone. As he rightly deserved.

Wolfe bowed his head and wished he had never been born.



Chapter Four

ETHNE CROUCHED OUTSIDE the kirk, staying low behind a pile of overgrown with tall grasses. Did the man think her a fool? He was trying to protect her from something. She saw it in his face, heard it in the timbre of his voice, and felt the desperation in his touch. She did not need protection.

A disgruntled huff escaped her. How dare he think her weak or helpless. She was a woman grown and had fought for years to not only protect herself but those she cared about as well. And she could protect him—a lone man longing to be loved. She would stay here, quiet as a wee mouse, until she found out what he was struggling so hard to hide.

Her heart pounded faster as the fog crept into the courtyard, swallowing up the rubble like a great gray beast devouring the land. An anguish from the front of the chapel startled her. She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream. It had to be her friend. No one else was here except the two of them.

With the silent stealth she'd learned while avoiding the villagers, she eased out of her hiding place, crept to the front corner of the small chapel, and peered around it. Her friend stood just outside, clutching his staff and staring down at the heavy mist creeping toward his feet. The urge to shove him to flee was strong, but she forced herself to remain silent. She needed to see what he intended to do.

His staff dropped to the ground, disappearing beneath the fog. But instead of stumbling to retrieve it, as she had seen him do before, he straightened his back, making himself appear to grow. His bowed shoulders widened and leveled, filling out and squaring off as if ready to face an enemy. Where the bent, wasted-away cripple once stood was a fearsome tall, well-muscled warrior with a broad chest and a dark, wild mane as black as the feathers of a raven. He ripped the cloth from around his head and glared up at the sky with two good eyes instead of just one.

Ethne held her breath, unable to believe the transformation she had witnessed. When he shifted and revealed the pipes in his hands, she knew. Her beloved friend, the half-blind, suffering man of kindness and caring, was the cursed chieftain of Clan MacDanua. A man the local legends said had been as fierce and protective as a great wolf. So much so, he even bore the name Wolfe MacDanua. But he had fallen to the seductress, Morrigan the wicked, and made the mistake of spurning her for his arranged wife. Ethne swallowed hard and clutched a fist to her heart. She ached for poor Wolfe MacDanua's cursed soul.

He placed the mouthpiece of the pipes between his teeth, tucked them under his arm, and filled it with his wind. The bleak hopelessness in his eyes broke her heart as he positioned his fingers on the chanter. Hatred for Morrigan herself was about to dole out rolled off him in waves. He closed his eyes and started to play.

As soon as the sad strains filled her ears, a plan came to her as naturally as drawing breath. She would listen to the song in its entirety, and when Morrigan-the-wicked came to steal her soul, she would spit in the evil hag's face and end the hag's cruel curse. Somehow. She didn't know how to do it, but she would find a way. Maybe her devil's mark and oddly colored eyes truly held the power everyone feared. If so, she would battle the darkness and end her reign.

Ethne settled back against the wall, all the while keeping Wolfe in sight. According to everything Mama had said, the curse forced him to play until the sun rose and burned the mist away. He slowly wandered through the courtyard as he played. The thick fog swirled around his legs as he continued to keep time with the sad tune. The moonlight made him glow with a pale blue-white light. He reminded Ethne of a restless spirit searching for a grave.

Tears streamed down her face as the song continued. It was a melody of mourning, of love forever lost, of wretched, aching loneliness. Ethne remembered Chieftain Wolfe MacDanua's story. She yearned to go to him and tell him how sorry she would be. But she dared not. She wasn't sure what the cursed mistress would do to him if he stopped his song before daybreak. And she had to spend the night in the castle, glean every bit of information she could, before she faced the vengeful Morrigan.

He turned and started walking toward her, his forlorn gaze locked on the ground. The closer he came, the more she shrank into the shadows,]

had just the would soon turn and take another direction. Thankfully, he did, and she knew her to breathe again. As he walked away, she returned to her refuge, the shaggy, weed-infested pile of rubble. At the back of the kirk, she had where it attached to what was left of the skirting wall, she pressed her forehead into the shadowy corner. After a while, she eased up and peeped at the man-then pulled in a deep breath. It barely hovered above the ruins. It would not last. Ethne while before it reached its zenith, then readied itself to relinquish its place. Wolf the sky to the sun. She hugged herself tight and concentrated on the old song. The saddest, most beautiful melody she had ever heard.

the bag
his face
what he



started to THE SUN ROSE, the mist faded, and his eternal shackles of deformation and pain returned. But this morning there was no glimmer of hope, no pinprick of natural brightness to lessen his agony, because Ethne would not come this afternoon or any day thereafter. He had severed the bond for her sake, knowing that if he drew too close for her own safety.

Just yet, The rag he used to cover his mauled eye rose from the ground and he turned his eyes toward him. “I have something to show ye, my chieftain,” Mrs. Tarrel said without making herself seen.

“I dinna have the heart for anything this morn, Mrs. Tarrel. Please, don’t show me.”

“Ye must have the heart for this.” Her tug on his arm surprised him, though the ghostly housekeeper had never done that in all the years he had known her, either when she lived or after. “Come now, my chief. Ye must.”

He allowed her to lead him past the overgrown mound of rocks and for his that had once been the fine bell tower he ordered built in celebration of his daughter’s birth. Then he halted, clenching his staff so hard his nails creaked like the lody of the wood. “Dear God in heaven. I beg that ye deafened her to the song. It was he knew in his heart his prayer came too late.

Sunlight washed across Ethne, surrounding her in the gentleness of that might morning light. It gave her the ethereal glow of a sleeping angel. He had known she slept and that the wickedness of the curse hadn’t already killed her outright. But even if it hadn’t, the song of doom would eventually take her and send her soul to Morrigan. The knowledge of his dear Ethne’s fate was a prayer he had been praying

nablingsobbing groan from the depths of his soul.

behind Her eyes flew open, and she sat straighter. “Chieftain,” she said almostsoft, throaty whisper of hastily cast aside slumber. “Ye startled me er backcoughed and pushed herself to her feet, nervously brushing her kirtle in the moon, “Dinna be angry. I have a plan, ye ken?”

uld be a “A plan to send yer soul to the depths of hell?” He shook his head and turned away, unable to bear the hopefulness in her face. Poor, innocent Wolfe’sShe had no idea. He bowed his head. Another ragged groan escaped

Once again, his selfishness had cost the world something precious and Evil had won. “Ye shouldha gone, Ethne. Shouldha saved yerself.”

“I can break the curse.” She circled him, trying to make him look at her but he turned away again. “Ye must give me a chance to end this misery” she said.

prick of “Do ye not think if there was a way to break the curse that I would have found it after bearing this torture for over two hundred years?” He scrutinized her hand across his face, flinching as he rubbed too close to the gouged scar that never healed. “And now ye will die and yer soul will be lost.” He finally looked at her gaze. “Ye have done the verra thing I tried to save ye from, lass.”

rel said Her jaw hardened with determination as she shoved in close and wrapped her arms around him, holding him in a gentle embrace. “I did what I needed to—leavedo. I did what was right.”

He reeled with her warmth, the sweetness of her scent. It seemed like the world was staggering back, making him drunk with her softness and the love in her eyes. “Ye deserve better!”

“Ye are not a bad man!” She closed the distance between them again. “Ye deserve better!”

1 of his “But I *am* a terrible man.” He had to confess, so she would see. “I was a fool who let the woman sent to marry me hated becoming my wife, I sought atonement.” Butbed. Gave in to the wicked seductions of the Morrigan. I was *weak*

shouldha been strong. Instead of working harder to win my new wife’s love, I merely serviced her to seed an heir, then sated my passions with the witch’s prayers. “He met Ethne’s stubborn gaze, willing her to see him for the selfish bastard he was. “And when I finally gained a grain of decency, I became ashamed of my ways, I spurned the witch and sought forgiveness from the Lady Aria. But it was too late. Even though the wife I dishonored bore me a daughter, she never truly forgave me. And nor should she

He stepped away again, putting an arm's length of distance between them. "Then our wee one died and my long-suffering Aria could stand no more of the unhappiness I had brought into her life." He turned and cast a sad look up at the east tower, the only tower still standing. "She jumped to her death because of me."

"Mama said ye were a good man," Ethne said. "If Mama said it is so, then it is so." She lifted her chin again as though daring him to challenge her. "Mama always knows."

"And what will yer precious mama say when she discovers what ye have done?" A bitter snort escaped him. "I feel certain her opinion of me will change then."

"It will not." Ethne closed the distance between them yet again. "She will help me find a way to break the curse."

"There is no way." Wolfe hated himself more than he ever had before. "I deserve this hell. Brought it upon myself." He touched her cheek with a shaking hand. "Ye deserve life. Love. A fine husband and precious bairns to care for ye in yer old age." His voice broke. "Ye deserve better than me, dear one. So much better."

"Leave what I deserve to me, ye ken?" She framed his face with her hands and pressed the sweetest of kisses to his mouth. "I will make ye free," she whispered. "And then ye can decide whether ye want me here or not."

He stiffened and clutched his staff tighter to keep from falling to his knees and weeping. What precious Ethne promised would never be. He knew it heart and soul. "Go, Ethne. Go to yer mother."



Chapter Five

ETHNE HURRIED THROUGH the door, bracing herself for what she knew was coming. She opened the door and looked back at her.

“Praise the Almighty!” Rhona jumped up from the stool beside her and pulled her into a crushing hug. “We feared ye surely dead,” she sobbed through gasping sobs.

“Ethne! Come to me, child,” Mama weakly ordered her from the cot in the corner. She lay back against a pile of rolled blankets, a bag, and what few pillows they owned, securely propped into a sitting position. Her eyes were red and her cheeks shining with tears. “What have ye done, daughter? What foolishness have ye brought down upon yerself?”

“No foolishness, Mama.” Ethne slid Mama’s gnarled hand into her hair and she knelt at the worried woman’s bedside. “I discovered it is the curse of the chieftain I’ve fed since last summer. Chieftain Wolfe MacDanua. No wandering cripple. I mean to end this curse once and for all.”

“The MacDanua,” her mother repeated in a horrified whisper. Her face crumpled with misery. “Oh, Ethne. No, my dear, sweet lass. I didna listen to the entirety of the pipes’ killing song.”

“I have, Mama. And when the wicked one comes, I mean to best him and free the MacDanua.” Ethne squeezed her mother’s hand. “I love him, and he loves me.”

Mama closed her eyes, but her tears came faster. The scarred side of her face became an angrier red. “Ye canna break the curse, child.”

“Every curse can be broken.” Ethne refused to let everyone’s disbelief veer her from her course. “Ye’ve said so many times.” She rose from her knees and sat on the edge of the bed, leaning closer, willing her mother to believe. “I just need ye to tell me anything ye think might work, and I will try them all.”

Mama shifted with a heavy sigh and wearily shook her head. “Ye

break the curse, Ethne.”

Ethne stood, too anxious and driven to remain seated any longer. “I’ve never heard of anyone ever broken a thing about witchery, but I remember every story ye’ve ever told me about the wicked one and yer hateful mother. How they hurt folks. Their curses are all true to ye. Especially when ye protected me from them. I’ll use the holy water from the well ye stole to christen me with. There’s salt in the crock on the table. Rhona has some silver just the other day, and I’ll pry the horseshoe from our door. I’ll use the iron so’s to have a bit of iron to be sure. Can ye tell me anything else I can use?” She hurried to the dried herbs hanging beside the hearth. “Sage is good for the firegot a bit of sage too, and there are rowan sticks in the corner.”

He said Her mother shook her head while staring down at her hands fisted in her lap. “None will work, my precious daughter. Not against Morrigan the narrowwicked’s evil.”

of rags, “Then what? Tell me, Mama. What?”

position, Mama lifted her head and gave Ethne a sad smile. “Same blood but different soul done, soul sacrificed for a lie told,” she answered quietly. Her watery blue eyes took on a faraway look. “I am the last. Morrigan-the-least. Daughters as Morrigan-the-lesser. Granddaughter to Morrigan-the-wicked. The cursed blood ends with me.”

at some “She means herself,” Rhona said in a horrified whisper. “To break the curse, ye need her blood. Her sacrifice.”

er lined “That makes no sense,” Ethne said, even though the truth of it soured her stomach and made it churn. For the very first time, Mama’s recitation of the family ancestry, and the saying that always began it, finally made sense. “No one has ever been told. Wolfe told me his wife knew of his adultery and never told anyone. Mama, him, even though he begged her and spurned the Morrigan forevermore.”

“He is not the one who lied,” Mama said. “The wicked one made Ethne swear on her blood oath with him. Swore to bring his dead wife back. Promised that if the son newly seeded in his wife’s belly would be born healthy and whole, she would one day else’s someday lead Clan MacDanua. But instead, she cursed him to become the rose deadly piper of Tarbat Ness and made him prisoner to the haunted mist of the Highlands.” She shifted with a heavy sigh. “That is why ye need blood. I’ll use the Morrigan line to break the bond. Ye need me.”

Ethne sank back onto the stool and hugged herself, unwilling to believe that losing her mother was the only way she could save the man she loved.

“There has to be another way. The tools I spoke of. Evil canna win.”

them.”

‘I dinna Mama leaned forward and gently tapped Ethne on the chest. “Wh
d about yer heart tell ye, child? Always listen to yer heart. Have I not told ye
ruelties well?”

ater ye “I am listening to my heart, Mama. I love him.” Then she caught
a got usher mother’s hands. “But I love ye too, and am not willing to lose ye. I
oorpost choose between ye. If I canna have ye both, then I will battle the M
I might alone and take my chances.”

ge! I’ve “Ye willna lose me.” Mama smiled, her eyes clearer than they had
years. “Ye will free me.”

d in her Ethne almost choked on a sob as she shook her head. “No. Ye’ve
an-the-verra selfish daughter. I canna bear the thought of losing ye. Not this w

“Ye would rather I die a slow, painful death from this poisonous s
eating me alive?” Mama pointed at the battered black trunk in the
t a pure “The narrow wooden box in the bottom. Bring it to me, child.”

ie eyes Ethne rose and backed away, shaking her head. “No. I will not fe
hter to athame.” Instead, she snatched a cloth sack off the hook beside the d
tainted started gathering everything she needed to battle the evil curse. Sal
water. Silver. Iron. Sage. She wished they had a prayer book or a c

eak the cross—she could make one with the rowan sticks and some leather stri

“Ethne!” Mama smacked the wall beside her bed, making a loud
ired her forbid this nonsense, ye ken? Do as I’ve told ye. Now.”

ing her Ethne ignored her and turned to Rhona. “Daren’t ye help he
lie hasherself, understand? I can do this without our losing her.”

forgave Rhona stared at her, cast a nervous glance over at Mama, then
e.” back to Ethne.

a false “Swear it, Rhona,” Ethne demanded.

that the Rhona gave a weak nod, then bowed her head.

ole and Not happy with her friend’s hesitant response but knowing it was
me theas Rhona could give, Ethne charged out the door, cringing against M
it of the shrill cries. Everything in her wanted to turn back, run to Mama and
od from dear woman tighter than she had ever hugged her before. But she co

Not with Mama determined to die so that everyone else might live.

believe Never would she slaughter her precious mother like a sacrificial l
e loved. the wicked one’s altar. Nor would she wait for the evil Morrigan to
thstand the time to strike. Armed with her sack of weapons, she would sum

witch's vile wickedness when the mist returned.

When she reached the ruins, she slowed. Wolfe had gone silent as that as when she promised to save him. The hopelessness in his gaze had that he believed all was lost. But all was not lost. Ethne refused to hold of that.

"Chieftain MacDanua," she called out as she moved deeper into worrigan once been the courtyard. He'd not given her permission to use the intir his first name in anything other than her thoughts. He didn't answer, been inknew he was there. Somewhere. The ruins held him prisoner.

The details of his poor wife came to mind. The east tower. The t raised a woman had jumped to her death from there. Ethne gathered her skirts ay." and picked her way around the piles of crumbled walls and blocks o ickness. The east tower looked out across the sea. If the lady had dropped fr corner, parapet, she would have met her end on the stone slabs coveri shoreline. Ethne needed to wage war against the darkness there, wh tch the blood oath had been dishonored with Morrigan's lie.

She slipped through a crack in the wall and climbed down to the t. Holystrand beneath the tower. Shielding her eyes, she looked up at the p ross. A Which section of the rounded wall had Lady Aria jumped from?

"She landed there, Ethne. On that slab," Wolfe said from behind he pop. "I Ethne turned and gave him an encouraging nod. "Then that is w this suffering will end, my chieftain."

"I would have ye call me Wolfe before ye learn to hate me." Fl with pain as he made his way across the rough ground, he hobbled turned "Ye must not do this, Ethne. Go from here. Surely, if ye travel far away, the curse will fail to find ye." His gaze sharpened with pl "Ethne—please."

She couldn't resist a victorious smile. "See? If ye were a wicked n as good selfish man, ye wouldna worry about me or feel remorse for anything. Mama's boldly rested a hand on his shoulder. "We all make mistakes in this hug the were never given the chance to atone. When ye tried, the wick ouldn't. imprisoned ye with the curse."

"I would not have ye suffer because of me, lass. Can ye not see amb on made me love ye? I canna bear what the devil woman and her killi choose will do because ye helped me. Because ye cared."

"I love ye too," Ethne said. "And ye need me."

“Ye love a cripple? A man weak and worthless?”

“Nay—I dinna love a cripple who is worthless. I love the courageous man I see before me.” She opened her sack and carefully emptied its contents on the waist-high shelf of stone where Lady Aria had ended. “I need to make a cross from these rowan branches. Can ye hold that place while I tie them?”

“Aye, since ye refuse to listen.” He leaned against the squared-column but she and rested his staff against his shoulder. “Why rowan?” he asked as she tied the sticks together as she instructed.

“Witches dinna like rowan. That’s what Mama always said.” She lashed the wood together and knotted the leather three times.

“Dark clouds are coming.” Wolfe cast a worried frown at the sky from the cowl deepened as he scanned the sea. “The water churns harder with the rising wind. ’Tis creating a maelstrom.” He caught Ethne’s hand where she squeezed, then bared his teeth, his face filled with imploring. “The darknesses ye, and she comes before sunset. Run, Ethne. Afore it’s too late.”

“I will not.” She pulled free, took the salt, and sprinkled it in a circle around him. “No matter what. Stay inside this circle, ye ken?” She handed him the horseshoe and the pieces of silver. “And hold tight to these. A few things will protect ye.”

He tried to shove them back into her hands. “No. I need ye to protect me.”

Taking a step back to dodge him, she touched the mark on her thigh to her. She lifted a small, stoppered urn. “My different-colored eyes, my mark, and enough holy water will send her back to the hell from which she came. I need to lead more.”

“Ye are wrong, Ethne!” her mother declared from close to the bastion or tower.

Panic shot through Ethne like lightning. She turned and spied her life. She clung to Rhona, lashed to her friend’s back like a bundle of sticks. She had her arms looped under Mama’s knees and hitched the old woman onto her shoulders as she picked her way down to the shelf of stone.

“I had to bring her,” Rhona said in a tone imploring Ethne to understand. “She begged me to pack her here before it was too late. She’s ready to die of her pain, and now that ye’ve found the MacDanua, she yearns to atone for the evil her grandmother did.”

“But she will die,” Ethne said, the words catching in her throat.
e kind, “Stop talking about me as if I am not here,” Mama said. She
placed Rhona’s arm. “Set me on the stone, lass. ’Tis where the blood oac
net herdishonored.”

them in “All of ye must go,” Wolfe said, stepping out of the protection of
circle. “Go now, afore it’s too late. Leave the Morrigan to unleash her
off rockon me. I am the one who started this feckin’ mess.”

he held “No, my chieftain,” Mama said with a determined frown. “The blo
was false. Ye were tricked. This evil is not of yer doing.” She po
’ Ethnecrooked finger at the rock. “Set me on the stone. Now.”

Sidling closer to the large, weathered shelf, Rhona leaned to the si
ky. His Mama released her hold and slid down onto the stone. The frail wom
with theout her hand. “My athame. Hurry! The evil comes.”

nd and Ethne scrambled up on the rock and knelt at her mother’s side. “
monessbe the one to fight her. I beg ye—dinna spill yer blood.”

.” Wolfe crawled up beside them, placing himself between them and
a circleand clutching his staff like a weapon. “All of ye go. Now! Hurry!”

handed The wind howled louder, and the sea raged. Roiling clouds blacke
ll thesesky, and the deadly mist spilled across the water toward them. Ethne
pry the ceremonial dagger out of Mama’s hand, but her mother held
ed. Notwith surprising strength.

“Death is not the end, my precious daughter,” she said, shoutin
oat andheard over the approaching storm. “’Tis only a new beginning.”

nd this “Mama, no. Please.” Ethne hugged her mother tight and buried her
nothingthe curve of the old woman’s neck just like she’d done as a child.

Mama gently stroked her hair. “It will be all right, sweet lass.
e of thealways be with ye.”

A torrent of wind and water hit them, nearly dashing them off the
motherThe high-pitched keen of the angry squall rose to a horrendous howl.
Rhonagrew heavy and smelled of brimstone. It stung their flesh like fire. Li
i higherflashed and thunder shook the ground.

“Same blood but a pure soul sacrificed for a lie told. For the good
erstand.For the harm of none. So let it be spoken, so let it be done. So mote
be freeMama shouted, then shoved the long, lethal blade of the athame deep i
o makebreast. Still clutching the hilt, she rolled forward and sagged over the

As soon as her blood dripped upon it, the black sky splintered with b

shafts of light and the earth trembled.

The east tower rumbled and swayed from side to side, then collapsed with wassending chunks of stone hurling down around them.

Ethne pulled Mama close and covered her as best she could. Rhona the saltin to huddle over Mama too. Something solid and warm pressed against Ethne, shielding her like a wall of flesh. Wolfe. No longer the halting twisted beggar but returned to the form of the breathtaking man she had once witnessed playing the pipes in the mist.

An enraged shriek split through the tempest, then deafening thunder rolled the darkness away, making way for the light. The sea calmed, and until the first time in as long as Ethne had visited the ruins, the wind died to an helda peaceful breeze. But her sorrow far outweighed her joy that the curse was finally broken. Mama was gone.

Wolfe rose and moved away, as though sensing Ethne needed to be left with her mother.

“Oh, Mama. How can I go on without ye?” She cradled the precious woman close. Mama had always been there, always protected her. The need for rippling through Ethne’s hair reminded her of Mama’s reassuring care. She tried to smile. “I will always watch over ye, my precious daughter.” Mama’s voice faded on to itrode the wind. “Know that I am at peace and in pain no more. Just what I wanted. Dry yer tears and live on, sweet lass.”

“I am so sorry, Ethne,” Rhona choked out between sobs. “She was in so much pain. When she begged me to carry her here, I couldna refuse. I can’t face inforgive me.”

Ethne wrapped an arm around Rhona’s shoulders and pulled her close. “Hush, dear sister. I understand.” She sniffed and forced a sad smile. “Mama is my only family now. How could there ever be anything but love between us?”

Wolfe moved closer, his head bowed. He crossed himself while catching a sad gaze down at Ethne’s mother. “God rest her soul,” he said, his voice reverent and thankful. “Yer mother was not Morrigan-the-least, Ethne. Her name shall be read of all. headstone shall read, *Morrigan-the-greatest – the mightiest of selfless women*. It shall be!” and we will make sure our children and our children’s children know the sacrifice she made.”

“Our children?” Ethne repeated, her heart daring to lift the slightest hope. “Aye, my love.” He gently scooped Mama up into his arms. “We

let yer mother's sacrifice be in vain. Come. Let us lay her to rest."

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Chapter Six

WOLFE OFFERED ONE arm to Ethne and the other to Rhona and led them through the MacDanua chapel cemetery into the courtyard. As they cleared the opening with its rusty gate hanging off-kilter, sunlight flooded the air, blessing them with the promise of better days ahead.

Rhona pulled away and stepped ahead of them, turning with a shy smile. “The two of ye have much to work out. When ye are ready, supper waiting at home, aye?”

“I thank ye, Rhona. For everything.” Wolfe cast a slow look around the first time in over two hundred years, hope stirred within him. “Too much work to be done, but MacDanua Keep will shine again, and ye are here as much as we do. This will be yer home as well, ye ken?”

Ethne gifted him with teary-eyed gratefulness, then gave Rhona an encouraging nod. “Aye, sister. We shall rebuild. Say ye will call this home too. Please?”

Rhona ducked her head, vainly trying to hide her tears. “I will,” she said. After a quick swipe at her eyes, she sniffed and squared her shoulders. “After it is more livable, we best eat and sleep at the cottage. Agreed?”

Wolfe laughed and nodded. “A wise plan, dear sister.”

Rhona gave Ethne a quick hug, curtsied to Wolfe, then turned and walked toward home.

“Thank ye,” Ethne said softly as she faced him. “She hasna had a peaceful life either.”

He gently cupped her face in his hand, unable to believe that all of them had received a second chance at life. He would not waste it. “Will ye stay, wife, Ethne, even though I have nothing to offer ye other than the ruins of an once verra fine castle?”

She slid her hands up his chest and smiled, then hesitantly touched his cheek. “I have nothing to offer ye either. Nothing other than my heart.”

“Ahh, that is where ye are wrong, m’love.” He eased her into an embrace and pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead. “Ye’ve given me unconditional love, and a life I never thought possible.”

She stepped back and gave him a troubled look, making his heart race faster.

“What is it, Ethne?”

“The villagers... Yer descendants.” She shook her head and looked down out of gaze. “They willna accept me. At least, most will not.”

He arched an eyebrow. “To the devil with them.” He lifted her face and kissed her forehead as if he could argue. The warm, tempting softness of her mouth nearly undid him.

She leaned in, pressing tighter against him as she shyly allowed her to smile. He welcomed his.

will be The sound of someone clearing their throat separated them. Ethne looked away and looked all around, obviously confused when no one was there.

nd. For “Mrs. Tarrel,” Wolfe said. “Be polite enough to show yerself to Ethne, if ye please.”

belong The nosy housekeeper shimmered into view, her ghostly smile as she almost glowed. She dipped an airy curtsy toward Ethne. “A pleasure to meet ye, Lady Ethne. I be Mrs. Tarrel, housekeeper to MacDanua Castle. This is my place. Ethne blinked slowly, as though caught in a daze. “Greetings to ye, Mrs. Tarrel.”

he said. Mrs. Tarrel bobbed in midair again, then turned back to Wolfe. “I was told ye I’d be going to my reward once the curse was broken, but then I see it, ye need me now more than ever. What with the keep to rebuild and a new wife? I dinna see any reason to hurry on my way.”

and ran Wolfe smiled and tugged Ethne back into his arms. “What say ye to this precious new wife? Is it all right if Mrs. Tarrel stays?”

had a “Definitely.” Ethne tightened her arms around him. “She can tell me yer secrets.”

of them “I can at that, m’lady.” Mrs. Tarrel chuckled as she faded from view. “I’ll be mybe off for a wee bit now to give the two of ye privacy. Call out should ye need me.”

“Is she really gone?” Ethne whispered.

hed his “I wager she has gone to the village to find workers to help us rebuild. She’s quite adept at stirring a person’s guilt and convincing folk to do what they shouldha done all along.” Wolfe had no doubt the wily housekeeper had

... closer gone to fetch the priest to make him and Ethne man and wife before
... e hope, day passed. "We should sit by the gate and watch for the priest."

"The priest?" She stared up at him, looking amazed. "How do you
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"I love ye more, my precious Ethne. With all my heart and soul."

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gone to fetch the priest to make him and Ethne man and wife before another day passed. “We should sit by the gate and watch for the priest.”

“The priest?” She stared up at him, looking amazed. “How do ye know he’s coming?”

“When ye spend over two hundred years with a housekeeper who is more like a grandmother, ye tend to see what she is about to do before she does it.” Wolfe stole another quick taste of Ethne’s luscious mouth. “And in this case, I dinna mind. I want ye, Ethne. To be mine for always. In the eyes of God and everyone else. My heart aches as though a part of it’s missing whenever ye’re not with me.”

“I love ye, Wolfe,” she whispered. “More than ye will ever know.”

“I love ye more, my precious Ethne. With all my heart and soul.”

The End

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[Loving Her Lonely Highlander \(Book 6\)](#)

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Many thanks and may your life always be filled with good books!

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Maeve

Once Upon a Haunted Scottish Cottage

Sofie Darling

Once Upon a Haunted Scottish Cottage

Sofie Darling



Chapter One

Scotland
1821

THE INSTANT THE carriage rolled to as smooth a stop as the bumpy road would allow, Theodora flung the door open, poked her head outside, took a deep, replenishing gulp of delicious Scottish air, her eyes batted against golden late-afternoon light.

Moppet flew from the cramped interior, her little spaniel legs carrying as fast as they could move, as she pursued the freedom of fresh scenery yet another long day's ride.

"Moppet," Theodora called out, a warning in her tone that the spaniel's venture deep into uncharted territory.

Not that this patch of Scotland was unknown to Theodora. As she'd visited from London with her parents, her mother always harbored a soft spot for her notoriously ill-tempered Aunt Sorcha.

Of course, Aunt Sorcha couldn't greet Theodora on this visit as she'd passed into the great heavenly beyond one month ago—God rest that cantankerous soul—which was what brought Theodora here, now.

Actually, the letter she'd received a fortnight ago brought her here,

True to her reputation of being an Original with a capital "O," Aunt Sorcha had left strict instructions that no one bother themselves—herself included—to attend her funeral as her niece Marion and great-niece Theodora were her only remaining family, and they lived together all the way in London.

Theodora's parents had perished in a carriage accident along the coast seven years ago, and her mother's sister, Aunt Marion, had been with Theodora as a companion since. Theodora would have long perished from starvation without her aunt to tend her corporeal needs. Her mind tended toward books—mostly the Greeks with a few romantic novels in for variety.

She stepped from the carriage and waited with valise in hand while the coachman unstrapped her travel trunk from the boot. She took a thatched-roof cottage before her. Positioned at the outer edge of a sleepy village, it remained as charming as she remembered—white with black around the windows and doors, an abundance of flora spilling from every direction.

All Theodora had to do was to stay for the two nights preceding the reading of Aunt Sorcha's last will and testament for it to be hers.

The letter in her reticule said so.

An unusual stipulation—but Aunt Sorcha had never gone her own way in the country. Theodora was yet mildly shocked by the entire matter, truth told, and never got the impression that her aunt particularly liked her enough to link her a bequest in her will.

Until six months ago, that was.

Theodora had been engaged to marry Mr. Hunt, who had been so unbothered that their engagement had entered its third year. The circumstances

library that she and Aunt Marion ran in London took up so much of her attention that she'd hardly noticed herself. It was Aunt Sorcha—a confirmed spinster all her days—who had been adamant in her weekly letters that, as a child, Theodora set a date for the marriage.

Then six months ago, shockingly, Aunt Sorcha had done a complete about-face and urged Theodora to reconsider the engagement. She'd made some very sound arguments that Theodora took to heart. She'd broken the engagement the next day—with no small amount of relief.

"I'll be off if that'll be all, miss," said the coachman. "Need to get the horses movin' to make Edinburgh by nightfall."

Aunt Sorcha's words were short.

"Of course," said Theodora, pushing her spectacles up the bridge of her nose. Money ready in hand, she paid the coachman.

The carriage rolling into the distance, Theodora took in another deep inhalation of fresh country air scented with pine and thistle. When the carriage door opened, she noticed something...unusual...something she hadn't noticed mostly before.

The front door of the cottage stood slightly ajar.

Moppet must've noticed the crack at that very moment, for Theodora

While she caught the hind end of the pup before she disappeared inside, sitting in the wagging with the excitement of a new frontier to be explored.

“Moppet,” called Theodora, her feet kicking into a run to follow the little timid pup.

Theodora crossed the threshold, expecting an interior as warm and cozy as the charming exterior suggested. The inside was, indeed, welcoming: its sitting room to the left and small library to the right—a library that made Theodora’s fingers itching to catalogue. She suspected a few gems were waiting to be discovered in there.

However, though a low fire burned in the hearth, Theodora felt no warmth. She’d of its warmth—quite the opposite. A sharp finger of ice scraped across her skin and slowly purred up her spine, needling into her veins and making her blood run cold. All the fine hairs on her arms and neck prickled to a standstill.

Her heart racing, she called out a weak, “Hello?”

From the stillness, no answer came. But that didn’t mean Theodora wasn’t calculating what her eyes didn’t see...

of her *A presence.*

Confirmed A trio of heavy heartbeats lurched past and...

ers that It was gone.

Feet that had become frozen into place found the wherewithal to complete picking up steam with each step as Theodora followed Moppet’s trail. She dashed through the cottage, hands rubbing at goose bumps that had lifted off her arms.

By the time she entered the kitchen, heat flooded through her in a rush. It was as if the moment never happened.

She spotted another open door, this one leading into the back garden. “Moppet,” she called out, again, certain it was futile. The little dog vanished to every adventure she found.

As Theodora followed the sound of barking—Moppet had clearly found an adversary—she noticed another sound: The rhythmic *thud* of axes on deepwood.

She rounded a bend in the garden and came to an abrupt stop, nearly tripping over herself. There, not twenty feet away, stood a man in a heavy overcoat tossed aside, shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, axe gripped in a large, masculine hand. A man tall, broad, and sturdy as a brick wall with a lock of black hair that wanted to tumble down his forehead no matter

likely tail many times he swiped at it with the back of his hand.

And this man, well, he was handsome.

How the Very handsome.

Perhaps *too* handsome.

And cozy His handsomeness didn't bear dwelling upon.

Eng with Bemused, he considered the small dog barking her head off at him that had man would be the cottage caretaker.

His were "Moppet," Theodora called out for the dozenth time, drawing both of eyes.

It a hint The man's head cocked to the side as he took in her presence. Her loss were the sort of gray that could appear silvery in a certain light. Yet his ing her warm, as if he was a man accustomed to smiling.

And. Theodora resisted the urge to give her dress a little straighten. "The Tilney," she said with more force than strictly necessary. "Miss Dora didn't great-niece from London."

Really, she hadn't needed to offer so much information to this common stranger.

And there was the easy smile she'd been half-expecting.

Somehow, it enhanced his handsomeness.

Do move, *Botheration*.

Trail and "Ah," was all he said in a Scottish burr that rumbled from the depths of his broad chest—or possibly the center of the earth. Theodora could be certain.

A warm "And you are?" The question bordered on a demand—possibly bordering into rude.

Garden. The too-handsome man offered her more of his easy smile and she was lost. "Mr. Boyd."

Theodora cleared her throat officiously in an attempt to disguise a found unsettled feeling inside her. "Mr. Boyd, I will thank you for your, *earnest* striking chopping contribution to the cottage, but I've arrived."

A shallow line formed between his straight black eyebrows. "Aye, my dear feet see that you have."

A man, He didn't budge an inch.

Ed in a Theodora stood, flummoxed. Why wasn't he moving?

With a *Of course*. He would expect payment for his wood chopping services. "How I could retrieve my reticule," she said, her feet already turned toward

kitchen where she'd dropped valise and reticule to chase after Moppet.

As she was opening her coin purse, she heard solid footsteps enter the room behind her. Unaccountable irritation fluttered through her.

She turned and nearly gasped. The size of Mr. Boyd. What was she doing with a big sweaty man who was taking up half the kitchen?

m. The Pay him and see him off, that was what.

She held up a coin. "Will a shilling suffice?"

th pairs She hadn't the faintest idea about wood chopping rates in Scotland

His eyebrows crinkled together. "For?"

lis eyes "For the wood."

his were His brow released, and there it was again—his easy smile. "No charge."

Her coin purse clicked shut with an annoyed snap. As good a name as Missdictated, she inclined her head. "My appreciation."

unbar's He was at liberty to leave.

Yet he didn't move. He was looking at her, as if...as if...

complete He knew her.

Which was impossible.

"Were you employed long by my aunt?" she asked for something to do.

"About a year."

Ah. This was a quaint Scottish village. Everyone knew everyone. It was the sort of place where a man would expect tea. "Would you care for a light repast, Mr. Boyd, or would you care for something else?"

Her gaze kept drifting down and getting stuck on his bare forehead. He was looking at her, as if...as if... She couldn't help noticing the glistening slick of perspiration from his, erm, exertions.

a slight She swallowed against a suddenly parched throat.

He didn't seem to notice. "Aye, it wouldn't go amiss."

pel the *Botheration*. Didn't Mr. Boyd understand *no* would've been the answer? Instead, he'd politely accepted in his light Scottish burr, pulled up a chair, and settled in, crossing one ankle over the other thigh.

e, I can The man looked entirely too comfortable—and entirely too...*man*.

But the comfort and manliness of her guest wasn't Theodora's problem.

She turned and considered the kitchen, dread crawling through her veins. "If I could have a word with you, Mr. Boyd, I would be most grateful." In London, Aunt Marion was in charge of tea—and everything else related to food—and Theodora ran their circulating library. It

delegation of duties that pleased and suited each woman.

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Oh... what had she gotten herself into?



Chapter Two

MISS TILNEY WAS smaller than Ian thought she would be.

But that was likely because she'd loomed so large in his mind the months.

In reality, she was an average-sized woman—and a comely lass. Not her spectacles could obscure her bright, intelligent blue eyes.

He saw a few things more, too.

She hadn't the faintest idea who he was—which was fair enough.

And she hadn't the faintest idea of what to do in a kitchen. She stood, staring at the stove as if it were the first time she'd ever laid eyes on one.

Perhaps it was.

But she wasn't the sort to give up, either. She began sorting through provisions Ian had brought from Edinburgh this morning and arranging cheese and ham onto a platter. A good start, even if Ian was a trifle worried about the bread she was presently slicing and putting directly on the stove's surface. It was a valiant effort from a woman who clearly knew her way up from down in a kitchen.

When, at last, she set the makeshift meal on the kitchen table directly across from him, the toast was only slightly singed, and Miss Tilney seemed quite pleased with the result. Her direct gaze caught his. "You caretaker for the cottage, you really mustn't leave the doors wide open to an animal intruder who would happen along."

Ian's brow gathered. "The doors were open?"

He hadn't left them so. In fact, he'd intentionally fastened them shut.

To his right, the little dog was dancing on her hind legs, tongue hanging out of her mouth. He held up a morsel of ham. "May I?"

Miss Tilney lifted her gaze long enough to nod, then cast an angry glare toward the slice of blackened toast in her hand. Arriving at the

logical solution, she picked up a knife and began scraping.

Now would be the time to disabuse her of the inaccurate conclusion reached regarding his identity. “Miss Tilney, I feel compelled to inform you we’ve gotten off to an erroneous start.”

Her knife paused, mid scrape. “Oh?” she asked. “Is this about the case? I can assure you I’m not angry, and I do appreciate all the chopped wood. I shall not lose your place over such a trifling matter.”

Her reassuring smile doubled Ian’s feeling of guilt. “I’m not the best lastcaretaker,” he stated bluntly.

She blinked. “You’re not?” A line of concern formed between her not eveneyebrows. “Then who are you, precisely?”

“I’m a solicitor from Edinburgh.”

Her head canted with curiosity. “...who chops woods during the winter time?”

“Our offices handled your aunt’s affairs for over a decade.”

Skepticism curled at Miss Tilney’s pert mouth. “Surely not. You cannot be older than five and twenty years.”

“The offices of Boyd and Son,” he clarified and added, “In Edinburgh.”

“I take it you’re *Son*?”

He nodded.

She didn’t yet appear satisfied. “Yet...you’re *here*, and my aunt, who was here longer is.”

“My sincerest condolences for your loss, Miss Tilney.”

Blast. Those should’ve been the first words out of his mouth at the meeting with Miss Tilney today. Everything kept getting jumbled in the order—*Miss Tilney*—and it was his responsibility to put it right.

She continued before he could speak. “And you’re here...today, not to any *Boyd*.” Though not a question, it was a question.

“It has to do with the will.”

“Are you in charge of the reading?”

“My father shall perform that duty.”

From her expression, he saw his answer hadn’t cleared up the confusion. “I received a letter.”

Miss Tilney’s eyes, bright and blue behind her spectacles, narrowed.

“From your aunt,” he added.

Here was the bit he didn’t like, because it was completely unexpected.

he remained uncertain what Miss Dunbar could've meant by it.
n she'd "When?" asked Miss Tilney, still and watchful.
rm you She hadn't asked, *What letter?* but *when*.
Interesting.
loors? I "A fortnight ago."
od. You It didn't need to be said that Miss Dunbar passed away one month
and that he'd received a letter from a dead woman.
cottage Miss Tilney went pale as if a ghost had walked across her grave.
sort of letter?"
en her Ian stood and retrieved the missive from his overcoat hanging
kitchen door. He placed it, open, in the center of the table between th
she scanned the contents, Miss Tilney's hand flew to her mouth with
his free gasp. Wide eyes lifted and met his. A beat later, she grabbed her retic
started rummaging. Her hand emerged holding a white square.
Another letter.
can't be A quick reading revealed the letters were identical in every
including the message within.
rgh." To inherit, the recipient was to stay the two nights preceding the
of the will inside the cottage.
Miss Tilney's gaze lifted. "What can this mean?"
rell, she *Mischief*, Ian didn't say, but he was thinking it. Miss Dunbar
penchant for playing little games with people. He saw the same kno
shining within Miss Tilney's eyes.
h upon *Blast*.
wrong "I shall, of course, leave," he said, as befitted a gentleman.
The furrow in Miss Tilney's brow deepened; her thoughts clearly
y, Mr. She was as intelligent as he'd thought she would be—and prettier t
small portrait in Miss Dunbar's library suggested. Before today, he
thought he liked her through her letters.
Now, he rather knew it.
And their acquaintance would have to end before it barely had a ch
fusion. begin.
"No," she said, definite.
d. Surely his ears were deceiving him. "No?"
"Don't leave," she said. "*Stay*."
ted and "Why?" he asked slowly.

“What if you leave and neither of us inherits the cottage?”

Ian could see her reasoning. If Miss Dunbar had been willing to p
jape, why not another? Yet... “It’s not quite respectable for an una
man to share a cottage with a proper young lady.”

Determination firmed within her eyes. “You’ve brought
ago—provisions to last us a few days.”

Ian knew the beginnings of a logical argument when he heard c
“Whatsettled back in his chair and let Miss Tilney proceed.

Eyes alight with purpose, she continued. “Further, the cottage h
by thebedrooms upstairs.”

em. As Even as Ian saw it was a good idea, he also saw it was a pot
a sharp terrible idea—possibly even disastrous, if her honor came into question
ule and She seemed to have heard his thoughts and shifted forward. “I

knows we’re here.”

A laugh startled out of Ian. It couldn’t help itself. “Everyone n
way—their business to know everyone else’s business in a Scottish village.”

Miss Tilney looked utterly unconvinced by his argument. “We stay
reading Quick understanding came to Ian. “It’s your aunt’s library, isn’t it?
“Pardon?”

“You wish to absorb it into your circulating library in London
had ayou?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You know quite a bit about me, it appears.”

“As Miss Dunbar’s solicitor, I was privy to information abo
family.”

Now wouldn’t be the optimal moment to mention the weekly letter
racing. Miss Tilney propped her chin on her hands and considered Ian v
han theclear, unflinching gaze. “So, we have an understanding?”

’d only Like that, Ian knew this about himself: He couldn’t say *no* to a
Miss Tilney asked of him. “Aye.”

Her brow released with relief as she stood, kitchen chair scraping
ance tothe aged pine floor. “I believe we should be able to keep out of each
way, considering I have my aunt’s library to catalogue and you have-
blinked.

“Wood to chop?” he offered.

She nodded, and within three seconds, she and her little dog swe
the room...

Leaving Ian with the tea crockery to clear.

lay one Not that he minded.

ttached Miss Tilney wasn't the sort of young lady to think about the dish
had loftier matters on her mind.

enough And he would be spending the next two days with her—*alone*.

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Leaving Ian with the tea crockery to clear.

Not that he minded.

Miss Tilney wasn't the sort of young lady to think about the dishes. She had loftier matters on her mind.

And he would be spending the next two days with her—*alone*.



Chapter Three

Midnight

*T*_{AP-TAP...TAP-TAP...TAP-TAP...}

Theodora dragged a pillow across her face.

Tap-tap...tap-tap...tap-tap...

The coverlet followed.

Tap-tap...tap-tap...tap-tap...

She peeked out from beneath coverlet and pillow to find Moppet c the foot of the bed, sleeping soundly, utterly unconcerned.

Tap-tap...tap-tap...tap-tap...

It was no use.

The *tap-tapping* was relentless.

She swung her feet onto pine floorboards and crossed the small r four determined strides. She poked her head out the window, suspe loose shutter, but each side appeared secure. Further, the noi mysteriously ceased. Perhaps it had been an errant gust of wind.

She crawled back into bed and brought the covers up to he Scotland held a chill that could creep into one's bones.

She'd barely closed her eyes when...

Tap-tap...tap-tap...tap-tap...

This time, she didn't hesitate. She shot out of bed and grabbed he rail, cinching it tight about her waist before reaching for the bedroo handle. The racket had to have been coming from Mr. Boyd's room. T must sleep like the dead, if he couldn't hear all that banging about.

Five seconds later, she was at his door, her fist giving it a firm knocks.

Theodora began reconsidering the wisdom of this course of actio the door flew open on creaky hinges, startling a gasp from her. Bef stood the sleep-disheveled Scotsman, hair tousled about his hea

hanging loose, and trousers that she suspected weren't fastened. He dared not look down.

"May I help you, Miss Tilney?" he asked, his voice groggy as he rubbed his eyes.

Had the man truly been asleep? "Could you please affix your shutter so it stops banging about?"

Mr. Boyd's silvery gaze narrowed, and he cocked an ear to the door. Stubborn, provoking silence prevailed.

"What banging?"

Theodora heaved an irritated sigh. "If it happens again, please secure the shutter."

She pivoted on her heel and heard a "Good night" at her back.

She hadn't been lying in bed two minutes when...

Tap-tap...tap-tap...tap-tap...

An instant later, she was retracing her steps to Mr. Boyd's door. She whirled about, looking slightly less bedraggled than a few minutes ago, as if he'd predicted her return.

"You must do something about that infernal shutter."

He let his cocked head and closed eyes answer for him. He was listening—and—*frustratingly*, like her—hearing nothing but dead quiet. The room was as silent as a crypt.

Stealthily, a frigid draft swirled around Theodora's bare ankles. It slowly snaked up her legs, lifting goose bumps in its wake. Instinctively, she crossed her arms over her chest to ward off cold that wanted to go through her chin, the bone... The same icy shard of air that she'd felt upon entering the room earlier.

"Is all right with you, Miss Tilney?" asked Mr. Boyd, concerned.

"Do you not feel that chill?"

His brow gathered, and he shook his head.

She threw exasperated hands into the air and whirled around in frustration—*did the man hear and feel nothing?*—her intention to return to her room and not leave until morning, no matter how much the shutter banged about.

Except, somehow, with the sudden flurry of movement, the loose ends of her night-rail became tangled in her legs, and her feet tripped over themselves. "Oh!" she cried out as, improbably, she began to tip over and fall. It all happened in the split of a second, but long enough for Theodora to catch her shirt.

er eyes register that she was about to tumble down the cottage's steep, straight
of stairs.

rubbed Then she felt it—a hand clamping around her upper arm...and pull
back from the brink...and into powerful arms...and chest.

window Mr. Boyd's broad, muscular chest.

Her brick wall assessment from earlier had been absolutely correct
ie side. Her head angled back so she could meet his eyes, reflecting shock
mirroring her own. "Are you injured, Miss Tilney?"

She'd become lost for words for the first time in her life, reeling fr
re it." near fall down the stairs—and something else, too. The warmth
Boyd's embrace... The *strength* of his embrace... The very nearness
faces... The vibrancy that pulsed in the intimate patch of air between
mouths...as if she could lift onto the tips of her toes and...

He was "Here," rumbled from the deep of his chest, "come and sit for a mi
redicted He set her away from him, and Theodora nearly sighed at the l
was right—*of course*—but that didn't mean she had to like it.

As he guided her inside his bedroom, it took a moment for her to
steninghe was guiding her toward his—

ise was *Bed.*

He seemed to realize it as well. Discreetly, he shifted course and
les and to the chair positioned before a desk. He pulled another chair near, so
ely, she across from each other.

ough to Theodora had a serious question to ask, but she feared he would lat
cottage Nevertheless, she must.

"Is it possible this cottage is haunted?"

l in the



IAN WOULD CHALK the question up to Miss Tilney having just suffered a
stration for she was too intelligent a woman to believe in ghosts.

er room In the clear light of morning, she would see that.

bout. So Ian avoided the question. Instead, he asked, "Would you care
e fabric glass of water?"

id over She gave her head a firm shake, her eyes stormy, but her color ret
and— All sleep-tousled, she was lovely.

dora to

at flight Lovely enough to kiss.

 Which he'd almost done—before he'd recovered his wits.

ling her It was simply that upon finding Miss Tilney in his arms, it seemed the most logical course.

 Thankfully, the voice of reason had intervened, and he hadn't made a fool of himself—or worse, compromised her.

κ surely Her gaze strayed toward the neat stacks of papers strewn about her desk. "I imagine being a solicitor in Edinburgh involves a great deal of time spent on the paperwork."

of Mr. "Indeed."

of their "How did you come to be a solicitor, Mr. Boyd?" She was making the most of their small conversation while she recovered her equilibrium.

 "I'm descended from a long line of Edinburgh solicitors," he replied. "I wouldn't really know any other occupation."

oss. He She gave a wistful smile. "You are fortunate to work with your father."

 Ian was aware of the carriage accident that had killed both Miss Tilney's parents. Out of respect, he didn't mention it. "I'm earning my place in the law offices. It's how I found myself paying weekly visits to help Miss Tilney settle her estate over the last several months of her life. It's the sort of thing one would expect of a junior solicitor."

they sat Miss Tilney's gaze shifted and settled onto the nearest stack of papers. Her head canted. "Is this a letter from Aunt Sorcha related to her affair with the neighbor?"

ugh. Ian leaned forward, catching Miss Tilney's crisp rose scent as he perused the contents of the paper. "This correspondence relates to the wrongful death of a lady's pet goat. Purportedly, the animal would scale a stone wall and eat all the neighbor's flowers. Poor fellow turned up dead one morning. The neighbor says it's not their doing, and our client insists it is. I believe the courts will have to decide the matter."

a fright, Miss Tilney didn't appear interested in the least by the story. Instead, she'd planted a finger in the center of the paper and held Ian's eye. "Is this Aunt Sorcha's handwriting?"

e for a He leaned closer. "I can assure you it's not."

urning.is it, then?"

 "Mine."

 "Yours?"

If Ian was reading her most expressive face correctly, he'd shocked her core.

"This is your handwriting?"

"It is."

Her eyebrows released with understanding. "Mr. Boyd, *you* wrote Sorch's letters to me."

Ah. He'd walked directly into this. "Your aunt's eyesight began to fail rapidly, and she'd needed someone to transcribe her letters."

Miss Tilney was looking at him strangely. The possibility existed that she might need to be concerned.

"It was curious how much nicer Aunt Sorch had become in her letters."

"Oh?" Ian asked in a futile attempt to buy time, as she'd caught the back foot. He had, perhaps—*definitely*—taken liberties with her." Dunbar's correspondence.

Miss Tilney's gaze narrowed. "She'd become so helpful with her Papa's advice."

"That's, *erm*, encouraging to hear."

Miss Tilney's gaze prodded. "It wasn't Aunt Sorch giving advice." Her gaze probed. "It wasn't Aunt Sorch being nice." A paper eyebrow lifted. "It was *you*."

That *you* emerged in the confident manner of an accusation made in court of law. Miss Tilney argued her case well.

And she wasn't wrong.

She wasn't finished, either. "You are the one who advised me to bring themy engagement to Mr. Hunt."

Ian saw there was no use in denial. Besides, he didn't want to confess. He'd been pleased to have done that bit of good for Miss Tilney.

"Mr. Hunt wasn't worthy of you."

"You said that in the letter."

The moment stretched long as their gazes held. Ian felt an immense wave of relief wash through him. Just as he'd seen Miss Tilney clearly for the first time, whose beginning, she now saw him so, as well.

Yet it wasn't simply relief he was experiencing, but something more—something intangible that pulsed between them.

Awareness.

d her to And...*intimacy*.

They were two people who knew each other.

He'd admired this woman from afar for a year. What wasn't to a

She was lovely, intelligent, and ran a successful circulating lib
te AuntLondon.

Now that he'd met her in person, he saw his admiration wasn't mis
failing She drew in a sharp breath and shot awkwardly to her feet. "I...I

bid you good night, Mr. Boyd."

that he With that, she fled the room.

Leaving Ian alone with thoughts he knew would keep him awal
weeklydawn's early rays were streaming through the bedroom's lone window

Had he been in the wrong?

him on It was true that he'd taken liberties with Miss Dunbar's correspo
1 MissBut he hadn't been able to keep his opinions to himself, not whe

known himself to be in the right and Miss Tilney in need of sound adv

r sound It was correct that it was in the open.

He could only hope Miss Tilney felt the same in the morning.

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ore, too

And...*intimacy*.

They were two people who knew each other.

He'd admired this woman from afar for a year. What wasn't to admire? She was lovely, intelligent, and ran a successful circulating library in London.

Now that he'd met her in person, he saw his admiration wasn't misplaced.

She drew in a sharp breath and shot awkwardly to her feet. "I...I...must bid you good night, Mr. Boyd."

With that, she fled the room.

Leaving Ian alone with thoughts he knew would keep him awake until dawn's early rays were streaming through the bedroom's lone window.

Had he been in the wrong?

It was true that he'd taken liberties with Miss Dunbar's correspondence. But he hadn't been able to keep his opinions to himself, not when he'd known himself to be in the right and Miss Tilney in need of sound advice.

It was correct that it was in the open.

He could only hope Miss Tilney felt the same in the morning.



Chapter Four

Next day

GOLDEN RAYS OF the setting sun streamed through mullioned windows, giving Theodora her first sign of the time since she'd entered Aunt Sorcha's library this morning. Her suspicion had been correct: The unassuming library possessed quite a few gems that she was keen to add to her circulating library.

After Theodora's parents' sudden and tragic death, the circulating library had been Aunt Sorcha's idea—Papa's single indulgence in life having been books, volumes spilling from study into drawing room and even bedrooms—but it was Theodora's passion.

Subscription was simple: Patrons paid one guinea per year and two shillings for each volume borrowed. And what a privilege it was for access to a wonderful collection of books and periodicals that ranged from philosophy to religion to politics to agricultural treatises to biography and beyond.

A few years ago, they'd expanded their offerings to include novels, which were printed in three volumes to keep patrons returning with voracious appetite. Their addition to the shelves had greatly enhanced Theodora's profits and made it possible for them to keep the Knightsbridge townhouse, as the library's popularity continued to grow each passing year.

Now, Theodora lifted her arms above her head and stretched her long, grown-achy neck from their hunched-over position. From her curled-up position on the armchair cushion, Moppet slitted one eye open. Once she gathered that her mistress wasn't doing anything unusual, she closed it again.

It had been Theodora's favorite sort of day—the sort where she could spend hours alone with books.

Except today, she hadn't been entirely alone with books.

She'd also been alone with her thoughts.

Of the two, books were the easier to catalogue.

While it was true she'd been doing what she loved all day, she'd also been doing something else, too: She'd been avoiding Mr. Boyd.

To think *he* had been her correspondent all those months...

His letters she'd looked forward to receiving.

The thought still astonished her.

With her failing eyesight, Aunt Sorcha wouldn't have been aware of the junior solicitor from Edinburgh had been writing to her niece—
advice he'd been giving her.

Advice that Aunt Sorcha wouldn't have approved of, for Aunt Sorcha's shelves changed at all.

But that advice?

It had changed Theodora.

The faith it had shown in her... It had made her stronger. It had made her believe in herself enough to beg off a too-long engagement with a gentleman she hadn't especially liked. Oh, Mr. Hunt was nice enough in a distant way, but, in truth, he hadn't been particularly keen on the marriage, either. It was what Aunt—

Papa's *No*.

That was what *Mr. Boyd* had helped her to see.

It was *Mr. Boyd* who had told her to wait to marry someone who was good for her.

And the strange part was... Theodora took no offense. In fact, she'd even suspected she liked Mr. Boyd immensely.

The thought unsettled her.

But perhaps not as much as it should.

Really, she found she wanted to know a bit more about him. Would it be only fair?

She began cataloguing the few facts she knew about him. He was intelligent and thoughtful. *Considerate*. He was the sort of man who wouldn't let a woman fall—either down a flight of stairs or into a marriage that would prove altogether wrong for her.

Theodora pulled a curious book from the last uncatalogued shelf. It looked like it appeared the same as its neighboring volumes, the spine was blank. She ran her palm across the brown leather surface, ever finding joy in the

smooth feel. She lifted the cover, and her brow crinkled with surprise. It wasn't a book at all. Rather, the cover was a lid and a false front for a wooden box containing what appeared to be a bundle of letters.

Carefully, for their yellowed edges put them at several decades old, Theodora lifted them from the box. The top letter was addressed to Sorchia Dunbar. Guided by overwhelming curiosity, Theodora untwined the twine holding the packet together and opened the top letter.

of what
and the

My dearest love Sorchia

Theodora's eyes went wide, and her mouth agape.
hadn't *My dearest love...*

That would suggest this letter—and the remaining letters bundled
—were...

Love letters.
ade her And not any mere love letters.

rtleman Love letters to...*Aunt Sorchia*.

nt way, Before she could read on, footsteps sounded at the door. Not
r. That thinking, she shoved the letters back into the box and slammed the lid.
She glanced around for a safe place for it. The top shelf of the bookcase
should do.

However, when Mr. Boyd entered two seconds later, he misinterpreted
adored her upstretched arm. "Miss Tilney," he said, rushing across the room,
let me assist you."

Like that, he was beside her, all burly masculine man and smelled
ct, she Scottish pine. Though she voiced a protest, it was admittedly squeaky
nothing to dissuade him from his intended gallantry. Seeing no help for
it, she took a step backward to allow him to retrieve the box she'd hastily
ldn't it ineffectively, shoved up there.

Then it happened.
as kind As he made to offer the box to Theodora, a pleased smile curved
't let a his mouth, the bookcase wobbled. He didn't notice for his back was to
would mild alarm pinged through Theodora as she felt *it*—an icy blade
breezing across the back of her neck, prickling all the fine hairs to a

Though The bookcase teetered again, and foreboding knifed through her. "Mr
She ran I think you should step away—"

at cool,

rise. It But she wasn't able to complete the sentence, for the wobble
a small momentum and was tipping over and, without thinking, Theodo
pushing Mr. Boyd out of harm's way. However, she used a bit too
les old, force, and the split of a second later, she and Mr. Boyd landed on the
o Missa tumble...

tted the Her spectacles flung across the room...

Her atop him.

But no matter about that, presently.

She had other pressing matters on her mind as she gazed down in
Boyd's silvery eyes.

"Did you notice it?"

with it



MISS TILNEY'S EYES were bluer without her spectacles, somehow deeper
more intense.

Without Ian noticed that.

id shut. But he was noticing all sorts of sensations at this moment.

ookcase Sensations—*physical* sensations—no gentleman had any business
speaking aloud.

interpreted "Notice what?" scraped across his throat in a gravelly rasp.

"please Her gaze remained locked onto his, and she didn't move. She had
acknowledged her position, *erm*, on top of him.

lling of Straddling him, in fact.

and did "The shard of frigid air that blasted through here the instant before
r it, she bookcase tipped over," she whispered, as if someone might hear.

ily, but Ian searched his mind, but truly, he felt incredibly hot.

"I didn't," he managed, electing for short and to the point. It was
best while she sat atop him and gave his body ideas that were
inconvenient to the moment.

d about Eyes wide, she leaned forward—which didn't help matters, for
o it, but caught her intoxicating rose scent. "I think this cottage is haunted."

of air "Haunted?" he all but scoffed, a healthy dose of skepticism edging
a stand. syllable, seeing him through this impossible situation.

. Boyd, Miss Tilney remained undaunted. "By a *murderous* ghost."

gained “Why would a ghost be trying to murder you?” The question ha
ra was asked.

o much “Not just me, Mr. Boyd. The bookcase was trying to murder *you*.”
floor in A shocked laugh escaped Ian.

Miss Tilney blinked those big blue eyes of hers and appeared to sn
And realize where she was situated.

On top of him.

Ian regretted the laugh as she scrambled to her feet and straighten
nto Mr. dress, eyes averted as she collected fallen books that had scatter
returned the bookcase to an upright position and kept half an eye c
Tilney.

When her gaze began casting about the floor, he intuited her pu
“Are you looking for your spectacles?”

A rueful smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. “They are
per and difficult to find when I’m not wearing them, an irony not lost on the s
sight.”

Ian gave the floor a quick scan. “There,” he said, pointing to a sp
feet behind her.

usiness As she bent to retrieve her spectacles, she also picked up a slip o
that had fluttered to the floor. Her brow gathered.

“What is it?” he asked before he could determine if he had the
In’t yet ask.

She studied the paper closely. “A list of some sort.”

“A catalogue of Miss Dunbar’s books?”

fore the Miss Tilney shook her head, a frown of concentration forming ab
mouth. “It’s a list of names,” she said. “Women’s names to the left and
names to the right, with lines connecting them. A very odd list.” She
for the the bottom, and her brow furrowed.

rather “What is it?”

She glanced up. “Is your given name Ian, perchance?”

or he’d “Aye,” he spoke with an abundance of caution.

“Two names are, *erm*, circled.” She held out the paper. “S
ing each yourself.”

Ian accepted the list.

Theodora Ian

d to be Miss Tilney's eyes brightened with realization. "I think I know is."

"Do I want to know?"

"Do you recognize any of the names on the list? Perhaps from up to...village?"

As a matter of fact... "I believe I do."

"It's a matchmaking list," she stated, radiating satisfaction. "Aunt Ned herwas the village matchmaker."

ed. Ian Ian hated to temper Miss Tilney's obvious delight, but it needed. Ian Misssaid... "That seems unlikely." He'd spent considerable time with the v

Miss Dunbar hadn't possessed a romantic bone in her body...
roblem. *Had she?*

"I found these."

rather As Miss Tilney held up what appeared to be a bundle of letters, short ofunruly growl rent the air. She froze in place, and a scarlet blush crept throat.

at a few The growl had come from the vicinity of her stomach.

Ian thought it best to pretend it never happened.

of paper She must've had the same thought, for her mouth opened to continue her stomach had thoughts of its own—and was most adamant about right to them.

It rumbled again, this growl even louder than the last.

"Have you eaten today, Miss Tilney?" It had to be asked. The possessed no great culinary skill.

out her "I, *erm*, had a slice of ham on bread this morning."

l men's Ian's brow furrowed. "And you've had nothing since?"

read to Miss Tilney squared her shoulders and lifted her chin a notch, gathering herself into a defensive posture. "Well, I—"

Her stomach grumbled again.

Actually, it was more of a roar.

"Miss Tilney, I believe it wise that we take our conversation in the kitchen before your stomach consumes you whole."

Miss Tilney's eyes brightened with realization. "I think I know what it is."

"Do I want to know?"

"Do you recognize any of the names on the list? Perhaps from the village?"

As a matter of fact... "I believe I do."

"It's a matchmaking list," she stated, radiating satisfaction. "Aunt Sorcha was the village matchmaker."

Ian hated to temper Miss Tilney's obvious delight, but it needed to be said... "That seems unlikely." He'd spent considerable time with the woman. Miss Dunbar hadn't possessed a romantic bone in her body...

Had she?

"I found these."

As Miss Tilney held up what appeared to be a bundle of letters, a loud, unruly growl rent the air. She froze in place, and a scarlet blush crept up her throat.

The growl had come from the vicinity of her stomach.

Ian thought it best to pretend it never happened.

She must've had the same thought, for her mouth opened to continue, but her stomach had thoughts of its own—and was most adamant about voicing them.

It rumbled again, this growl even louder than the last.

"Have you eaten today, Miss Tilney?" It had to be asked. The woman possessed no great culinary skill.

"I, *erm*, had a slice of ham on bread this morning."

Ian's brow furrowed. "And you've had nothing since?"

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Her stomach grumbled again.

Actually, it was more of a roar.

"Miss Tilney, I believe it wise that we take our conversation into the kitchen before your stomach consumes you whole."



Chapter Five

THEODORA SAW SHE had no choice but to follow Mr. Boyd into the kitchen.

Although what they were to do once they got there, she wasn't sure. Her inexperience in the evening and this morning's "tea" provided ample evidence of her inexperience in all matters gastronomical.

Best she stuck to books.

Except she needn't have worried. Upon entering the kitchen, Mr. Boyd was already once set to. He seemed to know where everything was, from the knives to the pots and implements. Further—and this was the amazing part—he knew what to do next.

"Can I help?" she asked. *Weakly.*

He pointed toward the kitchen table. "You can sit."

Relief stole through Theodora. But another feeling quickly sprang up—*curiosity*. Was Mr. Boyd preparing to make their evening tea?

"I didn't know men could find their way around a kitchen," she said, unable not to.

He'd shed his jacket and rolled his shirtsleeves up to his elbows like he'd done yesterday while chopping wood.

And much like yesterday, Theodora found her gaze wanting to drift toward his exposed muscles and sun-darkened skin.

He glanced over his shoulder, good humor shining in his eyes. "The kitchen was my favorite place as a child." He shrugged. "I picked up a few skills."

Theodora could see he was being modest. He'd picked up more than a few skills," judging by the smells beginning to emanate from the stove, which had already been hot from the low-burning fire that was ever present in a well-tended kitchen.

Her gaze fell to her hands, and she found they still clutched the bundle of letters. She began reading the top one aloud. "*My dearest love Sorcha.*"

Mr. Boyd pivoted at the waist and raised a single inquiring eyebrow.

answer to his unspoken question, she lifted the letter. A bemused
playing about his mouth, he returned to meal preparation.

Theodora felt—*yet another*—blush heating her through. It might
if she read the letters silently to herself and provided Mr. Boyd a summary
the end.

One letter followed the other, and a picture formed. “Aunt Sorcha
had a love.”

hen. “That’s...surprising,” said Mr. Boyd, diplomatically.

re. Last “Mr. Malcolm Ross,” continued Theodora. “He signed every letter
aptitude *Malcolm, forever.*”

An ineffable sense of melancholy came from nowhere and stole the

Theodora. She wasn’t sure she’d ever experienced such a deep
Boyd at sadness in her life as she laid the letters open, side by side, and began
ood to their sad tale. “In the first letter, Malcolm tells Sorcha of an opportunity
to do. has to secure land in America.”

“Enterprising of him,” said Mr. Boyd.

Men generally approved of such ventures.

ang up “In the next letter,” she continued, “Malcolm writes that he understands
Sorcha’s objections to leaving Scotland, but they can be together and
ie said, new life as husband and wife.”

“He’s still trying to convince her.”

is, much “By the third letter, Malcolm seems resigned that she’s refusing him
he makes one last effort.” Theodora felt herself smiling wistfully. “I
ft along her he will build her a replica of this cottage.”

s. “The Though Theodora had only met Mr. Boyd yesterday, she understood
p a few was that sort of man.

“The fourth letter is farewell.” Theodora could barely speak the words
than “at the sorrow clutching her throat. “Malcolm has resigned himself that
: stove, won’t be together.”

esent in “And that was the last she heard from him?” Mr. Boyd set the table
plates and cutlery before placing a large platter containing trout and a
indle of root vegetables between them.

” Theodora’s stomach lurched with aggression.

row. In “There’s one more,” she said through her ravenous hunger. “It’s
later, from America. Malcolm is informing Sorcha that he’s to be married

l smilemonth's time." Next was the part that made Theodora's heart ache
aunt. "His signature is no longer *Your Malcom, forever*. Instead, he
be bestwrote *Sincerely, Malcolm*."

mary at Theodora refolded the letters and tied the twine around them wi
deliberation. "I think Aunt Sorcha chose this cottage over the love
ia oncelife." She'd needed to hear the words aloud. "Which resulted in her l
her beloved Scottish cottage—and losing her happiness." Theodora sh
head in bafflement. "She refused Malcolm so she could keep a cottage
er *Your* Mr. Boyd's mouth turned down at the corners, which was as c
Theodora had ever seen him come to a frown. "That's not why she
throughhim."

well of "No?"

relating "She refused him, because she was scared."

imity he "Scared?" Theodora was fairly certain Aunt Sorcha had never
single moment of her life frightened by anything.

"I see it every day in my line of work. People making a bad
because they're afraid."

rstands "It is difficult to leave everything you know."

l start a "But that's not what they're afraid of losing. That's the excuse. I
afraid of risking something of themselves."

And Theodora knew exactly what. "Their heart."

im. But "Love is a risk some can't take."

He tells "Because," Theodora began slowly, understanding coming to he
has to risk everything."

?" "So, one plays smaller and makes the wrong choice."

tood he "Like I almost did with Mr. Hunt."

Mr. Boyd was too discreet to say yes, but they both knew it.

ords for Mr. Boyd knew something of life, but that knowledge didn't give
at theycynical outlook, rather the opposite. He approached life with kindn
generosity.

le with Theodora found she liked the unexpected man sitting opposite h
varietymuch.

Her gaze fell to the table and the feast set before her. "This
amazing."

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Chapter Six

GRATIFICATION COURSED THROUGH Ian.

It couldn't help itself.

Even so, it wouldn't do to natter on like a fool. "You must try Looks can be deceiving."

Miss Tilney flaked off a bite of trout and brought it to her mouth. She watched, transfixed, her eyes closed for a moment of bliss while she chewed. "This is the most delicious fish I've ever eaten."

"That's the hunger speaking, I believe."

She went utterly serious. "It is scrumptious, Mr. Boyd."

"Now that you're partaking of a meal prepared by me, you can call me Ian."

"*Ian.*" She spoke his name as if testing the taste of it on her tongue. "You can call me Theodora," she added with a shy smile.

"I would be honored."

"Now, Ian—" A charming little laugh escaped her at the use of his name. "One doesn't learn to make food this tasty from hanging about the kitchens. Tell me the truth. Someone taught you your skills, correct?"

"It happens that my family's cook is one of the best in Scotland," she said. "I was in the kitchens every day, stealing bits of shortbread and other tempting treats. One day, Mrs. MacFergus told me that if I was going to be her shadow, then I should learn what was what in the kitchen."

"She taught you how to cook?" asked Theodora, a note of disbelief in her voice. "And you took to it?"

Ian nodded. "I enjoy it."

Theodora's head canted to the side, and she was staring at him as if he were the strangest man on the face of the earth. "But food is necessary for sustenance. It fills you and makes it possible to get on with your life. It is what you do between the important parts of your day."

Though she didn't understand his passion for food, Ian wanted "Food...this meal...we are sharing it. You taste and enjoy the trout taste and enjoy the trout. It's a communal experience between you and me. Tell me this," he continued. "Do you read in your spare time?"

"Every day."

"Well, I cook."

"You finish your day's work and...cook?" A laugh of disbelief came from her. "Doesn't that feel like more work?"

"It doesn't."

it first. "Fascinating."

The way her bright blue eyes were staring at him... It was as if she had seen him for the first time.

chewed. "Mr. Boyd—"

"Ian."

"Ian, you differ greatly from anyone I've ever met."

He could tell from how she spoke the words and the look in her eyes that she liked that about him.

"About the letters," she began. She looked suddenly...uncomfortable. "And I feel for Miss Dunbar," he said. "The choice between love and duty would be a difficult one to make."

Theodora nodded, absently tapping Miss Dunbar's bundle of letters. She looked as if she were mulling over a decision. "Not these letters." Her expression sharpened. "The letters from *you*."

Ah. He'd been wondering when those letters would come up. He said, "Theodora, I must offer my sincere apologies for taking liberties."

and other "Why?"

g to be Actually... Ian wasn't sure. He wasn't sorry in the least.

He'd meant every word he'd written.

f in her Theodora's mouth twitched into a smile. "I rather liked that Aunt Sorcha became more pleasant to me."

"Yes, well, I can see that," said Ian, still discomfited by his past deceptions as if he had said, "But I should have told you the instant we met."

simply Theodora nodded, slowly, considering. "Perhaps," she allowed. "Eating Aunt Sorcha told me to be bold and brave, it was *you* telling me to be bold and brave. *You* thought I could be so."

"Your aunt was proud of the success you'd made of your circle."

her to library in London. She told everyone she met.” Ian wanted Theodora to
t, and I that about her aunt. “I’ve no doubt she thought you bold and brave. S
nd me one of those people who had a difficult time expressing such feelings.”

Theodora looked thoroughly unconvinced. “She was quite determ
see me married to Mr. Hunt.”

“You couldn’t have married that nodcock, could you?”

escaped “Everyone seemed to think so.” A beat. “Except my aunt...you.”

The praise sat uncomfortably within Ian. The truth was he’d und
overstepped.

“It was your *bold and brave* that gave me the strength to break
re were engagement.”

“You’re better off without him.”

Here was firmer ground for Ian, for it was the truth.

Theodora gave a dry laugh. “Without him, I’m now a spinster.”

“You’re too pretty to be a spinster.” The words were out of Ian’s
yes that before he could consider them.

Theodora blinked, and a shallow line formed between her eye
le. “You think me pretty?”

security “Every man with seeing eyes must think so, lass.”

The moment stretched long as a comely blush pinked Theodora’s
rs. She making her even prettier.

er gaze “I think I should...” Ian truly didn’t know where he was proceedi
that sentence.

again. *Kiss you.*

That wouldn’t do.

“Yes?” she asked, a hair breathless.

Ian recovered himself. What was it about her that brought
impetuous side of his nature? “Clear the table,” he said.

Sorcha She blinked. “Of course.”

Ian began moving the dishes from table to sink, feeling her gaze
ecision. While he’d felt like he’d known her all these months—had, in fact,
her to be a capable woman who knew her own mind—he hadn
“When prepared for the reality of Miss Theodora Tilney. The directness of he
be bold eyed gaze. Her unflinching quality. He found it most attractive.

As he reached for the shallow pan he’d used to sear the trout, an ic
culating of air breezed through the room. His hand wrapped around the han

o know instantly released as the copper pan clattered to the stove in a crash he was shouting, sharp, searing pain shooting from his palm up his arm.

Theodora was at his side in an instant. "What is it?"

"My hand," said Ian, unable to believe it. "I've burned it."

Without hesitation, Theodora grabbed his wrist and pulled him toward the sink, where she plunged his hand into a tub of water. She shot a concerned glance. "One would think a man who knows his way around a kitchen would know better than to grab a hot pan by the handle."

"That's the thing," he began. "I'd placed the pan away from the stove. There's no reason the handle should've been hot."

She touched light fingertips to copper. Her brow crinkled. "It isn't hot." Her gaze met his, utter seriousness in their depths. "I can think of one reason the pan was hot one instant and cold the next."

Ian immediately caught her meaning. "The ghost."

She nodded. "The *murderous* ghost."

Their gazes held, solemn. Then her mouth twitched, and his did, too. Their eyebrows burst into laughter. How good it felt to be sharing a laugh.

Ian's gaze fell—to where Theodora's hand was wrapped around his. To where she was touching him.

Her gaze fell there, too.

She glanced up and met his eye. Of its own volition, his other hand reached up and was caressing her cheek... cradling the nape of her neck. His head was angling down...

His lips touched hers, her breath sweet against his mouth.

Mirroring his movements, her free hand reached up, tentatively caressed his stubbled cheek... slender fingers tangling through the hair at the nape of his neck, sending a warm shiver cascading through him...

She lifted to her toes and pulled him toward her, deepening the kiss, the tip of her tongue sliding across his lower lip.

Oh, Lord.

Even as he wanted to follow this path, Ian knew what he must do...

He pulled away, gently, just enough so their lips were no longer touching. Their gazes held one another's captive, their breath shallow and fast.

"It wouldn't be wise to continue that kiss," he murmured. "It could lead..." Oh, why had he started such a sentence? "Well, you know where it could lead."

ish. Ian She nodded, knowledge shining in her eyes. She was an innocent who knew that much about Miss Tilney. But she was a well-read woman who would understand about such matters—and their consequences.

She touched trembling fingertips to kiss-crushed lips. It was the very first time she had done it—with curiosity and awe, as if...

him a “Don’t tell me that’s the first time you’ve ever been kissed?”

round a Her eyes didn’t tell him any differently.

“You mean, in all the years you were engaged to marry Mr. Heathcliff, you never...”

She gave her head a curt shake.

’t hot.” Unaccountable anger at the blasted nodcock surged inside Ian. “Heathcliff doesn’t deserve you, Theodora.”

She took a small step backward, far enough to provide a bit of distance between them. She lifted his hand from the bucket of water and examined it. The skin was bright pink, but the burn wasn’t severe. “It’ll smart for a few days, is all,” she said, returning his hand to the cooling water. An ungodly moment beat past. “Tomorrow is the reading of the will.”

s wrist. “Aye.”

That *aye* took every bit of Ian’s will to speak.

“And then...”

er hand She didn’t need to complete the sentence.

k...and *And then they would go their separate ways.*

“I can finish up here,” said Ian. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Opaque emotion flashed behind her eyes before she nodded and disappeared into the kitchen, her little dog trailing in her wake.

r at the Ian knew how he should feel.

He should feel like an utter cad for kissing her.

iss, the But he didn’t.

What he felt was longing—longing unlike any he could’ve imagined.

Was it possible that they would never see each other again? Tomorrow?

uching. Having corresponded with Theodora for nearly a year, he felt he knew her—and wanted to know more of her.

t could In fact, he wasn’t sure there was enough time in an eternity of years to know Miss Theodora Tilney fully.

But he wanted the chance.

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Chapter Seven

Next day

RETICULE IN ONE hand and valise in the other, the bedroom door click behind Theodora. She had quite a day ahead of her—a day she did inclined to rush toward.

Somehow, she'd managed to sleep the night through. Really, it had wonderful night's slumber—not a hint of ghostly shenanigans.

A sheepish smile pulled at her mouth.

Ghosts.

Perhaps Ian was correct, and she'd been indulging in a bit of fan the notion of a murderous ghost.

She touched light fingertips to her mouth.

Ian had kissed her.

And she had kissed him right back.

Her lips yet tingled with the slick, warm feel of his mouth pressed hers.

It was a wonderful experience, being kissed—its expression the relief a pent-up feeling she hadn't been aware of existing inside her. If she had might've tried it earlier in life.

But no.

She hadn't known Ian until two days ago.

From that one time, she knew he was the only man she ever wanted to kiss.

Which could prove a problem.

After today, she might never see him again.

The dull ache that had settled in the center of her chest last night expanded.

Voices drifted up the stairwell as she took the steps on quiet carpet. Moppet's claws clicking lightly on pine treads as she led the way

Theodora wasn't yet ready to face Ian or his solicitor father—or to go on ahead.

At the bottom of the stairs, instead of turning left toward the sitting room where she was expected, she opened the front door to let Moppet on her final exploration of the garden. Then her feet made a right toward Sorcha's library.

She stepped into the room, hesitantly, unsure what to expect. "No crashing bookcases, if you please, Aunt Sorcha," she said, low, so he wouldn't carry beyond this room. She felt half a fool for speaking to a man who—*likely*—didn't exist.

Carefully, she picked her way through stacks of catalogued books until she reached the bookcase she sought. She found the false book behind the door, opened it. From her reticule, she withdrew the bundle of Malcolm's letters and placed them inside with great care. With a feeling of profound reverence, she lifted onto the tips of her toes and shoved the box onto the highest shelf she could reach.

There.

The letters were where they belonged.

Here, with Aunt Socha.

"Farewell, Aunt."

As Theodora was striding across the library's threshold to exit, a familiar ribbon of air slid across her neck. *Icy*. Air that cut through skin and muscle all the way to bone. She went still—and waited.

"Aunt Sorcha?"

The question fell from her mouth in a breathless whisper. While she felt ten ways a fool, another part half expected an answer. But the only sound in the room was that of the blood rushing in her ears.

"What should I do?" she asked, the murmur so low she could hardly hear the words herself.

But something happened when the question left her mouth.

She *heard* it—and she knew the answer.

Her step determined and only slightly wobbly with nerves, she went from the small foyer to the cozy sitting room where Ian and his father waited. Father and son looked near mirror images of one another, except for the silver at the elder Mr. Boyd's temples and the smile lines that formed in the corners of his eyes.

he day “Miss Tilney,” said Ian, stepping forward, “may I introduce my Mr. Boyd, to you?”

g room Anxiousness shimmered about him, and she understood why. He ut for aher and his father to like one another.

d Aunt “Mr. Boyd,” she said, inclining her head and offering a smile.

o morein his eyes. “Miss Tilney,” said Mr. Boyd. He was a serious man, but kindness

r voice Theodora knew she liked him already.

a ghost “Right,” he continued. “Shall we get on with this unusual business?” Mr. Boyd took his place on the settee, and Theodora and Ian settled into the two armchairs opposite. A solid lump formed in Theodora’s throat, and a slick of perspiration coated her palms. She flashed a nervous glance at Ian. He gave a nod, reassurance in his warm gray eyes. Whatever lay in Aunt Sorcha’s will, all would come out alright. That was what his grandfather had wanted.

Mr. Boyd began reading, and Theodora released the breath she realized she’d been holding. Though she maintained an interested demeanor, she could hardly attend the words for they were in the language of the legal world, which admittedly wasn’t her favorite form of reading.

However, the words were having quite an effect on Ian, whose impatience had him moving to the edge of his seat and his brow furrowing. “*Jointly?*” he asked—*demanding*.

Theodora had never seen him so...forceful. Perhaps she was catching a glimpse of the Mr. Ian Boyd, junior solicitor extraordinaire, that the rest of the world outside this cottage knew. She found this side of him rather captivating.

he lone But the word he spoke snapped Theodora to—*jointly*.

Her mind searched back for the words preceding *jointly*.

lly hear *They shall...own...Miss Sorcha Dunbar’s beloved cottage...*

Jointly.

Now Theodora’s brow was furrowing. “My apologies,” she said haltingly, “but are you saying that Ian—*Mr. Boyd*,” she corrected—“and I are to own this cottage...*together?*”

ited for The elder Mr. Boyd shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. “You both occupied the cottage the two nights preceding this reading, you fulfilled the first stipulation of your aunt’s will.”

“There’s a second?” Dread crept through Theodora, as her heart

father, rather compelling case that it should break free of her ribs.

Mr. Boyd looked as if he'd rather be kicking rocks down the la- wanted presently sitting in this room, fielding this simple question—whose would be anything other than simple. That much was clear from the solicitor's expression.

s shone “The second stipulation is that the two of you marry.”

A beat of shocked silence reverberated through the room.

It was Ian who broke it. “Papa, did you know about this?”

?” Mr. Boyd shook his head. “I can assure you I did not. A week after I led into Dunbar's decease, an addendum arrived at our offices with the instruction, and that it not be opened until the reading of the will.”

toward Ian moved to sit beside his father and read the document first. “I know we know if it's legally binding?”

ize told As the men began debating the validity of the will, Theodora sat s river stone, unmoving as water rushed around it.

hadn't Her mind, however, raced.

neanor, What could Aunt Sorcha have possibly meant by this?

ie legal In a flash, she understood.

Of course.

sudden It had been right before her eyes this entire time.

rowing. “Mr. Boyd,” she said, “could you give your son and me a moment?”

ching a Two pairs of surprised eyes lifted from the document.

e world “Indeed,” said Mr. Boyd, discreetly keeping his curiosity to himself.

}. He gathered the papers and left the room.

Theodora was alone with Ian.

Save the ghost, of course.

Speaking of the ghost... “I no longer think the cottage is haunted by a murderous ghost.”

began, Bemusement lit within Ian's eyes. “And you have a theory what of herself, of ghost it might be?”

Theodora remained utterly serious. “It's a matchmaking ghost.”

“Since Ian's mouth opened surely to refute her statement, then closed, he rendered him speechless.

One finger lifted into the air as Theodora began her argument. She made a case to make to a solicitor, after all. “Upon my arrival, the front ar-

cottage doors were open.”

ne than “Yes?”

answer “And Moppet rushed straight through,” she explained with
ie elderdeliberation. He didn’t seem to understand. “Leading me to you.” A

finger joined the first. “As did the banging shudder during that first nig

Ian’s gaze grew less skeptical and more considering, as if he were

her theory a chance. “And you tripping and nearly falling down the sta

She held up a third finger. “Brought me into your arms.” Now, s

er Missholding up four fingers. “As did the bookcase tipping over.”

ruction A slightly wicked smile pulled at Ian’s mouth. “Oh, that wasn’t yo
straddling me on the floor.”

id. “Do A furious blush streaked through Theodora to the tips of her ears.

“But did she have to burn my hand?” he asked.

till as a A reasonable question. Yet... “It was but a light searing, and it le

Her gaze dipped and rested a beat on his mouth.

The kiss.

She didn’t need to say it.

They both knew.

“So,” said Ian, “our stay in the cottage the two nights preced
reading of the will, and the stipulation that you and I marry in order to
private—”

“Was Aunt Sorcha’s final act of matchmaking,” she finished for hi

Ian gave a bemused snort. “She wasn’t exactly subtle, was she?”

f. Theodora joined him in a smile, but she yet had serious words to s
the most serious of her life, for they would determine her future happir

“I must return to London,” she said, searching for a place to be;
landing there.

ed by a Ian cocked his head. He looked as if he had some serious words to
too. “You *don’t* have to return to London.”

her sort “I do,” she said, realizing she’d likely started in the wrong place. ‘
my books packed up correctly.”

Silvery gray eyes narrowed. “Oh?”

. She’d “I’m thinking a move to Edinburgh might be in order.”

“Why is that?”

e had a And here she’d arrived at the serious words she must speak—th
id backthat pushed her into unknown territory. She rushed across the short c

between them, perched beside Ian on the settee, and began digging into her reticule. She had a case to make for their future—and she would make it greatthoroughly.

second Her hand emerged with the paper she sought. “Hold this.”
ght.” Ian’s brow gathered. “Your aunt’s match list?”

giving Once she’d found a pencil, Theodora placed the paper flat on the table before them. “I was thinking about Aunt Sorcha’s match list and the names on it, and, *erm...*”

Tip of pencil depressed into paper, she drew a line from her name to Ian’s. Now, they were connected.

“I must return to London, *then* move to Edinburgh so my heart can be complete.” Oh, how her nerves had both body and voice trembling. “My heart can’t be complete without my books—and it can’t be complete without you.”

Long, masculine fingers took hers and twined through. “Theodora. The look in his eyes as he spoke her name emboldened her...giving her hope.

“You see, though we only met officially two days ago, I was already halfway in love with you before we ever came face to face.” She brought her hand to her cheek—only a little pink from last night’s searing—to her cheek. “I don’t want to make the same mistake as Aunt Sorcha.”

m. “And what mistake is that?”

“I will follow my heart where it leads.”

peak— Oh, could she speak the next words in her heart?

ness. Yes.

gin and “And my heart has led me to...you.”

Ian squeezed her hand, reassurance in his eyes. “Theodora.”

o speak, “Yes?”

“You’ve stated your case quite convincingly.”

“To see “Have I?” she asked, relief uncurling in her stomach.

“For over a year, I’ve adored you from afar,” he said. “And I can tell you nothing I want more than to spend the rest of my life adoring the way you love.”

Tears of joy sprang to Theodora’s eyes. “You told me once never to let myself be one for a man who didn’t adore me.”

distance “And you shouldn’t,” he said. “You won’t. You’ll be the most

side her woman in Scotland.”

make it A swift blast of icy air swirled through the room, so frigid i
Theodora’s teeth want to chatter. Instinctively, she and Ian moved clo
few inches between them disappearing, and he gathered her in his arm:

Really, they were left with no choice but to hold on tight—and ki
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woman in Scotland.”

A swift blast of icy air swirled through the room, so frigid it made Theodora’s teeth want to chatter. Instinctively, she and Ian moved closer, the few inches between them disappearing, and he gathered her in his arms.

Really, they were left with no choice but to hold on tight—and kiss each other warm again.



Epilogue

One year later

IAN SAT READING a two-day-old newspaper—quaint villages in Scotland content with receiving their news a few days late—and taking unpleasure in the silky feel of his wife’s hair as she lay stretched on the resting her head on his lap, eyes drifted shut, lashes a dark fan against cheekbones.

His wife.

Theodora was a wife—*his* wife—and he was a husband—*her* husband.

Sometimes, it was a fact difficult to countenance, for once they’d come to be together, life had taken on the pace and spin of a whirlwind. They had immediately returned to London to pack up her life and move a hundred miles to the north in Edinburgh. Her Aunt Marion had delighted to return to her homeland of Scotland.

From there, along with Theodora establishing a new circulating library, they’d begun the planning for the wedding. To Ian’s great surprise, Theodora had taken to it, at times sounding no less intimidating than a general addressing his troops before a take to the field of battle.

“It’s simple,” she’d explained. “I want the day to be a grand reflection of our love.”

And it had been.

And all the days that had come after—all six months of them—had been too. What was this very moment—them sitting contentedly after an evening meal of venison stew—if not a reflection of their love?

Though the moment was small, it was no less grand.

“Do you like the newest piece of artwork gracing the cottage?” Theodora, her eyes yet closed, a hand idly stroking Moppet, who lay snuggled at her side.

Ian gave a dry laugh. Above the fireplace hung Aunt Sorcha’s ma-

framed and set in the cottage's place of pride for all to see. Though Ian and Theodora knew its meaning now, in the years to come their children's children and so on would know the story—a story which pass into the realm of family legend passed from one generation to the

Theodora's eyes blinked open and met his from her place on his bed. "I have something to tell you, my dearest."

Ian detected a note in her voice. Since they'd wed, he thought he'd know her full range of notes. But this note held a mystery. "You've asked, cautious."

"And I couldn't tell you in Edinburgh."

He set the newspaper aside. "Why is that?"

"Because I thought it fitting that Aunt Sorcha hear the news, too."

Ian felt his eyebrows crinkle together. "But Aunt Sorcha is..."

Then he saw it—the secret smile curling about his wife's lips. He

kicked into a full gallop. "What is it you wish to say to me, my love?"

"Give me your hand."

Her fingers twined through his and tugged his hand down until it rested on her subtly rounded belly. "*This.*"

Joy in its purest form streaked through Ian. "You're with child," he'd been stating the obvious with no small amount of awe.

Of a sudden, Theodora gasped, but her smile didn't fall. "Do you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

But even as he asked, he did feel it—a rush of warm air sweeping about the room and enveloping them in a protective embrace.

Eyes watery blue with unshed tears, Theodora sat up and face him. "It's all that matters."

"It's all that matters." he spoke around the lump in his throat.

All he wanted was to kiss his wife.

Toward that end, he reached out and cradled the back of her head. His eyes fast on one another. He brought her mouth to his.

And when they kissed, all the love and happiness they held for each other and the new life they were bringing into the world poured through them.

The match list's work was done—even to Aunt Sorcha's sleeping satisfaction.

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About Sofie Darling

Sofie Darling is an award-winning author of historical romance. The book in her Shadows and Silk series, *Her Midnight Sin*, won the 2020 award for Best Historical Regency.

She spent much of her twenties raising two boys and reading romance she could get her hands on. Once she realized she simply write the books she loved, she finished her English degree and embarked her writing career. Mr. Darling and the boys gave her their whole blessing.

When she's not writing heroes who make her swoon, she runs a man in a different state every year, visits crumbling medieval castles whenever gets a chance, and enjoys a slightly codependent relationship with her Bosco.

About Sofie Darling

Sofie Darling is an award-winning author of historical romance. The third book in her Shadows and Silk series, *Her Midnight Sin*, won the 2020 RONE award for Best Historical Regency.

She spent much of her twenties raising two boys and reading every romance she could get her hands on. Once she realized she simply had to write the books she loved, she finished her English degree and embarked on her writing career. Mr. Darling and the boys gave her their wholehearted blessing.

When she's not writing heroes who make her swoon, she runs a marathon in a different state every year, visits crumbling medieval castles whenever she gets a chance, and enjoys a slightly codependent relationship with her beagle, Bosco.

Once Upon a Haunted Hillfort

Mia Pride

Once Upon a Haunted Hillfort

Mia Pride

Dedication

To my PA, Alison, for standing by me through the hard times and I
me afloat.

I couldn't do this without you!

Dedication

To my PA, Alison, for standing by me through the hard times and keeping me afloat.

I couldn't do this without you!



Chapter One

“COME ON, SOPH! Stay and have a few drinks. It’s Halloween!” begged, jumping up and down in her bunny costume, floppy white ears bouncing around her jovial face.

“I would, but I promised my aunt I’d attend a book signing event tomorrow. You know the archaeology program I was accepted into. The program director and his wife recently wrote a book. They are visiting and want to meet them. Which means I need to be up early.” In truth, Sophia was out of place at this party. Her friends were wonderful, but Sophia always had a sense that she was different and never quite belonged.

“Nerd.” Becky stuck her tongue out at Sophia, who rolled her eyes and leaned in to kiss Becky on the cheek.

“Well, this nerd needs to pay rent and behave. My mom is shellin’ out a fortune for my tuition. The least I can do is deserve it.” Sophia adjusted her tall, white wig as it tilted like the Leaning Tower of Pisa for the dozenth time that night. She thought being Marie Antoinette would be a great costume, but she hadn’t anticipated the wig issues—or the French foreign exchange student who kept pretending to cut off her head all night.

“Wait.” Becky held up a finger and narrowed her eyes. “Doesn’t that work there? The one your aunt keeps trying to set you up with?”

“Yeah, but that has nothing to do with it. I’ve never seen his face. I can’t even remember his name. Anyway—gotta go. Bye, everyone! See you soon.” Sophia blew her friends kisses as she grabbed her keys and pulled out the keys. Her small, yellow sedan was a mild nightmare with shuddering brakes and a radio that only worked on its own terms, but it was all she could afford. Besides, it was just temporary. Soon, she’d be moving into her temporary flat in Moray and living near the University of Aberdeen campus, so she wouldn’t need the car.

Hopefully, this new stage of Sophia’s life would help her disco-

true self, the part of her that always felt like something was missing she couldn't explain why, but she felt deep in her bones that the missing piece resided at the university. So, she'd left San Francisco and everything she knew to come to Scotland. She knew without a doubt that something life-changing awaited her.

Kids ran through the streets carrying bags of candy and wearing a variety of costumes, from monsters to princesses, while parents followed. Becky reminded them constantly to stay off the lawns. A group of teenagers gathered in the parking lot just outside Becky's flat, laughing as they drank from bottles of alcohol.

Sophia didn't want to be the old lady telling them how to behave. What was the deal, she was only 20, but she saw keys hanging from one of the boys' belts, and as he opened a silver SUV and tossed a bottle of whiskey into the passenger seat, she felt a pang. To hell with minding her own business, she decided. This boy could be older than 17. He was going to kill himself or someone else, and her conscience told her to speak up.

"Excuse me," she said nicely as she walked over. "You clearly have been drinking, and there are a lot of people out tonight. You can hurt yourself or someone else if you drive."

"Aye, Mum," the kid snickered.

Sophia rolled her eyes and decided to speak with someone possibly more reasonable. Pinning her gaze on a young woman dressed like Frankenstein's bride, Sophia said, "You're going to let your friend drive off drunk and kill someone? Is that how much you value your friend's life?"

The girl blanched and looked from Sophia to the boy behind the wheel. "Give me yer keys, Daniel. Shite, ye are goin' ta kill yerself c... In fact, wee child." She held out her hand, and Daniel, flashing Sophia a dirty grin, reluctantly relinquished the keys.

"Ye should mind yer own business, lady. Now I'm goin' ta be late for the party."

"Better late than dead. Have a nice night."

Sophia shook her head and walked toward her car. She'd avoided the confrontation, but maybe she'd saved a life tonight. As she slowly drove through the crowded neighborhood and entered the main road, silver light from her headlights replaced the bright, noisy streets she'd left behind.

When her radio popped on unexpectedly as usual, and her first

1g. SheHalloween song blared through her speakers, Sophia smiled and sang
g piecelooking up in the rearview mirror to squint at the bright lights that su
ing shebegan flashing behind her.

ng life- “What the...?” The same car had been on her tail since she
Becky’s, but now its brights blinded her.

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The car wasn’t stopping.

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Halloween song blared through her speakers, Sophia smiled and sang along, looking up in the rearview mirror to squint at the bright lights that suddenly began flashing behind her.

“What the...?” The same car had been on her tail since she’d left Becky’s, but now its brights blinded her.

Ahead, the light turned from yellow to red, and Sophia stopped. But the blinding lights from the car behind her seemed to speed up, get closer, and flood her car’s interior with a blinding brightness that made her tremble as adrenaline pumped through her veins.

The car wasn’t stopping.

In a panic, Sophia laid on her horn, hoping to get the driver’s attention and make them stop, but they continued to barrel forward. It was a matter of seconds, though it felt like an eternity, as she turned her wheels toward the side rail, hoping to move out of the way and avoid the oncoming car. But she felt the jolting impact as a loud crash rang in her ears, metal crunched, and glass shattered. Her body flew forward, and her face smacked against her steering wheel.

Her car plowed into the side rail, rolled down an embankment, and something warm and fluid ran down her brow as the Marie Antoinette wig slid off her head. Figures the airbags are as faulty as the radio, she thought, and then, everything went black.



Chapter Two

“WHERE DO YE want me to put these?” Callum asked, lifting the dusty pamphlets with a grunt.

His supervisor, Thelma, tore her gaze from the table she’d been over all day to look at him from across the room. “Ye can place those in the basement for the night. Everything is looking great in here. I know we are anxious to join the festivities tonight, but I’m just so nervous tomorrow!”

Callum shifted the box in his arms and smiled at the older woman, her gray hair frizzed around her reddened face. “Everything will be just fine, Thelma. Murielle and Samuel have been here for book signings and they get packed, but we have enough books to sell. Once these pamphlets are out of the way, I think everything will be ready.”

Thelma nodded and took a deep breath. “Ye are right, lad. It’s just their work has truly inspired this village. They are celebrities! Even their work must be perfect.” She tittered to herself as she shifted a stack of books to the center of the signing table, stepped back, cocked her head to the left, and moved them back where they had been.

Callum had become close friends with Murielle and Samuel, the two who had discovered an ancient book about Pictish life in the caves just off their shores. Before that discovery, little was known about the people whose ruins now rested beneath Burghead’s paved roads. This visitor center was built upon the ancient hillfort’s ruins. He valued Murielle and Samuel’s work as much as the next person, but he knew they’d never fuss because a stack of books wasn’t perfectly centered on the table.

Thelma’s phone buzzed in her pocket, and frowning, she slipped it out, looked at the screen, and squinted at her screen. “Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no...”

Callum watched as Thelma’s face blanched, and she leaned against the table, knocking her perfect stack askew. “Is everything okay?” Had S

Murielle canceled their signing tomorrow? He couldn't figure out what could make his boss turn as white as a ghost.

"I wish it was something so trivial. Ye ken how I told ye my great-niece from San Francisco moved here to start at university?"

Callum creased his brow and nodded. Thelma had talked his ear off about her "beautiful" great-niece she hoped to set him up with soon. Their families had been in or around Burghead as long as his, but her sister's family had moved to California two decades ago when Sophia was a baby.

"I... she... I need to go." Thelma grabbed her purse from the counter and hurried toward the door, talking as she moved. "She is in hospital. A careless drunk driver plowed into her and ran her off the road. She... well, the doctor now ye received from Sophia's mother said I needed to hurry. It doesnae look good about her. Once that last box is stored away, just lock up behind ye, aye?" Thelma's voice shook, and she didn't wait for him to speak before heading toward her door.

Callum stood as still as a statue for a few moments as he processed what had just occurred. His heart ached for Thelma. Having no children of his own, it had seemed that her great-niece, Sophia, was like a daughter to him.

Thelma. He silently prayed that Sophia would pull through whatever she'd sustained as he walked toward the stairs leading down to the basement. As he carefully traversed the stairs, Callum recalled his first meeting with Murielle when she had visited the Burghead Visitor Centre and appeared quite distressed. Callum had called Samuel to pick her up, but before he had arrived, Callum had learned that Murielle was not from this time. She had lived in the year 686, right here in this village.

It was rumored that the caves along the Moray coast held ancient secrets whose doors served as a portal between times, but Callum had never believed in such nonsense—until he met Murielle. Now, the scared and lonely Pictish woman he had met last year had embraced her place in this time with her husband, Samuel, a professor of archaeology and a man from this time.

Though Callum was excited to see them again tomorrow, he was determined to lock up the visitor center for the night and join his village in their

Samhain fire festival. Reaching the basement, Callum carefully placed the box onto the last step and pulled his keys from his jeans pocket to unlock the spring-loaded basement door. When the keys became jammed in the lock as they sometimes did, Callum jiggled them futilely before giving

that else using a nearby stool to prop the door open. He'd have to remind The
change this lock again, though he'd reminded her many times a
at-niece Grabbing the box from the step, Callum walked into the musty roo
crinkled his nose, always put off by the damp smell that permeated the
if about A stack of boxes littered an old folding table in the corner, and
family plopped the pamphlets atop the others. They'd all need to be set ou
ily had once the signing was over, so he made a mental note to keep everyt
one place for easy retrieval.

iter and When an earthy-herbal scent suddenly overpowered the usual
damned Callum sniffed the air and looked around the room for its source. It
e text I the first time the distinct scent had caught his attention in the basem
k good. he'd yet to find the source. Though it was similar to sage and wholl
aelma's pleasant than the smell of what he suspected was mold, Callum was
out the who preferred not to ignore odd things but to seek answers.

Bending over, Callum opened a box that appeared to have been fo
ed what beneath the table for long enough to gather a thick layer of dust. Torr
of her and old office supplies filled the box, but there was nothing that
ghter to produce such a scent.

injuries "Och, ye do have a nice arse, Callum."

ement. With a startled yelp, Callum smacked the back of his head on the
ng with he attempted to jolt upright. Then he spun around, looking around th
ppeared room, wincing as he held his head with one hand as he scrambled to j
re Sam string hanging from the mounted light overhead. When the light flick
ne. She life, Callum looked around the room, finding himself alone.

"Who said that?" he whispered, looking beneath the table again.

secrets A disembodied gasp echoed off the walls, like a startled woman,
ed such he saw nothing. "Hello?" He wouldn't be surprised if the visitor cen
rincess haunted, for it quite literally rested on the remains of the old Pictish
er new where Murielle's brother once ruled over many centuries ago. Sti
.

anxious And certainly, never anything that complimented his arse, of all thi
annual Turning in a circle again, Callum saw nothing but the peeling whi
ced the on the walls, old periodicals, and a broken diorama he still needed to
ock the illustrated posters of Pictish villagers plowing fields, dying cloth
old lock tending to cattle were pinned to the wall, their yellowing corners cu
up and the edges. But, he was sure the only living creature in this basement w

elma to and perhaps that wee rodent that he'd seen periodically popping its wh
already nose out of the hole behind the desk.

om. He Pulling out his cell phone and checking the time, Callum realized
walls. Samhain festivities in town were well on their way. His people to
Callum Hallow's Eve seriously, as did he. Deciding he could investig
it again basement another day when he had more time, Callum walked tow
hing indoor, where the keys still dangled inside the lock. As he reached for th
stool holding the door open flew to the side, crashing against th
musk, Callum yelped.

wasn't And the cursed spring-loaded door slammed closed, locking him in
ent, but Shaking the knob lock, Callum cursed. The herbal scent hung he
y more the air, and the single overhead light flickered as if it were deciding v
a manor not to give up on life. He knew the feeling.

When the room's temperature dropped, and the hackles on his neck
rgotten on end, Callum straightened his spine and closed his eyes. The way th
a book had flown into the wall? *That* was not normal.

would "Ye have my attention, whoever ye are," he whispered as he
around, only to be met with sad hazel eyes framed in thick black lashes.

"Ballocks!" he shouted and jumped back, his heart beating wildl
table as looked at the slim, pink-cheeked young woman standing before hi
he dark waves of rusty hair floating about her round face. "Who the bloody
pull they? How did ye get in here without me noticing?"

ered to She blinked and opened her mouth slowly, only to snap it shut and
step back. She was bonnie, he'd give her that. But the shock in her e
him uneasy. Wasn't he the one who was supposed to be frightened?

though "Ye can see me?"

ter was "Aye. I see ye. Do ye know what ye've done? We cannae get out
hill for now!" he grouched. "It's locked from the outside, and there are nae w
ll, he'd down here!" Pulling out his phone, Callum cursed when he saw the c

"x" beside the signal bars. "Of course. *Why would* I get reception
ings. here?"

te paint Looking back up at the lass, Callum scanned her length and f
repair. when he took in her dark blue tunic with long sleeves and a wide nec
is, and much like those the Picts once wore. Was she some history fan-g
rling at arrived a day early for Sam and Murielle's presentation? She wouldn'
as him, first to arrive in historical clothing.

iskered “Are ye here for the book signing and presentation? It isna tomorrow.”

that the She shook her head and took a step closer to him. He almost stepped back but decided to stand his ground and get some answers. “Ye do realize it’s not stuck down here, aye? ’Tis AllHallow’s Eve. Nobody will be heard the back ’til morning.”

em, the “I have been stuck down here for... ages...” she said. “Ye can see the wall, heard me!”

“Aye and aye. Why wouldnae I?” He narrowed his eyes. “What do ye mean ye’ve been stuck down here for ages? I’ve been in and out of the cave many times and never seen ye.”

Whether “I’ve seen ye, Callum,” she responded, stepping closer, holding out her hand. When her fingers grazed his arm, the chill of her flesh made him stand shiver. She appeared healthy and hale, yet she felt as clammy and dead as a stone. Maybe she had been down here all day with the frigid air chilling his bones, and he simply hadn’t noticed.

turned Then, he remembered the words she’d spoken that had caused him to shake his head. Was that what this was? A hallucination? Had he cracked his head as hard as that? Nay, he knew he hadn’t. “Why did ye say I have a nice little room with a name tag? And...how do ye know my name?” He looked at his shirt to verify he wasn’t wearing his name tag, which still sat on his nightstand. He meant to work today but had to come by to set up for tomorrow.

It took a She shrugged and raised her brows. “I have watched ye come down here many times over the past year when ye first arrived. It used to be one of the people before ye showed up. Yer name is Callum. I’ve heard it spoken many times. Ye look like Ronan.” She tilted her head curiously, and his heart pounded in his chest before it began beating wildly and thundering in his ears. *Ronan!* He’d never heard that name before from Murielle.

dreaded Another time-traveler? Had she come through the cave, like Murielle had? “Do ye know where ye are?” he asked her slowly.

rowned “Aye. The Burghead Visitor Centre’s basement. That is what it is today. What was it before today?” he asked slowly, afraid he didn’t know—knew.

girl who “It was our home. Me and Father’s.” Her voice grew soft and wistful as if she conjured a distant memory. “Before... before he killed me.”

She was killed? A sick feeling fell over him. It was not every

ie until woman stared you in the eyes and told you she'd been murdered.
father murdered ye?"

ed back She shook her head. "The new cleric. He called me a heathen
we are believing in the old gods. Said we survived the illness in our home because
coming worked for the Devil. I dinnae understand this new religion or why they
to destroy us. Tell me, Callum. What year is it, and does the new religion
me. Ye exist?"

"It's the year 2023, and if ye speak of Christianity, aye, it still exists
t do ye She nodded sadly. "I wasnae evil, ye ken. Truly, I wasnae! I tried
is room him that Queen Caitriona healed Father. He came home with a terrible
after his journey, but the new queen knew how to help him. He wanted
t a pale listen. He accused me of praying to the heathen gods—which I had done
de him course, but I needed to save Father! The cleric burned mugwort to repel
cold a devil, but when nothing happened, he drowned me." She shuddered with
ling her memory became too much, and Callum noticed her cheeks reddening.

Mugwort. He knew that herbs were often used to repel evil spirits
n to hit time and even in this era. That explained the herbal scent wafting through
his headbase ment.

he arise? She appeared as alive as any lass. But she'd mentioned Queen Caitriona
that he Murielle's brother's wife. In the year 685, King Brodyn married
wasn't traveler from modern days named Caitriona, who'd passed through time
in early 2023. He knew this from his talks with Murielle. He also knew
and go he looked very similar to his ancestor, Ronan, a well-respected warrior
ly auld King Brodyn's and Murielle's guard. Murielle had mistaken Callum for
en. But Ronan when they first met here and believed Callum to be a reincarnation
stopped him.

d heard "I believe ye," he said. And he did. "Did ye know Ronan well? Murielle
says I look like him. He is my ancestor."

Murielle The lass's eyes widened, and she nodded. "Aye! Ronan was a great warrior
but always too busy fighting for King Brodyn or guarding Princess Murielle
oday." to pay me much mind. I cannae tell ye how relieved I am that ye can
wish to see me. I have seen ye walk past me many times and always longed to
ye. Why can ye suddenly see me?"

imsical Callum looked at her curiously. "Maybe because it's Halloween
Samhain, as ye may call it?" He shrugged. "They say the veil between
/ day living and dead is lifted on this day."

“Your “Aye, that makes sense!”

 “As much sense as the fact that I’m locked inside the basement
 for a woman who died well over a millennium ago,” Callum said, looking
 at the room for any way out. There wasn’t one.

 “Ye aren’t afraid of me.” The woman stepped closer and looked
 at him with those hazel eyes. She looked so real—so alive. Wee freckles dot
 her nose, and flecks of gold reflected in her irises. She was absolutely beau-
 tiful.”

 “When ye grow up in a village built on ruins, ye see things. He
 l to tell I’ve never seen a ghost as real as ye. ’Tis hard to believe ye aren’t ali-
 ve. I’ve also never heard a ghost talk about my arse.” Callum pursed his lips
 but couldn’t prevent the smile from gracing his lips.

 Her pale cheeks pinkened as if blood still coursed through her veins.
 “Ye weren’t meant to hear that.” She looked away shyly, and he found
 himself thoroughly intrigued by this woman. Bold one minute and shy the

 “When nobody can see ye, ye speak yer mind freely and frequently.”
 So, she thought he had a nice arse, eh? Callum shouldn’t be flattered
 that a dead woman was attracted to him, but something about her made his
 heart beat erratically, and not from fear. He was as attracted to her as if she
 were a warm, living human woman, and he found he needed to learn all he
 could about her.

 “Well, if we’re stuck in here, we may as well get to know one another.”
 Callum said, sitting on the creaky wooden floorboards. Nodding,
 the woman moved beside him and tucked her red waves of hair behind her ears.

 “What is yer name? Tell me about yerself.”

 “My name is... or was... Sorcha.”

 “Is,” Callum said with a smile. “Yer still here, aye?”

 She smiled and nodded. “I was nineteen summers old when
 Caitriona arrived. As I said, she saved my father from certain death.
 That man was eternally grateful. She and Murielle both helped me greatly.”

 “So, ye know Murielle?” Callum asked. “She will be arriving tonight,
 finally. Do ye know she lives in this time now?”

 “Aye, I have heard what I can from here.”

 Callum filled her in on the cave’s odd portal through time and space,
 including Queen Caitriona, who had passed through it. “’Tis how she
 knew how to save yer father,” Callum said.

 Sorcha listened with rapture to everything he said, smiling, laughi-

tilting her head back as she did so. Callum took a secret moment to look at her while she spoke of her life in Pinnata Castra as a merchant's daughter. She'd lit up with joy with her recollections, and Callum found himself wishing to touch her again—just her hand—to see if she still felt comfortable at him. She looked so pink and healthy now.

Still, he dared not cross such a boundary, even if their connection felt so natural. After all, they had known one another in his former life. They were free to one another, and her years spent trapped in this place had taught her a thing or two about modern times. Aside from her thick brogue, her ability to speak their language was impressive. He knew Picts spoke a combination of Celtic, Gaelic, and Latin—a language lost until recently when Sam Murielle had discovered an ancient book created by monks that explained Picts in great detail, including their language.

Though Callum had done well enough with the lassies in his twenty-one years, he'd never met one he felt so drawn to. Was it because she was unavailable? He'd heard that men only want what they can't have. It didn't feel right—because she felt right—different.

“May I speak honestly, Callum?” He nodded and looked into her nervous smile forming on her pink lips. “When Father Emmitt accused me of consorting with dark powers, I tried to tell him that Pict Mother survived the illness due to Queen Cairiona's healing. He said she was wicked and that he would come for her next, then her sister, Emilie. I told them they are like us. They are sent from the Devil. When I tried to warn them, he...”

Callum's throat constricted as the mood darkened in the basement. Any remaining warmth vanished. It was as if her life force diminished. She spoke of her death. Her features dimmed, and her eyes, still beautiful, lost their sparkle. “He... what, Sorcha?” Reflexively, Callum placed a hand on Sorcha's knee to both support and encourage her while she spoke. A strange energy shocked his fingertips, and he hissed, pulling back. It didn't truly hurt. Nay, he was simply startled, not only by the sensation but the images it provoked.

Suddenly, no words were necessary. Sorcha didn't need to tell him what had happened, for he saw her memory in his own mind.

She was bending over near a stream, collecting a green-leafed plant with black buds and white buds, when she was suddenly pushed from behind. With a yelp, she landed

observed down in the water. Water flooded her—no, *his* lungs. He began to cough and struggle for air. An angry voice shouted at him from the surface, accusing him of conspiring with the evil spirits who saved her from God's wrath. Shein Father Emmitt's mind, the illness Sorcha and her father had evaded punishment from the Almighty for worshipping heathen gods.

ion felt Callum thrashed and kicked, struggling for air as cruel accusations spoke his ears. "I shall rid this place of yer kind! Ye will be first, but ye shall die the last! 'Tis God's will!"

ability A final desperate gasp left his lips as his lungs filled with water. In a moment everything went black.

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down in the water. Water flooded her—no, *his* lungs. He began to cough and struggle for air. An angry voice shouted at him from the surface, accusing him of conspiring with the evil spirits who saved her from God’s wrath. For, in Father Emmitt’s mind, the illness Sorcha and her father had evaded was a punishment from the Almighty for worshipping heathen gods.

Callum thrashed and kicked, struggling for air as cruel accusations filled his ears. “I shall rid this place of yer kind! Ye will be first, but ye shallnae be the last! ’Tis God’s will!”

A final desperate gasp left his lips as his lungs filled with water, and everything went black.



Chapter Three

“CALLUM!” HIS BODY shook as Sorcha’s voice called to him, and when he opened his eyes, she leaned over him, shaking his shoulders and crying those real tears streaming down her cheeks? “Callum! Wake up!”

Gasping, he sat up and clutched at Sorcha, pulling her down atop him until he caught his breath. The familiar musty-floral scent surrounded him, pulling him back into the present. He was still inside the basement, even though he somehow transported through her memories. He wasn’t sure why he had that intense need to cling to her other than personally experiencing her moments and feeling her terror.

“Sorcha...” he croaked as he wrapped his arms around her, feeling her heartbeat against his. “How...”

Silently, Sorcha clung to him. She was real. Her tears soaked through his plain white tee shirt. Her breath fanned his chest. Her heart beat with his rhythm, and her skin was now warm and soft. “How is this happening? I... felt it.”

“Felt what?” she asked, propping herself up with confusion-glazed eyes.

“Your... your death. When I touched ye, I saw it through yer eyes and yer fear. Och, Sorcha.” Callum sat up and, overcome by emotion, pulled her into his lap, wrapped his arms around her, and held her while she sobbed. She surrounded them. She rested her cheek against his chest and curled up with her chin resting on the top of her head. Her arms curled around his waist.

“It was long ago, Callum. I’m only sorry ye had to experience this. I havenae interacted with another person since that day. I didnae ken that this would cause such a thing.”

Sorrow creased her face, and Callum’s stomach twisted as her hands fluttering gripped his belly. The desire to lean in and take her lips was so strong... too strong.

So, he did. Gripping the back of her neck gently, Callum leaned slowly placing his lips on hers. She audibly swallowed, and her breath hitched before she gave herself over to his kiss. Her lips were warm and soft as was all of her. She felt so good in his arms, so right in his lap. He could imagine himself with her, laughing, loving, and sharing memories... but he realized what he was doing, where they were. Had he been too forward? Too aggressive? He pushed away.

When he said, "I'm sorry, Sorcha. I dinnae know what came over me."

3. Were she to say, "Dinnae apologize, or ye shall break my heart," she whispered, and fell down at the floor. Her dark lashes fluttered before she spoke again.

It had been so long since he'd felt like this. I've watched ye come and go from this place for so long, I'm pulling unable to speak to ye. Unable to tell ye that my heart and stomach ache whenever ye are near. Now, ye can see me. I can... I am... *here*." She felt this around the room with wonder as she ran a finger along the wooden floorboards.

"I can feel the world around me for the first time since my death," she said. "Dinnae ken why, but ye gave me this gift. Please, Callum, dinnae let me go. I havenae felt the touch of a man. I died before I had such a chance."

And I've longed to speak to ye for many moons. Now, ye can see me. Please, let me feel ye. If this is the only time I shall ever feel yer touch, please dinnae let me go. I'll be grateful for the simple pleasure of it."

Overcome by her plea, Callum pulled her closer as he sat on the floor, wrapping her legs around his waist and kissing her with a fever he'd never experienced. He wasn't sure if it was the strangeness of the encounter or the woman in his lap, but he was driven wild.

He drove him wild or simply the beautiful woman in his lap, begging for more. I felt a wee jot of affection before she lost the chance forever. He pulled her down, Callum knew it was more. So much more. There was so much silence between them that he'd never experience again if she disappeared.

so that Sorcha simpered and tugged at his hair as his tongue slid into her sweet mouth. If she appeared to him exactly as she had the day she died, that was all that mattered.

Sorcha had truly been the bonniest lass in all of Pinnata Castra, and he was touching wondered how she could have remained untouched for so long during her life when girls married quite young. Either way, she was here now, so he would take an odd whole. She wanted to feel alive, and he'd gladly oblige her.

His cock throbbed painfully in his jeans, but he did his best to ignore it. He'd not push his luck and take advantage of the lass, even if she was technically nothing but a manifestation. To him, she was real, and he would cherish her for as long as he could.

closer, deserved his respect.

eathing But when Sorcha began to shift atop him, Callum groaned and
nd soft, away from her lips, trailing his tongue down the creamy column of her
e could nipping her sweet flesh as she wriggled in his arms.

hen, he “Callum.” She sighed his name, and he clenched his fists into her
ard, too fabric to prevent his hands from wandering to her small, perky breasts
even lower beneath her tunic. Lord, he’d never had to use so much restraint.

The energy surrounding them crackled in his ears and buzzed through
looking bones, sending currents of desire through his every cell.

“I have Releasing her tight grip on his shoulders, Sorcha leaned back and
o long, into his eyes. Her chest rose and fell as she slowly pushed her tunic down
ch hurt shoulders, exposing her breasts. Callum watched as her nipples pulsed
looked responding to the chill in the room. How was this happening? It wasn’t
floor’s Samhain, but he’d never thought such a thing was possible.

death. I Sorcha straightened her spine and took a fortifying breath. “I want
take it touch me, Callum.”

chance. He wanted to do that more than he’d ever wanted anything in this
Ye can But it didn’t feel right. She was untouched by a man. Moreover, she
ae deny ghost. He had to remind himself that she wasn’t real, even if she very
was at the moment.

e floor, “I... I want to, but I cannae.” He shook his head and closed his eyes
d never “Is it because I’m dead?”

ter that That made him open his eyes and look at her. “From where I am
ging to Sorcha, ye are dead. It’s about honor. Ye are untouched by a
r. Deep dinnae want to take advantage.”

nothing “When I was alive, I had to fight lads off with a stick. Now, I’ve
the one man I wish to touch me, and he willnae. Callum, I have been
: warm, here for... what year is it again?”

ed, then “2023.”

and he “I cannae even count that high. How long have I been here, Callum?
; a time He swallowed hard and felt his stomach tighten as he did the
lid and “About 1,337 years... approximately.”

“Do ye ken what it’s like to be stuck in one place that long? Of course
nore it, dinnae. One has nothing but time to ponder their life, death, and what
he was never accomplished. One day, ye showed up, and I have never been the
nd she Callum, ye are a stranger to me, and I am not a young lass—not truly.

what I want, and I want ye. If this is too hard for ye, I understand. I will be pulled ye be.”

throat, Sorcha began climbing off his lap with dejection in her eyes, and growled in frustration, grabbing onto her tunic skirt to tug her back tunic’s lap. The fabric tore just above her knee, and then her slim, sillage breasts circled him as she heaved for breath, making her breasts rise and fall in restraint. his gaze.

ugh his “Ye cannae know how badly I want ye,” he said through gritted

“But then what? Ye disappear, and I’m left with nothing of ye but me looked of this moment?”

own her “Aye,” she whispered. “Mayhap tonight is all we have. Perhaps ckered, year on Samhain, ye will see me again. I cannae say. Does that may be anything? I want to feel alive while I can, Callum!” she said with frus

“I want ye and nobody else!”

at ye to He’d heard enough. Gripping the back of Sorcha’s neck again, he her in, slashing his lips across hers until she gasped, opening her mouth world could slip his tongue inside and taste her. She was warm, soft, and warm was in his arms. His hands slid up her smooth arms to cradle her breasts, y much her arch into his palms.

When he rolled her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, s. cried out and gripped his shoulders as her hips began to move. He exactly what that meant. She wanted more... and he desperately wanted sitting, give it, though he wasn’t sure how far to take this. Slipping one hand under man. Her torn tunic skirt, he sought out her core, swallowing his groan when her slick heat against his finger.

he found Sorcha mewled against his lips and shifted, seeking his touch. His n stuck explored, grazing her nub and making her cry out for more. When he slid down his chest and stomach to finally rest on his restrained c pressing against the front of his jeans, she growled in frustration. “What i?” yer trouser string? I dinnae ken how to undo this odd fastener!”

he math. With a chuckle, Callum unbuttoned his jeans and dragged down zipper, allowing Sorcha to reach in and take him in hand. Her horse, ye clenched him, and he groaned as he leaned in to nip at her ear. Dear God all they was a temptress.

he same. “I admit that I dinnae ken what to do next,” she whispered as her y. I ken explored his manhood. “I have never seen a man’s...” her voice trailed

He left and he saw her cheeks redden.

“Cock?” he asked with a raised brow. She nodded shyly.

Callum “Aye... cock.” She giggled as she said the word and something about his innocence only drove him over the edge.

“Are ye certain ye want this?”

“More than anything, Callum. I’ve wanted ye for so long. Make me alive again.”

Her plea was genuine, and Callum pushed aside his reservation. A memory was a ghost. Dead. Dust. Yet, by some miracle, she was here now in his arms, begging him to give her something no man had ever given her before.

Once another day and with any other woman, Callum would refuse. The change to madness. Yet, she had appeared to him for a reason. Moreover, he sensed a connection with her on a level deeper than just the flesh. After all, if

what was left of Sorcha was her soul, then it connected with his on a level he simply couldn’t explain, and his body reacted to her in a way he’d never experienced.

A powerful sense of possession washed over him as he looked into her eyes, pushed his jeans down to his knees, and slowly guided her down to his throbbing erection. She slid her arms around his neck as she straddled

Sorcha, though she didn’t know what to do, so Callum gently gripped her hips and urged her to move as he pushed deeper into her, careful not to hurt her. To his surprise, Sorcha sighed and tilted her head back as she lay beneath comfortable with the movements, with no sign of pain or discomfort on her face. Only pure pleasure shone in her eyes as her cheeks pinkened, and she gripped his neck.

Callum groaned and slipped his hands beneath her skirts, cupping her hands on his backside as she moved against him. She felt more real than any woman he’d ever been with. Responsive, pure, confident, and eager. All his reservations left as he became caught up in the moment—caught making love to a woman who died over 1,300 years ago.

No. He pushed that thought away. He may never see Sorcha again, but that thought stabbed his heart but only made him even more determined to treasure her every movement and breathy sigh.

Leaning in, Callum took her lips with his, slipping his tongue into her mouth as she moaned and moved against him with a heightening fervor that matched his own. For a lass who’d never done this, she had a natural

that drove Callum to the brink. But he didn't want her first time without her finding pleasure, so he slipped a finger between them and out her nub, making her gasp and quiver at the new sensation. Within moments Sorcha cried out and tensed around him, making him reach his boiling just as she went slack in his arms.

me feel Panting, Callum held her against him, wrapping his arms around her and pressing her against his heaving chest, terrified she'd disappear. A puff of smoke.

is arms, But with each breath, she remained in his arms, her chest rising. On any falling with his.

his was "Ye havenae idea how much this meant to me, Callum." Sorcha pressed her head on his shoulder and nuzzled into him. The intense need to hold her was relentless, but they were still on the hard wooden floors. Sorcha looked around the room for something to lay upon. Spotting a blanket sticking out from a nearby box, Callum reached to the side and pulled it out, and carefully laid her down upon it, wrapping his limbs around her wanting nothing more than to relish this moment.

on onto "Ye arenae going to disappear on me, are ye?" he asked. He wanted to sound lighthearted, but a sense of dread laced his words. He knew her hips wouldn't stay—couldn't stay. He wasn't sure how she'd been able to hold herself in this manner as it was, but it couldn't last... could it?

she got "I dinnae want to leave... but I fear I shall. I cannae control it."

on her A thought came to Callum. "Ye can manipulate yer environment." Sorcha scrunched her nose and lowered her brow in confusion, Callum closed his eyes.

"Ye pushed the stool away from the door so I couldnae leave. Ye know I could do that."

an he'd She shook her head. "I didnae ken I could do that. I never have seen ye. I've never been seen. Never been heard. But when ye heard me, I put up in and kicked the stool away from the door. All I could think about was running away in fright after I'd spent 1,300 years alone and in pain, and Mayhap, the pure fear of ye running away from me gave me an unexpected strength. I hope ye arenae angry that I trapped ye. I didn't know the door would lock."

into her He nodded his understanding. "I am not angry at all, Sorcha. But ye never frightened. I was shocked, confused, and perhaps shaken. My talent wouldnae have run from ye. I have seen other spirits. Ye know

to endMcLean?”

stroked Sorcha’s eyes lit up, and she smiled. “Aye! She was the auld healer
oments,village. She lived nearly 100 years, rest her soul. She passed away la
g pointYe have seen her?”

“Och, she is a well-known spirit in these parts. We see her dressed
er backmany eras. Her soul has lived many lives. I am her descendant.”

into a “And Ronan’s,” Sorcha added.

“Aye. My family has never lived anywhere else but the surro
ng andareas.” Callum looked at Sorcha and gently scooped a red tendril
behind her ear. “I’m going to save ye.”

rested Her eyes widened, and she swallowed. “I dinnae understand.”

ld onto “In the morning, when I get out of this basement, I am heading
Callumcave. I will find ye in yer time. And I will save ye.”

n extra Sorcha smiled and opened her mouth to respond but paused as
, pulledwashed over her features. She gripped his arm and pushed herself
nd her,seated position. “I... I grow weak. Callum...”

The wooden clock on the wall began to ding, and Callum realized
ed it tomidnight. All Hallow’s Eve had ended, and her spirit was fading.
ew shetwo...Her hand began to fade before his eyes.

o show “Sorcha!”

Then, she became translucent. *Three...four...*

“Callum...” she whispered. “I want ye to ken... that I love ye.
’ Whenbright curls dimmed, grew almost pink, and then he could see throu
larified.*Five...six...*

new ye “I will find ye, Sorcha! I promise! I will save ye!” *Seven...eight...*

She smiled and put a hand out to him, and her lips formed the
before.again. *Nine...ten...* “I love ye,” *Eleven*. No sound came out. The onl
anickedCallum heard was the last strike of the clock. *Twelve*.

was ye “Sorcha!” He yelled and dove forward.

visible. But Sorcha was gone.

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McLean?”

Sorcha’s eyes lit up, and she smiled. “Aye! She was the auld healer in our village. She lived nearly 100 years, rest her soul. She passed away last year. Ye have seen her?”

“Och, she is a well-known spirit in these parts. We see her dressed from many eras. Her soul has lived many lives. I am her descendant.”

“And Ronan’s,” Sorcha added.

“Aye. My family has never lived anywhere else but the surrounding areas.” Callum looked at Sorcha and gently scooped a red tendril of hair behind her ear. “I’m going to save ye.”

Her eyes widened, and she swallowed. “I dinnae understand.”

“In the morning, when I get out of this basement, I am heading for the cave. I will find ye in yer time. And I will save ye.”

Sorcha smiled and opened her mouth to respond but paused as terror washed over her features. She gripped his arm and pushed herself up to a seated position. “I... I grow weak. Callum...”

The wooden clock on the wall began to ding, and Callum realized it was midnight. All Hallow’s Eve had ended, and her spirit was fading. *One... two...* Her hand began to fade before his eyes.

“Sorcha!”

Then, she became translucent. *Three...four...*

“Callum...” she whispered. “I want ye to ken... that I love ye...” Her bright curls dimmed, grew almost pink, and then he could see through her. *Five...six...*

“I will find ye, Sorcha! I promise! I will save ye!” *Seven...eight...*

She smiled and put a hand out to him, and her lips formed the words again. *Nine...ten...* “I love ye,” *Eleven.* No sound came out. The only thing Callum heard was the last strike of the clock. *Twelve.*

“Sorcha!” He yelled and dove forward.

But Sorcha was gone.



Chapter Four

MURMURING VOICES MADE Callum's ears perk up, and he ceased his re-pacing as he ran toward the basement door. Seven hours had passed since Sorcha disappeared, but Callum hadn't slept or even sat down. All he could consider ways to save her, things to say when he'd meet her in her cell. His pulse quickened when he realized that someone had finally arrived at the visitor center. Desperation and adrenaline shot through every cell in his body as he called out for help.

"It's Callum! Can ye hear me?" he shouted as he banged on the wooden door and rattled the knob to make more noise.

The voices stopped just before the doors swung open. Luckily, he stepped back in time to avoid being hit by the door. When Murielle and Samuel appeared on the other side, he sighed with relief and rushed toward them. He hadn't slept a wink or done anything but ponder his encounter with Sorcha, determined to find her again.

"Callum?" Murielle asked, her sleek blond hair catching the light as she stepped closer. "Are ye all right?"

Callum shook his head. "Ye know a lass named Sorcha, aye?"

Murielle frowned and looked at Samuel with concern in her eyes.

Samuel shook his head as he regarded Callum. "We do know a lass named Sorcha, yes. But surely not the one you are referring to."

"From Pinnata Castra. Red hair...Queen Caitriona saved her father from a smallpox outbreak in 685?"

Murielle stepped forward, and for the first time, Callum noticed her rimmed blue eyes and shaking hands. "How do ye ken this, Callum?"

"She was here! Last night, I came down to the basement to store pamphlets and heard a voice. When I reacted to it, the stool I used to prop the door open flew across the room." He pointed to the black metal stool in the corner of the wall. "It was Sorcha! She told me she'd been stuck down here since..."

death! Murielle, there is a clergy member... a priest, or a monk, who will come to Pinnata Castra. He will accuse Sorcha of being a witch, whatever the equivalent of a witch is at that time. He drowns her, claiming she used some dark force to survive a plague. Sorcha said that, just before she died, he threatened to go after Queen Cairiona and her sister, Emilie. I need to get to her! I need to save her!"

Panic overcame him. Now that he was free to leave the basement, he wanted to run full speed toward the cave and save Sorcha.

"Callum." Murielle put a hand on his shoulder and looked at him before speaking.

Samuel cleared his throat and closed his eyes. "You cannot save her, Callum."

"Sure, I can! I know all the stories! Emilie saved Wee Lucas, I cannae I save Sorcha? I have to try! I... I love her..." His voice trailed off as the words slipped through his lips so naturally that he hadn't even considered the truth of them. How could he be in love with a woman who had stepped so long ago... a woman he'd spent only a few hours with? He could explain it, but he had to find her.

"Callum, she is gone. She died a week ago. Murielle and I were with Sorcha when it happened. She is likely the first case of what is now considered a witch hunt in Scottish history. Only, they didn't call it that back then. She apprehended the priest, and he is currently being dealt with. King Brodie will lock him away and send a messenger to seek a church official. Only the court can determine his punishment. He cannot hurt Cait or Emilie, but Sorcha is lost to us. I'm so sorry."

"No." Callum backed away and clenched his fist.

A tear slid down Murielle's face. "I loved Sorcha, Callum," Murielle croaked. "She was a great friend. I was there when her father fell ill, and she sought help. Cait was able to help because she was vaccinated against red-smallpox, which I dinnae ken at the time, of course. I havenae slept since it happened. We almost canceled this book signing, but Burgundy came somehow to us, and I dinnae want to disappoint the people."

Samuel looked around the basement and rubbed his freshly shaved head. "Murielle... this building... isn't it built pretty close to where Sorcha was once her was?"

"Aye." Murielle nodded. "Now that ye mention it, I believe this ma..."

ho will be the exact location of her home.” She looked at Callum with so
h... other gaze, but the twisting, gnawing ache in his stomach made him br
laiming contact. He couldn’t bear the pain. All he’d thought about all night w
fore she to save Sorcha.

. I need “It was AllHallow’s Eve. I suppose the veil was thin enough for h
to be seen,” Samuel added.

ent, he “It wasnae just her spirit,” Callum whispered as he looked arou
room. “She was whole. Real. Solid. We talked all night, but at midnig
Samuel disappeared.” *Talked, fell in love, and made love...*

“The veil had closed,” Murielle murmured with understanding. “T
ve her, that Sorcha has been trapped here all this time... my poor sweet :

Murielle clutched her chest as tears ran down her cheeks. “Ye couldn
s! Why saved her, even if ye tried, Callum. Ye cannae cross the veil of time.”

d off as “How can ye possibly know that?” he asked with frustration. He
had toangry at Murielle or Samuel, of course. He was angry at the unive
ho died bringing Sorcha to him, only to rip her from him immediately with
ouldn’t hope of saving her.

“A soul can only exist within one body at a time. You and Ronan
visiting soul. He couldn’t cross over with Murielle, and I suspect it’s because I
dered ais occupying your body now. Ronan is occupying your soul in the ye
en. We if you crossed over, God only knows the catastrophic consequences,”
lyn had explained.

ly they “Furthermore,” Murielle said, gently taking his hand. “Sorcha’s li
w. But with her. If ye saved her... then what? She cannae have children, or
timeline would be altered. I believe, if ye were meant to save h
wouldnae have appeared to ye a week—and a few thousand years—a
Murielle death.”

and she “And, Callum, what would you say to her? That you met her spiri
against year 2023 and traveled back in time to save her?” Samuel shook his h
a wink know how painful this is. I really do, but I see no scenario where yo
head is ever meant to save her. I’m so sorry, Callum.”

Callum couldn’t respond. What was there to say? He’d spent th
n chin, holding her, loving her, getting to know her in a soul-searing way he’
s home experienced. And for what? Just to be left empty, aching, and broken.

Murielle looked from Callum to Sam, then back again. “I have sor
ay have I’d like to give ye.”

row in “Murielle... are you sure? It means a great deal to you,” Sam quest
eak eye She nodded and smiled. “I’m sure. He needs it more than I do.”

as how Callum wrinkled his brow as he watched Murielle unclasp a small
er spiritpin. She wore it every time she left the house on cold days. Here.”

Callum observed the small silver brooch in Murielle’s palm. A c
nd the shape with intricate swirls intersected with a V-rod—a prevalent
ght, she symbol. Slowly, Callum put out his hand, and Murielle gently pla
clasp into his palm.

’o think “I cannae take this from ye.”

friend.” “Then we can share it,” she said with a smile. “Ye keep it for now.
ae have it will help ye heal. Sorcha was a verra special lass. I amnae surprised
such an effect on ye after all these years. And I dinnae ken what ha
wasn’t between ye both down here, but I assume ye had as great an impact o
rse for she had on ye.”

out any What did it matter? She was gone, and Callum was left here a
suffer the loss of a woman who never existed in his time.

share a Clearing his throat, Callum placed the brooch in his pocket. “Yer
his soul is starting soon. Do ye need help setting up?”

ar 687. Samuel shook his head and patted Callum on the shoulder. “No,
Samuel handle this. You have been trapped down here for what I assume is
hours. Go home, eat, shower, sleep—whatever you need to do. We wi
ne died right.” Samuel slipped on a smile. “Hey, just think. In January, you’re
else the our archaeology program at the university. We’ll get to spend muc
er, she time together. Soon, you’ll be helping us excavate the cave.”

fter her Callum nodded. Maybe they were right. After all, they knew mor
the limitations of traveling through time than he did. His excitement to
it in the the university was stunted by the pain of losing Sorcha, but perhaps
ead. “I good timing. After this experience, how would he continue to wor
ou were He’d languish away in this basement, hoping for any sign of the wom
stormed his heart, consumed his body, and then left him with nothing
e night memory.

d never When Murielle and Samuel grabbed the boxes of their boo
ascended the stairs, Callum remained. He wasn’t quite ready to walk
nothing nor was he certain that Sorcha was gone. After all, she’d been able to s
for years, even if he couldn’t see her.

tioned. Pulling her brooch out of his pocket, Callum ran a thumb across the metal's surface, knowing that just a week ago, Sorcha had worn this brooch that was almost 1,400 years old, and yet it wasn't. The entire concept was so cloaking, and though he'd pondered time travel since the day he met Murielle, he'd never had the urge to try it until last night.

resent But, he had to heed Samuel's warnings. Sorcha was gone. He could not save her. And he'd be risking a possible catastrophe if he crossed over. He shuddered to think what would become of his and Ronan's souls if their bodies occupied the same time or space.

Still, it wasn't fair. He was doing just fine until Sorcha showed up. Part of him wanted to shout at her for leaving him, even if he knew she had to. It was ridiculous.

“Are ye here, Sorcha?” he asked, looking around the room. “I don't know if ye could hear me. I was going to save ye. I wanted to run into the cave, pass through, save ye, and bring ye back here to live with me. I chuckled at his foolishness. It had never been an option. What had he been thinking? Murielle was right. If he'd found Sorcha in her time and told her the truth, she'd have run away in fear. Nay, they were meant to be together for one night together and nothing more. Though, he couldn't understand why he couldn't see the purpose of any of it?

Sighing, Callum held up her brooch. “If this is all I have of ye, I'll cherish it forever, along with your memory. Just know that ye are leaving. I can't explain it. I just know ye and I were meant to be together, even if it was for one night. Ye've changed my life. I love ye and pray ye are safe. I hope that ye have moved on and found peace.”

With an aching pit of anguish settling in his belly, Callum left the basement where her home had once stood, where he'd lost his heart to a woman who didn't exist, and felt a shot of pain through his heart when the door slammed behind him. He knew today was his last day working here. If he stayed, he would languish away, spending time in the dark, lonely basement, hoping for another glimpse of a woman he'd never have.

Nay, life was for the living, and he had to go on, even if he'd never seen Sorcha—a woman lost to the pages of history. But to him, she'd never go away, forever in his heart.

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Chapter Five

WATER FILLED HER lungs as she struggled to break free. She screamed and swung her arms at her attacker, but just like always, her body went limp and darkness overcame her for what felt like a thousand years. Then, Callum swam before her. Brown hair and blue eyes, like always. “Callum,” she reached for him, hoping this time he’d not slip through her desperate fingers. But just like he did every time, he vanished.

Her alarm rang beside her ear, and Sophia sat up in bed with a start. Sweat covered her body, making her cotton pajama pants stick to her skin and her hair cling to her nape.

Ever since her near-death experience nine weeks ago, the same dream plagued Sophia, leaving her empty and aching for something she couldn’t find in this place. A man with a familiar face and name but nothing more. A sense of heaviness of water flooding her lungs still weighed her down. Were these dreams meant to feel this visceral?

She’d spoken to her therapist about the dream, but so far, Sophia couldn’t unlock what buried trauma her therapist believed resided in her subconscious. Aside from the reoccurring dreams, she’d been getting glimpses of faces from long ago and faces of people she felt like she knew. She had memories, yet it seemed she had many more that belonged entirely to someone else. Was that even possible?

According to the doctors, she’d died the night of her accident. Her heart had stopped beating. Her lungs had stopped breathing. Her brain had stopped synapsing. Sophia’s death was called at 11:59 p.m. on October 31st. If she’d heard of out-of-body experiences, she’d never believed in such things. But Sophia had floated above herself, watching as they covered her with a white sheet. Peace had washed over her as bright white light warmed her in a comforting embrace. A voice called to her, telling her it was time to go home, and promised that everything would be as it was meant to be.

Then, Sophia had come to life with a gasp just before they wheeled her body down to the morgue. Doctors, nurses, and staff ran around in a panic, calling for help as machines began beeping again.

“She came back to life at midnight, exactly!” one of the nurses said to the doctor, who ran over to shine a light in her eyes.

“Incredible,” he muttered. “She was dead.”

“Well, she isn’t dead now!” a nurse said in a shaky voice. “Call the neurologist!”

“Callum,” Sophia had croaked in a weak voice, making the doctor’s face in confusion.

“Callum.” The name had been the first thought that whispered in her mind when she returned to life. But who *was* Callum?

From that day forward, these dreams had consumed her, almost giving her a glimpse of a past life through someone else’s eyes. She could vaguely recall a young man named Callum, even though she’d never met him. Her family and the doctor had decided it was a side effect of her trauma, perhaps a coping mechanism that had to replace the memory of the crash, which remained hazy in her mind.

But Sophia knew there was more to it, somehow.

The first day of her new archaeology program had arrived, and she thought of her life-altering accident and her parents’ encouragement to return to school.

Sophia was determined to stay the course. Her future awaited, brighter than ever. More than anything, she treasured every new breath she took. Life was fragile, but she was stronger than ever.

Sophia showered and slipped on a pair of dark blue skinny jeans, a purple, cable-knit sweater, and brown boots before grabbing her bag and looking into the mirror. Her hazel eyes shone with excitement, and she

tucked her wild red waves of hair behind her ear, a gift from her grandmother—Sophia’s inspiration to return to her highland roots and stop the past.

The University of Aberdeen was only fifteen minutes from her new home, and though the early January air was frigid, and she required a puffy coat with a beanie to keep warm, she enjoyed the walk to the first class of her new program.

Her professor, Samuel Sullivan, was a world-famous archaeologist who had recently discovered the first written records of the Pictish people. He had translated it with his wife, and together, they traveled for book signings and lectures.

She was beyond grateful to have been accepted into this program.

led her program. More importantly, she did it independently even though her frequency, Thelma had worked closely with him at the Burghead Visitor Centre.

She knew that this was the beginning of a new life for her.

aid to a Wisps of breath drifted from her lips as she walked onto camp

Sophia looked around in awe at the ancient building with bright red

climbing up its stone walls. She had survived that awful accident for a

Get the and this was it. Whatever her future held, it would come to fruition

Never had she felt a greater connection to anything. She'd heard

r frown Americans feeling an odd connection to their ancestral lands, but

knew, deep in her bones, that she belonged here, maybe even in her

er mind Scotland in a past life.

Callum. The name whispered in her mind again. *Callum.* Why did that name keep running through her head, and why

limpses Callum? Why did that name keep running through her head, and why

a man make her insides ache with a sense of loss and longing? It was as if she

therapists something—no, someone—dear to her heart, yet she hadn't a clue

hanism Callum was. Blue eyes and brown hair swam through her mind again

like in her dreams.

Students rushed by from every direction, likely just as anxious to start the new Winter term as she was. As excited as Sophia was to start her

home, journey, a sense of panic began to wash over her. "Oh, no..." she

shining as the feeling of being held underwater and slowly drowning transported

her back to her traumatic accident and subsequent death. It was as if she

twice. Once from the car accident and once from drowning—why

means, impossible, for there hadn't been any water near the crash site.

ok bag Gripping her aching temples, Sophia closed her eyes and tried to

and she out the chatter around her, focusing on her breathing. "You're not

Scottish You're not drowning," she whispered to herself. She had to get a grip

and study was not the time for another episode.

Callum.

ew flat, Shaking her head and gritting her teeth against the surmounting

oat and pain, Sophia opened her eyes and took a few steps on the slick cobble

ew life, yelping when she barreled into someone. Familiar blue eyes stared at

who'd her, making her suddenly lose her balance. Her feet slipped from beneath

her. He'd but his arms gripped hers to hold her upright.

ings and *Callum.* The pesky inner voice spoke.

stigious "S-Sorcha?" The man looked at her with a mixture of pain, hope

er aunthorror.

Sophia That name... she knew that name. Looking up, she saw him, and her brain had stopped synapsing when she died, it made up for it for her, and thousands of electrical pulses sparked in her head. A tunnel opened in her mind's eye, flooding her with images, voices, and memories that were not hers—yet they were hers entirely.

Callum here. “Callum?” She gripped his arm when the sensations overwhelmed her, and he guided her toward a bench away from prying eyes and swiftly into the courtyard. Class was starting, and within minutes, the courtyard was empty.

“It’s you,” she whispered. “I... I know you.”

Callum was “Aye. Ye know me. How... I dinnae understand. How are ye here?” She looked her up and down, frowning, when he saw a small scar on her forehead lost from her accident. She touched it and wondered how she could be both women at once. She was Sophia. She had Sophia’s memories and personality, much but she also was Sorcha. She remembered it all now. It was as if running through a tunnel.

Callum had knocked the cobwebs off some repressed memories.

Images of being drowned flashed in her mind, and she gripped the hem of Callum’s brown coat as panic overwhelmed her. “Queen Caitrion’s sister, Emilie! He was coming for them next! Callum! Ye must warn them! How am I here? I... I dinnae ken what is happening!” When her accident began to morph into a Scottish burr, she slapped a hand over her mouth.

“They are safe, Sorcha. They are well. Murielle and Professor Sorenson have verified that the man who drowned ye was captured before he died, anyone else.”

Now She shook her head as tears swam in her eyes. “I am Sophia Nelsen from San Francisco. But I am also Sorcha Mac Bielich from Pinnata. Callum, what is happening?” She shook with fear, and he silently held her, rubbing her back and doing his best to comfort her as she broke down into tears. “I dinnae ken who I am! Why do I remember ye in the basement? I remember us... us...” Sophia looked up at him and remembered everything, especially their night of lovemaking on the basement floor of a visitor’s home that now resided where her home once stood.

Callum made calming shushing noises and took her hands. The moment their skin touched, waves of white light pulsed through his fingertips.

glimpses of Sorcha flashed in his eyes, only it wasn't him—at least not if he'd had her in this lifetime. *Ronan*. He was seeing her through Ronan's eyes. His stomach flipped, and his heart raced when he looked at her. Ronan had loved her all his life, the pain twisting inside his gut told Callum that Ronan had suffered unrequited love for Sorcha before he married Eva. Had she known this as Callum, a feeling of wholeness washed over him, and he just knew he'd found her, very depths of his soul that she was the piece of his essence that had been missing.

nearly “Sorcha... Sophia... I dinnae have the answers, but I think Sam Murielle can help.” He paused, and a speculative expression crossed his face. “Wait. Yer name is Sophia Nelson? Do ye have an aunt named Thelma?” He asked. Sophia wiped away a tear and cocked her head. “Aye...I mean, yes.” She growled with frustration. “I have two languages competing in my head. Why did seeing you trigger Sorcha's memories? And how do ye know?”

ing into “I worked with her at the Burghead Visitor Centre until I met Sorcha—in the basement.”

the collar Things began to click. *Wait a second...* “Are you the co-worker?”

1 them! Callum nodded, and Sophia frowned. This was all too much. She couldn't sort her emotions; worst of all, she simultaneously felt emotions from her—herself—and Sorcha—who was inexplicably familiar and simultaneously mysterious.

Sullivan All this time, Aunt Thelma had tried to set her up with Callum, but she hurt Sorcha had fallen in love with. And now Sophia held all Sorcha's memories.

“I cannae do this.” Standing, Sophia began to walk away from the bench. “I am had to get to class, but how could she when in this condition? How could she concentrate?”

held her, “Wait!” Callum grabbed her hand and pulled her back toward him. “It isn't a coincidence! Ye know it isn't! Yer aunt tried to set us up for a moment? It was with her the day...” He paused and looked at Sophia with sadness. “Nothing, blue eyes before reaching out to gently run a finger along the small of her forehead. “The day of yer accident. We were working together. I found the text from yer mum that ye were in the hospital here in Scotland.”

instantly rushed out the door in a panic. Later that night, I met Sorcha in the basement, and she was a spirit, yet she was verra much alive. I couldnae understand

not himdinnae, but things are coming together.”

tomach Sophia shook her head, the knots in her belly tightening as her
er. Theincreased. Chills ran up her spine as she pondered the situation and
red into Callum try to piece it together. She felt as though she were being p
? Now,two directions at once.

v in the Callum’s voice was like a lifeline, pulling her back to the pres
always tying her in place. “Sophia, what time was yer accident? Yer aunt
were declared dead but returned to life. Do ye know the times?”

uel and She crinkled her brow and pulled away from him to grab her th
his face.temple. “I was run off the road around nine o’clock and remember
a?” until I awoke exactly at midnight on November first. The doctors s
...Yes!”died. I had no brain waves, pulse, or oxygen for nearly two minute
y head!shivered when she remembered seeing herself on that metal gurney
l... youprepared to be toe-tagged and stuffed in a freezer. She gripped her bell
it began to roil.

you, or “I saw myself. I floated above my body, drifted away into the lig
heard a voice assure me that I was coming home and everything woul
ker sheit should be. That’s all I remember before waking. Then, the dre
drowning began. I kept seeing you—but just your face. It appeared to
ouldn’tif behind a veil. I’d wake up in a sweat calling for you, but I
Sophiaunderstand who you were until just now. I’m Sorcha, but still Sophia.
neouslyHer knees weakened, and her vision swam. She swerved again and
Callum’s sweater sleeve for purchase.

he man Callum took her arm again and walked her gently back to the ben
mories,please. Ye arenae well.”

ch. She “How can I be well? I freaking *died*, Callum! I was dead! Now I’
uld sheand I think I’m some woman named Sorcha and see images of peopl
place that appears quite old.”

l. “This “1,337 years old, to be exact.”

nonths. “E-excuse me?” she questioned, raising her brow. “What are ye
is in histalking about?”

scar on “Does this feel familiar?” Callum reached into his coat pocket and
She gotout Sorcha’s silver brooch, holding it out to her.

Thelma “My brooch!” she cried, hesitating to touch it. “How do ye have i
sement.wished her mind would settle on one dialect or accent, but it seeme
l. I stillswitching between the two at will.

“Murielle had it. I was devastated when ye disappeared on me, anxiety Murielle allowed me to have yer brooch, to feel closer to ye.”
listened He held the brooch out for her to take, but she shook her head. “I pulled in ready to hold the brooch I wore when I died 1,337 years ago. I still process my most recent death,” she murmured with a shudder rolling out and spine.

said ye Nodding, Callum tucked the brooch away again and took her
“Based on what ye have told me, I have an idea what is happening. I think we need to speak to Samuel and Murielle right away.”

nothing “As in Professor Samuel Sullivan? I’m supposed to be in his lecture said I’d now. I didnae understand until just now that Murielle’s husband, Sarah.” She Samuel Sullivan, my professor. How can they help us, though?”

; being Callum chuckled and shook his head. “Now, it really canna be a coincidence. Ye are part of his archaeology program?”

“Yes.” She explained how Thelma had encouraged her to apply for the job, and she’d done so on her own merits.

ld be as “I am also just joining his program. Do ye recall what I told ye about Murielle traveling through the cave to live in this time with Samuel?”

o me as She nodded. “I do. We were in the basement together. Wait. How didn’t have been in the hospital as Sophia on that night but have Sarah’s memories? Callum, did Sorcha’s soul replace mine when I died?”

gripped Callum didn’t respond immediately, but nausea roiled in her gut and she didn’t appear shocked by her question. Instead, he gently cupped her face. “Sit, between his and shook his head. “I dinnae know, but it crossed my mind.”

Sorcha appeared to me just after Thelma received the message about the accident. I’d never seen her before, though she claimed she always saw me and a

“She did. Or rather, *I* did. I can see it in my memories. She tried to get your attention and believed ye were Ronan at first, but ye didnae see her until one night. By then, she understood that ye were Callum, though she couldn’t understand how ye looked so much alike.”

“And, she disappeared at midnight on November first. I went back to bed, but she pulled times afterward, but she was gone. Sophia,” he said, squeezing her hand.

“Ye look just like her. Ye share her memories. When yer accident happened?” She appeared to me, and then she disappeared right when ye came to bed. I cannae make sense of it, but it has to be fate. How else is it that ye look like her, even if ye werenae born with her soul? It’s as if ye were

Sorcha meant to join with her.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing. It doesn’t seem possible.”

Callum scoffed. “I’ve recently come to know there is more in this need than we believe, especially around Burghead. Will ye come with me to see up herto Professor Sullivan?”

Sophia nodded and, hand in hand, she walked with Callum in the hands building, and together, they awaited Professor Sullivan outside his office, but I

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“I’ve never heard of such a thing. It doesn’t seem possible.”

Callum scoffed. “I’ve recently come to know there is more in this world than we believe, especially around Burghead. Will ye come with me to speak to Professor Sullivan?”

Sophia nodded and, hand in hand, she walked with Callum into the building, and together, they awaited Professor Sullivan outside his office.



Chapter Six

CALLUM FELT LIKE he was floating in his chair as he waited for Samuel to finish class and return to his office. He was here, holding Sorcha's hand. Sorcha's hand. He wasn't sure who was who. Had Sorcha possessed Sophia's body? Or did Sophia share Sorcha's soul? Were they two women, or were they the same?

He'd seen and heard a lot of strange tales about the cave, of time and even souls living multiple lives. He even shared Ronan's soul, or at least he had been told several times. But just nine weeks ago, Sorcha's soul had been trapped in that basement. Now, she was here, and though it made sense, he tried to understand it, the whole thing made no sense at all.

"Callum?" Sophia whispered as she rested her head on his shoulder. "Already, it was as if they'd known each other their entire lives, just a feeling I felt in that basement. 'I'm scared.'"

"We will figure this out. Ye have me now. I willnae let anything happen to ye ever again." She nuzzled into his side, and contentment wrapped around him like a blanket.

"Callum?" Murielle's voice floated to him, snapping him out of his thoughts. Sophia lifted her head from his shoulder, and Murielle looked at her. "Sorcha?" Murielle ran over to them and pulled Sophia into her arms. Sophia stood behind Murielle with confusion morphing his features.

"Murielle!" Sophia cried, hugging a friend she recognized from a long time ago.

"How are ye here?" Murielle asked. "Ye died! I've missed ye ten years. I had wondered if yer soul existed in this time. How did ye find us?"

Samuel stepped forward to unlock his office as students flooded the hallway now that classes were ending. "Let's go into my office," he said, pushing the door open. They filtered in, and Samuel closed it behind him.

Callum had Sophia sit in one of the seats and addressed Samuel.

sorry we missed our first lecture, Professor Sullivan. Ye know how my program means to me. But, as ye can see, we have a bit of a situation.”

“So, I see,” he said, sitting behind his desk, looking at the woman settled beside Callum curiously. “I assume your name is not Sorcha time?”

She shook her head. “My name is Sophia Nelson.”

From there, she and Callum took turns explaining the entire situation to Samuel and Murielle, hoping they could help explain the situation.

Sophia’s “Sorcha—I mean, Sophia.” Callum turned to look at her beseechingly, “I want ye to know that, after our night together in the basement, I wanted to go back in time to save ye from yer fate, but Murielle told me ye were gone. I had no way to save ye.”

Murielle wiped a tear away and moved to stand beside Samuel. “I’m so sorry, Sorcha. It verra well may burst. I cannae believe my beloved Sorcha had been with us. I think I understand what happened, but I cannae be certain.”

“I also have an idea, but I’d love to hear yours, Love, and see if it matches mine,” Samuel said, looking up at his wife with a pure love in his eyes that Callum understood for the first time in his life, for he had felt the same overwhelming emotion every time he looked at Sophia.

“Well,” Murielle said, scratching her head. “I believe Sorcha and Fionn’s souls were meant to be together, but she got stuck in the in between for so long that her soul couldnae move on.”

Callum looks nearly identical to Sorcha, much as Callum looks nearly identical to his Ronan. Ronan’s soul moved on, but hers couldnae until she finished with her business she had. That, and she needed a body. Most souls inhabit a body at birth.”

“But Sorcha couldn’t occupy Sophia’s body because she was so very young,” Callum added.

Murielle nodded. “Precisely. But it all happened exactly the way I meant to. Callum didn’t see Sorcha until Sophia was in her car wreck at five o’clock when her soul was preparing to cross over. That’s when the halls became temporarily stronger. Her soul was preparing to transition into Sophia’s body. That’s how Callum was finally able to see her. A moment later, she disappeared when Sophia was declared dead at midnight. Callum spent the next three hours with Sorcha, neither of them knowing that Sophia’s soul was weakening as Sorcha grew stronger. Sorcha could finally move on to the next life.”

ach this Callum—or Ronan—was Sorcha’s unfinished business. Just when he
love with her, Sophia died, and Sorcha was pulled into her body.”

an who Sadness gripped Callum as he listened, gripping Sophia’s hand
in this Sophia had to die for Sorcha to live. I’m so sorry, Sophia. Your soul, it

“It was temporary, Callum. It didn’t make me who I am. I am still
am still Sophia. I have all my memories, ideas, passions, opinions,
ation to personality. I’m just now who I was always meant to be. I’m whole
feel it. It’s all right. Please, do not mourn for what I lost, for I have gained
ngly. “I much more.”

ed to go “And her Aunt Thelma kept trying to set us up without even knowing
already were meant to be. How is that possible?” Callum asked, tilting his head

“Because ye were always meant to be,” Murielle said, placing a hand
l. “My his shoulder with a smile. “One way or another, yer souls were going to
is here together. Once Sorcha inhabited Sophia, it was time.”

Callum was at a loss for words. He was part of some ancient
ee if it events that all led to this moment. Goosebumps broke out across his skin
shining it all sank in.

felt the “There is something I dinnae understand,” Callum said, looking

Murielle. “If my soul is meant to be with Sorcha’s, why weren’t she and
Ronan’s Ronan together in their time?”

he was Sophia cleared her throat and nervously wrung her hands together.
Sophia well, Sorcha, was in love with Ronan,” she softly admitted, looking
tical to Callum to Murielle. “I never told a soul. I was much too shy, and he would
hate ever guarding Murielle or fighting battles for King Brodyn. Before I could
body at the nerve to tell him, he married another woman. A few months later,

My unfinished business must have been to express my love for Ronan
stuck,” Callum. Once I did, I was free to pass on.”

“And Sophia’s soul left just in time for ye to inhabit the body ye
it was always meant for,” Murielle said in awe. “And Sophia, I never told
at nine because I didnae ken how to ye felt about Ronan, but he was in love with
Sorcha as well. He told me, but he was too busy keeping the royal family safe
on into he didnae believe ye cared for him, so he focused on his duties. Then
nd she showed up, and she showed great interest in him, so he married her.
at those was devastated when ye passed, Sorcha. He locked himself away for a
oul was full moon’s cycle while he grieved. He was never quite the same, but
because himself for not protecting ye. Eva wasnae too happy about it.”

She fell in love with him. “When I touched Sophia’s hand earlier in the courtyard, a shock went through me, and I felt Ronan’s emotions and saw his memories for the first time. “Buttime ever. Being reunited seems to have sparked some repressed memories—” But I felt his intense love for Sorcha. It was actually painful. He believed in me. I love was unrequited, so he lived with the pain of that. Then, Eva came along, and she showered him with attention, and he married her.” Leaning over Sophia now. As she sat in a chair, Callum kissed the top of her head, thankful she was still alive. “I should have stayed and praying she remained by his side for the rest of his days. “It should have been you,” he whispered in her ear.

“Clearly, you were also both meant to end up in my program together. I want you to continue to work with Murielle and me as we research the Picts. And who better to lead our team than a Pictish princess,” he said, gesturing to Murielle, “and someone who has passed through both times all his life,” he added, pointing to himself. “and two people who once lived in that time. I lost Caitriona and Ewan, but I have gained you.”

“I think I need to lie down,” Sophia muttered. “This is going to take some time to adjust to.”

Samuel stood from his chair and walked them toward the door. “Come with me and take her back to your flat so she can rest. I will send you today’s notes. Just contact your other professors and tell them you had a personal emergency. I will vouch for you, if needed.”

Nodding, Sophia thanked him, hugged Murielle tightly, and then called for Callum to take her to his place for the night.

She got up

and I died.

—or

we were

you this

with you,

life, and

then, Eva

Ronan

nearly a

blaming

“When I touched Sophia’s hand earlier in the courtyard, a shock ran through me, and I felt Ronan’s emotions and saw his memories for the first time ever. Being reunited seems to have sparked some repressed memories. But I felt his intense love for Sorcha. It was actually painful. He believed his love was unrequited, so he lived with the pain of that. Then, Eva arrived, showered him with attention, and he married her.” Leaning over Sophia while she sat in a chair, Callum kissed the top of her head, thankful she was here and praying she remained by his side for the rest of his days. “It should have been ye,” he whispered in her ear.

“Clearly, you were also both meant to end up in my program together and work with Murielle and me as we research the Picts. And who better to have on our team than a Pictish princess,” he said, gesturing to Murielle, “a man who has passed through both times all his life,” he added, pointing to himself, “and two people who once lived in that time. I lost Caitriona and Emilie on my team, but I have gained you.”

“I think I need to lie down,” Sophia muttered. “This is going to take me a while to adjust to.”

Samuel stood from his chair and walked them toward the door. “Callum, take her back to your flat so she can rest. I will send you today’s lecture notes. Just contact your other professors and tell them you had a family emergency. I will vouch for you, if needed.”

Nodding, Sophia thanked him, hugged Murielle tightly, and then allowed Callum to take her to his place for the night.



Chapter Seven

SOFT LIGHT FILTERED through thin blue curtains, and Sophia started jumping with fear when she rolled over to find Callum beside her completely forgotten that she'd fallen asleep at his flat the night before hours of talking, sorting out the many pieces of their mystery, and ple one another in ways she had never experienced before.

The soreness between her legs, the ache in her thighs, and the smile on Callum's face made her feel the heat of a flush as it all rushed to her. His short, dark hair stood up around his head, and a sexy covered his jaw.

"Good morning, gorgeous," he murmured, pulling her closer and her deeply until she groaned and opened her mouth to him, allow tongue to taste hers.

"Good morning," she replied, wrapping her arms around his neck nuzzling closer. When his fingers slid between her thighs beneath the she eagerly offered herself to him, widening her legs as her pulse increased.

"How did ye sleep?" he whispered before leaning down to suck on nipple into his mouth. She'd forgotten that they'd both fallen asleep and she was very glad they had. His touch was a balm to her soul, one she waited centuries for. It was true that, as Sorcha, she'd been too approach the strong, handsome warrior that Ronan had been.

But as Sophia, she was bolder and ready to seize the life and time she'd loved for so long. Both Sophia and Sorcha's memories drifted through her mind, and she knew it would take a while to adjust. But the only that mattered now was accepting the gift she had been given—to be with Callum and to share a life together. They were young and had many years to grow, travel, and work together with Samuel, but she vowed never away from what she wanted again.

And right now, she wanted Callum. “Make love to me,” she sighed as her fingers stroked along her sensitive, needy flesh.

“I don’t know if we have time,” he said, nibbling on her neck. “It starts in an hour.”

She groaned and arched when his fingers hit the perfect spot. “The Promise?” she gasped when electric waves of pleasure ran through her

“Och, I promise,” he said with a cheeky grin, watching her with a smirk etched, as she shuddered and went limp beside him. “I dinnae think there is a chance. She’dI could ever deny ye,” he added, giving her one more intense, passionate kiss before pulling the sheets off of them. His long, lean muscles flexed as he climbed out of bed, and she watched his perfect arse as it flexed when he picked up his boxers.

Callum turned around and raised a brow at her, knowing she’d been watching. Shamelessly, she shrugged and slid out of bed, pulling up her scruff comfortable in her skin, which was an entirely new sensation for her.

“I told you that you have a nice arse,” Sophia said with a wink, kissing Callum on the cheek before pushing her back onto the bed to kiss her sensually. She laughed and squirmed beneath him with delight.

When Sophia’s soul had left, so too had many of her reservations and fears. She had a new lease on life, and Sorcha had waited 1,337 years to finally be here with Callum.

And there was no way she was going to squander one more second

she bared
her side, but
she had
been shy to

The End

the man
through
any thing
moved by
years left
to shy

And right now, she wanted Callum. “Make love to me,” she sighed as his fingers stroked along her sensitive, needy flesh.

“I don’t know if we have time,” he said, nibbling on her neck. “Class starts in an hour.”

She groaned and arched when his fingers hit the perfect spot. “Then later. Promise?” she gasped when electric waves of pleasure ran through her body.

“Och, I promise,” he said with a cheeky grin, watching her with rapture as she shuddered and went limp beside him. “I dinnae think there is anything I could ever deny ye,” he added, giving her one more intense, passionate kiss before pulling the sheets off of them. His long, lean muscles flexed as he climbed out of bed, and she watched his perfect arse as it flexed when he picked up his boxers.

Callum turned around and raised a brow at her, knowing she’d been watching. Shamelessly, she shrugged and slid out of bed, perfectly comfortable in her skin, which was an entirely new sensation for her.

“I told you that you have a nice arse,” Sophia said with a wink, making Callum chuckle before pushing her back onto the bed to kiss her senseless as she laughed and squirmed beneath him with delight.

When Sophia’s soul had left, so too had many of her reservations and fears. She had a new lease on life, and Sorcha had waited 1,337 years to finally be here with Callum.

And there was no way she was going to squander one more second of it.

The End

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[Where the Stars Lead \(Book 2\)](#)

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[For Love of a Laird \(Book 1\)](#)

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[Maid for the Knight \(Book 3\)](#)

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About Mia Pride

Mia is a full-time mother of two rowdy boys, residing in the SF Bay Area. As a child, she often wrote stories about fantastic places or magical worlds, always preferring to live in a world where the line between real and fantasy didn't exist.

In High school, she entered writing contests and had some stories published in small newspapers or school magazines. As life continued, her love of writing grew. So one day, she decided to end her cake decorating business, pull out her laptop and fulfill her dream of writing and publishing novels. And she did.

When Mia isn't writing books or chasing her sweaty children at the park, she loves to drink coffee by the gallon, get lost in a good book with her family and drink really big margaritas with her friends! Her favorite place is the Renaissance Faire, where you can find her at the joust, roasting the shirtless highlander in a kilt.

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Once Upon a Haunted Knight

Elisa Braden

Once Upon a Haunted Knight

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Chapter One

August 1832
Morecock House
Lancashire, England

“**H**AVE YOU A man, Mrs. Black?” The *creak-thud, creak-thud, creak-* Mrs. Crosby’s crutches slowed. The housekeeper peered at Addy on her shoulder. “Mrs. Black?”

Addy dragged her attention away from the elephant tusks mounted on the wall above the billiard room door. She’d been *Mrs. Black* for less than a day—a courtesy afforded to housekeepers, not maids—so she’d nearly missed the question.

“A man for what, precisely?”

Mrs. Crosby arched a brow. “If you must ask, then I have my answer. The *creak-thud* rhythm resumed, along with her brisk instructions: Bootle delivers supplies from the village on Fridays. He can assist you with the heavier tasks. Your duties are keeping Mr. Whittaker’s collections tidy and arranging for repairs.”

Addy followed the woman she’d been hired to replace into a corridor lined with Egyptian masks, Greek busts, and a bizarrely buxom goddess statue. “Morecock House appears quite sound. Didn’t you say renovations were completed last year?”

Pausing, Mrs. Crosby replied, “Yes. They were necessary after the Flood? The house sat on a small rise surrounded by flat lawn, meadows, and wooded hills. There wasn’t a lake or stream for a mile in any direction.

“Mr. Whittaker travels a great deal,” Mrs. Crosby continued. “Mrs. Whittaker are rarely in residence. If they return during your employment, I suggest hiring temporary staff from Lancaster.”

Lancaster was a half-day’s ride. She could walk to Morecock Green in minutes. “Why not from the village?”

Rather than answer, Mrs. Crosby led her into a parlor decorated floor to ceiling with paintings of exotic animals. There was even a portrait of Mr. Whittaker riding a camel like a heroic steed. Addy marveled that she would choose to have herself immortalized looking that ridiculous. The wealthy were a mysterious breed.

"Dust every item weekly," Mrs. Crosby advised. "I recommend a schedule of five rooms per day. Do you cook?"

"Yes."

"Good. You'll be cooking for yourself. The larder, stillroom, and pantries are at your disposal. Give Mr. Bootle a list of anything you require." Addy jangled as she moved back out into the corridor. "The groundskeeper managed by the land agent, Mr. Evanston. They're here Saturdays and always provide you with wood and fresh game." They passed a green drawing room where a marble sculpture of Zeus stood beside a full suit of armor. The armor looked like two chums wagering on a horse.

Addy had been a maid since age sixteen. She'd worked her way up from hauling kitchen scraps out of a Liverpool scullery to collecting a Countess's baroness's bed linens for washing. She'd scrubbed, waxed, and polished. Her arms were sleek with muscle and her hands rough with calluses.

Dusting Mr. Whittaker's peculiar assortment of curiosities could properly be called a job. She'd have no maids to manage, no mistress to please, no menus to discuss with the cook. There was no cook. No butler. No footmen. No servants at all. She'd be entirely alone here, answerable to an absent land agent, doing less work than she'd done as a chambermaid.

So, why were they paying her a housekeeper's wages?

The *creak-thud, creak-thud, creak-thud* of Mrs. Crosby's crutches as they passed into a long portrait gallery. Addy wondered how the "flood" had broken her leg. She wondered why the villagers had gone silent when she'd told them she was the new housekeeper at Morecock House. She wondered why she'd been hired without an interview.

But this position was a rare stroke of good fortune in an otherwise luckless life. Addy wasn't brave enough to question it.

At the end of the gallery, they passed a set of paneled doors. The *thud* rhythm quickened, but Addy's pace slowed. "Mrs. Crosby, what is in there?"

Creak-thud, creak-thud, creak ... thud. The housekeeper stopped.

her shoulders stiffened. “The library.”

Portrait of Addy adored libraries. The hush. The solitude. The scents of
t a manpaper, and beeswax-polished wood. She tried the latch, but it was lock
he very “Don’t.”

Addy frowned at the woman who’d gone parchment pale. “Why?”
mend a “A little advice, Mrs. Black.” Mrs. Crosby glanced down at her l
lips twisted bitterly. “Resist all curiosity. Do not relax your guard. An
open that door.”

d cellar

” Keys

ers are

nd will *September*

g room

he pair ADDY’S RESISTANCE LASTED a month. It was the books. Always the book

On a drizzly Tuesday, she was climbing down from the stepladde
ip from gallery when a ball of orange fluff brushed her ankle. Hands on hi
heshire grinned at the long wall between the library and the staircase.

ed until “Three hours, Princess. We’re finished for the day, and it’s not ye
I’d say well done, but sadly, you were of little help.”

uld not The cat nudged Addy’s shin with an imperious shoulder. Absently
tress to bent down to give her a stroke—which put the library doors squarely
utler or vision. They taunted and beckoned, promising wondrous worlds fa
only to from her own.

id. She brushed her brown woolen skirt and tried to ignore the com
that had been hounding her for weeks. But the rain outside pattered
echoed And she’d finished her work early. And nothing rivaled the plea
woman curling up with a cup of tea, her new feline companion, and a roo
it when stories.

se. She “What do you suppose is in there?” she asked the cat. Princess an
with another nudge and a loud purr. “Besides books, obviously. I
herwise gives dire warnings about books.” Addy nibbled her lip. She fingered l
of keys, clinking them together. “Libraries need cleaning, too.”

creak- Princess didn’t reply, but she did crouch into a pounce position in
room is the doors before attacking the fringe on a nearby carpet.

Addy took it as a sign. “I’ll just peek inside.”

ed. Her “Rewl.”



She sorted through the keys, trying one after another. “No one will
leather, In and out, quick as that.”

ed. “Rawl?”

“You needn’t come along if it frightens you.” Finally, she found
that clicked.

eg. Her “Rowl.”

d never “Don’t be cross. I’ll only be a moment.” She opened the doors.

Inside, the air was stale, the room dark. But the scents of leather
and old wood reached beyond the dust. She drifted deeper. It was large
library, larger than the green drawing room. Every wall was lined
shelves and every shelf lined with books. Most of the furnishings—
table, a pair of sofas, four tall chairs, and several cabinets—were draped
white sheets. Heavy velvet curtains covered five windows. The room
s. been shrouded, entombed, and forgotten.

r in the “Such a pity,” she murmured. “What have they done to you?”

ps, she Immediately, she set to work. First, she drew back the curtains, clearing
at the dust plumes. Daylight revealed more shrouded furnishings
t noon. corners of the room—a tall urn, a pair of desks, and what appeared
either a mirror or a gigantic painting leaning against one wall.

7, Addy A thready meow came from the corridor. Princess peeked around
7 in her doorframe, her eyes comically flared, her fur standing on end.

r away “Not to worry, Your Highness. The only sinister thing about this library
the neglect.”

pulsion Invigorated with new purpose, Addy removed the shrouds, marveling
l softly. the fine quality of each revealed piece: the fluted walnut table, the
sure of wingback chairs, the glass-door secretary with an old-fashioned quill-
mful of The rosewood and velvet sofas strayed too close to ochre for her taste
she couldn’t fault the craftsmanship.

iswered Of all the rooms Mrs. Crosby could have locked away, this one made
Nobody least sense. The furnishings were lovely, the books numerous, and no
ner ring atrocious oddity or overendowed statue spoiled the elegance of the space.

Folding the sheets carefully to avoid scattering dust, she didn’t
front of Princess had entered until she heard a yowl behind her. The cat had
her claws on the last remaining shroud—the one covering the painting.

Addy hurried to rescue her, but the cat pulled the sheet loose, landing
herself in the canvas. She thrashed and yowled in true feline outrage.

I know. quickly lifted the cloth free, which earned her a furious scratch from the panicked Princess. Addy yelped. The cat hissed and darted toward the

Dabbing her bleeding wrist, Addy called, “Temperamental little mouse, the keyfeed you, you know! You’d have starved if it weren’t for me ...”

Her words ran dry as she caught sight of the portrait Princess unveiled. Framed in dark, carved wood, the painting was at least eight feet tall and five wide. But it wasn’t the imposing size that made her gape.

It was the man.

He was a knight—dark-haired, bearded, and brooding. Dressed in chainmail with steel plating along his shoulders, wrists, and boots, he held a longbow in one hand and a shield in the other. A sword was strapped to his back. A helmet lay in the mud at his feet. Behind him was a castle and a looming storm. He gazed into the distance as though listening for the next wave of attack.

To Addy, he seemed immovable.

“Oh, my.” Impossibly rich colors swirled in strokes of layered paint. Addy could almost hear thunder cracking, hooves pounding, and swords clashing as men battled to take ground. “Who painted you?” she whispered. She glanced at the bottom of the painting, but there was no signature, only a nameplate embedded in the frame.

“Sir Hugh Marshal.”

Eyeing the man’s towering stance, ferocious frown, and iron shoulders, she quirked a smile. “You’re quite the formidable figure, Hugh. But you’ve a dollop of dust on your beard.” She retrieved a step ladder and a cloth then gave him a gentle swipe. “There. Much more dignified.”

A plaintive meow sounded behind her.

Climbing down, she chided Princess, “If you were a better mouse, you wouldn’t be so hungry all the time.”

“Mow. Row. Rewwwl.”

“Very well, I accept your apology.” She chuckled. “But perhaps we should apologize to our new acquaintance. We’ve disrobed him with a noticeable lack of ceremony.” Casting a teasing glance at the tower, she nodded toward the cat. “Pray, forgive us, kind sir. Her Highness, the Princess of Pillownia doesn’t know her own strength.”

“Rowl?”

Addy sighed. “She only knows her own appetite, which is bottomless.”

om the Princess swished her tail back and forth in a lazy arc. She purr
door. wound herself around Addy’s ankles.

beast. I “After more salmon, are we? I shall ask Mr. Bootle to bring ext
now on.” Shifting her attention to the portrait, she frowned. “Perhaps
ess hadhelp me move this, as well. It would benefit from better light.”

ght feet She began gathering up the folded sheets and stacking them
corridor. Then came the dusting, shelf by shelf, book by book. By t
she finished, daylight was dimming, Princess had vanished, and
n chainstomach grumbled its emptiness. “I suppose I should start dinner. No
an axePrincess will give me another scratch if I delay any longer.”

up. His Having finished her work, she started to leave the library. Nothing
& storm.have halted her. Except ...

tackers. *You forgot to introduce yourself.*

Whimsical and strange, the impulse tugged like a tide. Slowly, she
int. Shein the doorway and retraced her steps. Feeling like an absolute nin
lankingaddressed the man in the painting. “I suppose it’s only right. I kno
ed. Shename, after all.” She dipped a curtsy. “Mrs. Black, at your service.”

a brass Introductions complete, she retreated.

No. It wasn’t sufficient. A ticklish pressure in the back of he
prompted her to reveal more. *What a silly goose you are*, she chided
nassivetalking to cats and paintings. Clearly, she spent too much time alone.

ire, Sir Yet, she found herself pausing. Answering. “Adeline Black. Frier
red herme Addy.”

h more The pressure eased. She shook off an eerie shiver and left Si
Marshal to enjoy the sound of the rain.

er, you



October

aps we

with anADDY DIDN’T KNOW when she began imagining his voice. She only
ing Sirtheir conversations were less infuriating.

: Royal In the weeks after unlocking the library, she took her mid-mornin
the desk nearest Sir Hugh’s portrait. After her work was done, she
back to curl up in one of the leather wingback chairs, where she co
ess.” Princess and wallow in a tale of romantic adventure. After dinn

red and returned to the library to read before bed.

Unfortunately, Sir Hugh took her cozy silence as an invitation from interrupt. Repeatedly.

That odd, ticklish pressure to converse with her imaginary persisted until it felt as natural as her own thoughts—which it was, of in the He wasn't *real*. Addy knew that. The man was likely a figment of a time painter's imagination.

Addy's She'd seen renderings from the medieval period before, and to doubt looked nothing like them. Her last employer, the Cheshire baroness displayed a panel from the thirteenth century in her grand hall. The should had been much simpler and flatter. Sir Hugh's painting resembled baroness's grandest portraits from the last century.

Addy was letting her imagination run away with her; that was returned every time she resisted the compulsion to return to the library, a penny, she would grow into longing and longing into pain.

What could it harm to indulge in a little fancy? she decided. It was if she was spoiled for company. The villagers treated her with apprehension and pity. They spoke of Morecock House as one might see a graveyard. The only living creatures she encountered routinely herself, Princess and Mr. Bootle. She'd seen Mr. Evanston once to receive her and the conversation had been ... puzzling.

"Anything broken yet, Mrs. Black?" he'd asked, looking haggard man under thirty.

"No, sir. Mr. Whittaker's collection is in superb condition."

"Splendid. But I was asking about you."

She'd blinked her confusion. "Me?"

"Any limbs broken? Burns or mishaps?"

"No, sir."

He'd nodded. "Take care to avoid injury, even if your work suffices it."

Addy didn't quite know what to make of that.

She likewise didn't know what to make of Sir Hugh Marshal. She tried to imagine his voice as booming and gravelled, a match for his dark rushed. But in her stubborn mind, it simply wasn't. Instead, his voice equated expertly played violoncello—resonant and velvety.

His manners, on the other hand, were more like a rusted gate.

she'd taken to calling him Sir Rude.

tion to *Are you a widow?* he asked during this afternoon's reading of *Ivan*.
She poured more tea and slanted him a glance. "Rather a presun
knightquestion."

course. *Answer me. Plainly, you are unwed. Widow or maiden?* His co
alentedrang with the arrogance she now found vexingly familiar.

She sipped, wincing as hot tea burned her tongue. "It's custom
his onehousekeepers to be addressed as Mrs., whether or not they've ev
ss, hadmarried."

figures *Maiden, then.*

led the "For the love of ..." She closed her book with a snap. "Yes, my
Sir Rude. I am an untried maiden with nary a single lusty impulse.
all. Butvirgins are trollops by comparison. Now, may I resume reading?"

ressure Minutes passed. *You labor as a servant. Yet, you read.*

"As I've explained *several* times, reading is my favorite a
asn't asParticularly when I'm allowed to do so in peace."

mix of *Who taught you?*

peak of "The best man I've ever known."

y were More silence. *His name?*

wages, A pang pierced her heart. "I called him Papa."

Your father tutored you when he should have seen to your marriag
d for a She glared up at his portrait. "I was fourteen when he died, so I
differ."

Princess entered, crossed to display her backside to Sir Rude, the
onto Addy's lap. Setting aside her book, Addy used both hands to
gently beneath the cat's furry chin.

"Who's the best companion in the whole, wide world?" she
"Certainly, the best in this room?"

fers for Princess purred in ecstasy.

"That's right, it's the Princess of Pillownia, Her Royal Highness
Plumper Tufted Hills, the Duchess of Dawdleton, the Marchion
'd triedMissingmice—"

. scowl. *Cease this prattle, woman. You know how it tries my temper.*

d to an Yes, she did, which was why she continued, "The Count
Countingfish, the Viscountess of—"

Lately, *You're making a fool of yourself.*

hoe. “—Voracityville, the Baroness of Birdwatch Bridge—”
'Tis a bloody cat.

aptuous “—the Lady of Lackadaisica—”
And it's male.

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“—Voracityville, the Baroness of Birdwatch Bridge—”

'Tis a bloody cat.

“—the Lady of Lackadaisica—”

And it's male.



Chapter Two

November

FOLLOWING THE SHOCKING revelation that the Princess of Pillownia hid ballocks amid her—or, rather, his—long orange fur, Addy wondered might be going mad.

How had he known?

Or, rather, how had she? Perhaps she'd spotted the anatomical anomaly passing but failed to register it until that afternoon. Yes, that was it.

Sir Hugh was a figment of her imagination. He must be.

With her dust cloth hovering over the bosom of the overendowed goddess, Addy muttered to herself, "He's not real." *Swipe, swipe.* "He's not real."

She dragged the stepladder into the billiard room, where Princess refused to answer to a more dignified name—chased a ball into one billiard table's pockets. The cat's ballocks now mocked her incessantly.

And the pressure to return to the library grew hour by hour, day by day.

Just as she finished polishing the elephant tusks, the pressure reached fever pitch, as though he roared her name from three rooms away. Moments later, she unlocked the library door and swept inside. "Leave off your insufferable blunderbuss!"

Where have you been? he bellowed.

"Here! Cleaning!"

For a bloody fortnight?

"Keep shouting at me, and it will be a year!"

He quieted. *Calm your temper, woman. You're turning ruddy.*

Heaving, she glanced toward the ornate mirror above the fireplace. Normally, she was paler than a sheep in a blizzard, and her black hair appeared even whiter. But now, her face glowed red. Only fury turned her this color, which happened so rarely that it might as well never happen again.

The same might be said of her ranting at someone. Addy avoided

at all costs. She couldn't afford the risk.

Squinting up at his portrait, she saw only layers upon layers of oak surrounded by dark wood. "I'm imagining this." She swallowed and descended into madness."

A fanciful nature isn't madness. Read less and cease indulging in titles for the cat, and mayhap you'll find a husband.

Once again, his rudeness sparked her ire. "Firstly, I'd sooner wed a woman than a man, and seeing as you're in my head, you should know that. Secondly, my madness produced you. Naturally, you'd wish to deny it. Deny it? He laughed. *Proof enough that you know nothing of the world if she Madness is a paradise compared to sanity. The only troubling thing is that it never lasts long enough.*

Stricken, she stared at the fierce, dangerous warrior above her. He may in like a man who would drive others to seek refuge, not seek it himself. Shouldn't her own invention match her expectations more than they contradicted them? She loathed confrontation, loathed being interrupted while reading, loathed domineering men with an unnatural fixation on her 's not." unwedded status.

—who Her dream knight would have been gallant and courtly. At the very least, she would have made him more pleasant than a rusted spoon scraping across china.

day. "How—how did you know Princess is male?"

ached a *I have eyes.*

oments Her breath quickened as she examined those eyes more closely. Her eyes were green. "Who painted you?"

Nobody.

She traced a finger over the frame, felt the hashed symbols and various knots. "Are you real, Sir Hugh?" Her voice shook.

For an eternity, she didn't think he would answer. Then he did.

Aye. Though, I wish to God I weren't.

replace.

ir made

ned her *December*

at all.

conflict "ARE YOU A ghost?"



No.

oil paint Addy laid another medieval history tome on the growing pile. "I've demon?"

No.

in daft "An angel?"

The sound in her head was half grunt and all scoff.

my cat "We'd save a great deal of time if you would simply tell me why you are."

." Silence.

e state. He'd been far too silent of late, refusing to answer her questions, ignoring her litany of cat titles, forgetting to disrupt her reading. He hadn't spoken to her in weeks. Apart from a raw request that she read aloud when she worked, he scarcely spoke at all.

himself. But that was his mistake. The quieter he was, the more determined he became.

interrupted She crossed the room to search the walnut secretary. Someone—on her Mr. Whittaker—had stashed research materials about Sir Hugh Marshal every corner of this library. Addy meant to find them all. She bent in at least, twisted to look for hidden levers.

ing good *What are you doing?*

"Secretaries often have clever little crevices. One merely needs to know where to apply pressure." Her fingers found the tiny latch. *Click.* The panel at the back popped open. "Ah, yes." She grinned at him over her shoulder. "There's the spot."

A warm, ticklish sensation touched her nape. She brushed it away.

Cleaned a great many secretary desks, have you?

writhing "Not really. My father was a cabinet maker." She withdrew a stack of papers and sorted through them until she found what she'd been looking for—a letter from a scholar at Cambridge describing his findings about a portrait. "That's everything Mr. Whittaker mentioned in his journal."

Her employer's research about Sir Hugh Marshal was sparse. Whittaker had purchased the portrait from an estate in Sussex following the painter's drowning death in a garden fountain. Before that, the portrait had hung inside a notorious gaming hell and brothel, which had burnt to the ground while the portrait remained unscathed. Before that, the portrait had survived a shipwreck off the coast of France.

According to Whittaker's rushed, sloppy notes, provenance is unreliable. "A painting went back at least two centuries, perhaps more. Its past was murky and information about its subject murkier. Even the descriptions changed from time to time, causing Whittaker to speculate that there might be more than one infamous portrait of Sir Hugh Marshal.

Addy nodded toward the pile of papers and books on the desk. "Are you certain you won't tell me your story before I embark on this odyssey of unnecessary research?"

Sir Hugh maintained his brooding silence.

Ignoring him, she sighed and glanced out at the swirling snow. "Very well. I'll be out at a return in a few hours."

As near as she could tell, "Where are you going?"

"To the kitchen. It's Christmas, you know."

And she said, "More silence."

"Princess will be positively unbearable if his meal is delayed. He is—likely the demanding sovereign."

Two hours later, she returned carrying a large tray laden with her favorites: roasted goose with a marmalade glaze, buttered parsnips, pies, plum pudding, and spiced wine.

"I've no earthly idea how I'm meant to eat all this alone," she announced as she placed the tray on a table, dragged the table in front of his portrait, and retrieved a chair. "Perhaps you'd be so kind as to keep me company over her, Hugh."

What happened to your hand?

She glanced at her linen-wrapped left palm. "The knife slipped while I was preparing the parsnips."

A pile of papers on the desk. "A tense pause. *You're bleeding.*"

Waiting for a response, she said, "Indeed, the bandage was spotted red. She closed her fist. "It's nothing certain to heal in a few days. Now, you haven't answered me. Will you join me for dinner?"

Whittaker said, "He sighed. *Have I any choice?*"

Reverent, she said, "No. But, as my father was fond of saying, our worst hardships have become our greatest triumphs if we attend undesirable duties with the same vigor as the desirable ones."

Waiting had been a test. He didn't respond at first, but after a long minute, he grumbled, "The food grows cold."

for the She sat, took a bite of the goose, and moaned in pleasure. “Forgive me for being a bit hungry, dipping another forkful into the tangy orange glaze, she chuckled. “I’m a bit famished.”

the more Between bites, she spoke as she might with a friend—if that required her to carry both sides of the conversation. “Where am I from? Are you so glad you asked, Sir Hugh?” He hadn’t, of course. “I was born in Lancashire, twenty-two years ago today. Yes, I was a Christmas baby, was I?”

No answer. Perhaps he suspected her aims.

I shall “Apart from rainy autumn mornings, this might be my favorite winter weather. The snow makes the world feel soft and clean, don’t you agree?” She thought of the idea if he could see the windows from there, but as she was conversing with herself, she supposed it didn’t matter. “Did you celebrate Christmas last year, Sir Hugh? I confess, much of my knowledge of the medieval period’s customs comes from fiction. Of course, that presumes you hail from that time. Do feel free to correct me.”

all her He held his silence, but she sensed his vexation growing.

the mince She bit into a mince pie, humming with pleasure. “Good heavens, Bootle’s new spice merchant is exceptional. The cloves fairly dance on my tongue.”

ait, and Ticklish heat washed across her skin as though someone held a candle near her face. She brushed away the sensation, tracing her fingertips across her forehead and jaw. It moved to her lips. She dabbed them with her napkin.

while she continued, refolding her napkin several times to disguise her nervousness. “I think he’s developing affections for me.”

Unexpectedly, this prompted a response. *Who?*

ing. I’ll “Mr. Bootle.”

me for *What makes you think so?*

“Little things. He compliments my hair. I can’t imagine a plainer complexion than coal black. He adds small gifts to my orders and pretends they’re for me. Last Friday, it was a bottle of rosewater. The week before, a salve for chapped hands, which he’d noticed were chapped from the cold. I suppose those are mere kindnesses.”

ed, *Eat,* His silence felt thick and heavy in the room. Perhaps Sir Hugh would believe her.

ve me.” She continued, “He invents unnecessary tasks as an excuse to
d. “I’mUnfortunately, I can’t convince him to enter the library, let alone h
move your portrait, so it hasn’t proven useful.” She finished her p
: friendconfided, “Last Sunday, Mr. Bootle argued with Mr. Evanston over w
m? I’mthem would walk me home from church. In the end, they bo
here inFortunately, they’re young and fit, so I wasn’t slowed too much.”

oe. And *How young?* The words sounded grinding. Dark.

“Under thirty, I’d say.”

Has either offered for you?

weather. “Offered ... marriage?”

had no *Aye.*

ng with “Heavens, no. As I’ve said, I don’t want a husband.”

with a *Foolish woman. ’Tis not about wanting. ’Tis about protection.*
periodtempt a man long enough, he will break.

Please “Don’t be silly. I’m hardly a beauty. Mr. Evanston is a gentleman

Mr. Bootle has many fine young ladies in the parish to choose from
quite handsome. Goodness knows what he finds fetching about me

ns. Mr.shrugged. “I’m certain their interest will wane once they realize—”

on my *God’s bones, how you try my patience. Have you ever met a
male?!*

idle too It was his first bellow in forever. She blinked at the portrait. Had
r throatabove the castle always been forked with lightning? And when had a
sword attached itself to his hip?

ly bill,” Princess entered the library, providing a welcome distraction. A
suddenwound around her feet. She gave him a stroke. He rewarded her
purring arch. “Mew.”

“Oh, dear, you need a pillow, don’t you?” She stood to retrieve one
the sofa and plopped it on the floor.

After settling on his rightful cushion, Princess nuzzled her
er colorrepeatedly and purred louder. “Mow.”

errors. “You’re most welcome, Your Highness.”

for my After his outburst, Sir Hugh descended once again into brooding
e mightCold settled in with the night’s dark, making her shiver. Addy drank h

by the fire and attempted to lead him into a discussion of period-app
i didn’tpainting techniques.

He would only say, *I know nothing of this, woman. Leave me be.*

linger. Nodding, she carried her tray to the kitchen and washed up while F
elp meattended his business outside. She brushed away the snow from his fu
oie andhis return, urging him to lie in his bed near the hearth. Then she v
hich ofupstairs to the library, moved the table and chair back into place, and
th did.the fire.

Lifting her lantern high, she said softly, "Goodnight, Sir Hugh.
Christmas."



January

If you "DO YOU HAVE all your parts?" Addy dipped her ginger biscuit into her
took a nibble. "This book claims you were beheaded by Henry VIII
in. Andnow seeking eternal vengeance."

n. He's *Then your book is rubbish.*

e." She Slowly, she dusted the crumbs from her fingers and hid a smile. T
was. Finally. "I thought you had decided I was unworthy to be i
bloodyexalted presence."

Nothing unworthy about you, woman. I was training.

the sky "Axe or sword?"

second *Both.*

She reached for another biscuit but stopped when her shoulder scr
The catHissing in a breath, she cupped the injury.

with a *What's amiss?*

She shook her head. "A small accident. I tripped over Prince
ie frommorning and took a bad fall. Luckily, he wasn't hurt."

But you were. Show me your injury.

ankle "Don't be silly. It smarts a bit when I move. Or breathe. Or think
too much." She waved dismissively. "I'm fine."

Show me.

silence. "Tell me what year you were born."

er wine Silence.

ropriate "Very well. I shall resume my research."

Not that her research was getting her very far. Nobody knew w
painted the portrait. Nobody knew who Sir Hugh Marshal was, let alo

Princess his portrait was associated with so many disturbing occurrences.

ir upon The Cambridge professor's letters named several possible Sir entured Marshals from different periods. One was an eighteenth-century lan banked who'd bankrupted himself while constructing a "towered castle" in

That Hugh Marshal lacked both a knighthood and good sense.

Happy Another was a fourteenth-century English knight known as the S of Scotland for leading brutally brief sieges during the Scottish V Independence. Little was known about him apart from a few ment reports to King Edward III.

Despite the portrait's armor being "reflective of the High to Late Ages," the professor argued that Sir Hugh's identity was "far more lik obscure, Tudor-era nobleman by the same name. Given the painting's tea and influences, he surmised an eighteenth-century artist had view and are nobleman's execution as an injustice and portrayed him in a more guise to convey "covert dissatisfaction with monarchical tyranny."

Obviously, Cambridge professors weren't as astute as one hoped. here he She put away the useless volume of Tudor history and opened an : in your of the Scottish Wars of Independence. Just as she began a chapter Battle of Bannockburn, Sir Hugh returned to interrupt her reading.

You must leave this place, he said grimly.

"No, thank you. I quite like this position."

I'm in earnest, woman. Leave and do not return.

reamed. She clicked her tongue. "You'd say anything to avoid answering simple questions."

If I satisfy your curiosity, will you leave?

ess this "No. But I shall consider your arguments for why I should."

She could almost hear the jangle of his chainmail as he paced. A questions.

about it "When were you born?"

All Saints' Day.

Rolling her eyes, she clarified, "The year, Sir Rude."

I never asked.

"Surely you know the century."

A pause. *I became a page in the year of our Lord 1308.*

who had She'd read that most knights began their training as pages between why seven and ten, which put his birth around 1300. She glanced down

book. “Were you at the Battle of Bannockburn?”

1 Hugh *If I were, we would not have known defeat.*

downer Arrogant man. “Were you the Scourge of Scotland?”

1 Kent. *Scourge? Mayhap. I only heard the Scots call me by one name.*

“What was that?”

Scourge *Death.*

Vars of It took a moment to catch her breath. He was real. A real knight.

ions in medieval warrior. A real man. “H-how did you die?”

I didn’t.

Middle “Why are you still alive, then?” She shook her head. “And living i
ely” an painting?”

rococo *’Tis not a painting.*

ed the “What is it?”

heroic *A prison.*

She stood and moved closer to him. Tracing a curious finger o
frame, she gazed up at the hand that gripped the axe. Long arms thi
account muscle seemed capable of crushing full-grown men. Broad, straight sh
on these seemed impossible to bend. A rocklike jaw bespoke a will of granite
eyes promised death to all foes.

He looked indomitable. She couldn’t imagine this man being caged

“What happened to you, Sir Hugh?”

In stark tones, he told her his story. It began in summer, at the star
g a few second War of Scottish Independence. Tasked with capturing a s
stronghold adjacent to both a river and the sea, Sir Hugh had lain sie
castle held by the MacLellan clan.

He and his men killed the castle’s chieftain on the first day, leav
sk your man’s widow to lead the Scots’ resistance. On the third day, English
breached the walls. Sir Hugh took the castle in less time than it had tak
to travel there from England.

He imprisoned the widow in one of the castle’s towers. She’
valuable hostage, should negotiations become necessary, he thought. I
was a highborn woman, proud and delicate. He offered her every con
which she was accustomed: her bed and furnishings, books to re
favorite foods, any materials she required for her interests. She
en ages permitted to leave her chamber or speak to anyone but him. Otherw
at her was treated more as an honored guest than a prisoner.

Sir Hugh held the castle for three months. During that time, he communicated with the widow rarely, as her grief and rage unnerved him. She tore at her hair. She attacked his guards until her hands bled. She ranted and screamed at all hours.

Finally, on a cool September morning, she went silent. Her screams ceased. Her demeanor transformed into that befitting an educated woman of a real noble birth. Now, when she summoned him, she was subdued but courteous. She apologized for her madness, vowing to trouble him no more. Evidently, her new interest in healing those who had survived the siege, she requested the herbs and ingredients for medicinal remedies.

Hoping his hostage had found a more peaceful pastime, Sir Hugh granted her any substance she asked, provided it wasn't poisonous.

Forty days later, on All Hallows' Eve, he awakened inside his prison, an exact replica of the castle he'd conquered. This castle, however, was devoid of life. No birds. No people. No cats or horses or insects. Nothing but darkness with except him.

He had every comfort he was accustomed to: his bed and furniture. Whatever food he desired, his armor and weapons, a library filled with books and maps. Acres of wooded grounds surrounded the castle, though the forest existed beyond them.

In the great hall stood an enormous pane of polished black glass through which he could view his old chamber and the confusion of his men strategically discovering his disappearance. None of them could hear him, though he roared and screamed. Nothing could break the glass, though he pounded with his strength.

For weeks, he thought he'd died and landed in purgatory.

Near the end of December, he discovered the truth when the Maiden widow appeared on the other side of the black glass. Calmly, she explained that the Douglasses had retaken the castle for the Scots, slaughtering him without mercy. And Sir Hugh's curse was to watch from his cage. But she history forgot him.

She said she'd given him every kindness he'd given her, and she would take every precious thing he'd taken from her. All hope. All kindness was freedom. She described the terms of his curse, explained that hope was to return every hundred years, only to be snatched away again.

Eyes glowing with a mad fever, she ordered her men to load the

turned the tapestry onto a boat headed for France.

out half His last glimpse of her was her nose dripping blood into a gleeful
wailed She turned ashen. Collapsed. And the MacLellan widow went to join
her husband in her own eternity.

attacks He saw centuries pass, witnessed the world beyond the glass chamber
of bizarre ways. His library continuously acquired new volumes. Any book
the virtuous world outside could offer, Sir Hugh need only request it. He watched
nothing listened, read and studied. His language changed. His knowledge grew
and he so did his despair.

Every hundred years, he hoped the curse might break.

granted This time, surely it would break.

It never did.

on—an Addy collapsed into a chair. “How—” She covered her face and gasped
devoid catch her breath. Her hands fell away. “How do we break it?”

reathed *We? There is no we.*

“Of course there is. Just tell me what I must do.”

ishings, *Run as far away from me as you can. Forget I exist.*

1 books “No.” Tears choked her. She shook them away. “Leave you imprisoned
nothing No. I won’t.”

You must.

through “Why?”

n upon The room filled with a thunderous pall. *Because every person who
e raged tried to help me is dead. If you don’t leave, you’ll be next.*

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The room filled with a thunderous pall. *Because every person who’s ever tried to help me is dead. If you don’t leave, you’ll be next.*



Chapter Three

February

ADELINE BLACK REFUSED to leave him. And Hugh wanted to wring her or kiss her.

He hadn't decided.

This morning, he practiced swinging his axe to pass the time until she arrived. The weapon's whooshing slice and familiar weight calmed his nerves. A step, a feint, a swing. Switching hands, he pictured the curse as a man who had bruised her shoulder and cut her palm. With an explosive heave, the axe flew end over end, arcing toward the far wall. *Thunk*. It embedded in a wooden training pell near the great hall's fire.

Breathing heavily to clear his fury, he wiped sweat away with his sleeve and checked the window for signs of her. The orange cat sauntered before turning to flaunt his hind end in Hugh's direction.

He nearly chuckled. Every bloody time.

Hugh supposed he shouldn't complain. His own routine consisted of watching Adeline, waiting for Adeline, distracting himself from thoughts about Adeline, and fantasizing about bedding Adeline until neither could walk.

He was beginning to suspect he had a problem.

"Good morning, Sir Hugh," she sang as she swept into the library.

He glared down at his body. Predictable as the sunrise. Granted, he had had a woman in five centuries. But this was bloody embarrassing. It was as if she was the loveliest woman he'd ever seen.

Her skin looked like fresh, warm cream, that was all. Very well, but her hair was also pure onyx. Her fingertips had the daintiest little calluses he had ever seen. And her waist was curved precisely to fit his hands.

It wasn't as if her every breath made him harder than his lance. Very hard it was. But it wasn't *her*. He was simply starved for a woman. Any

would do.

As long as she looked like Adeline. Spoke like Adeline. Was Adeline. Bloody hell, he had a problem.

“Oh, you’re a bit dusty today. Here, let’s tidy you up.”

His mouth went dry. Not this. God, not this.

She dragged her ladder into place, climbed to the top rung, and started to reach his frame.

Which put her bosom squarely on display. Pressing. Mounding. Piled up above her modest neckline. She diligently pursued every speck of dirt on his neck—every crevice imaginable. Wriggling. Stretching. Huffing.

“... asked Mr. Bootle for his assistance again after church, but he was dreadfully superstitious.”

Until she Her hips swayed back and forth like a pendulum with every swipe. He brushed her hair. *Aswing. Swipe, swing. Swipe, wriggle, swing.*

And who “... discovered a note about Scottish curses in a traveler’s guide to the Cape Colony. I shall never understand Mr. Whittaker’s atrocious scheme. Who puts an insulting letter from a cousin in the same drawer as an unpaid night soil bill?”

His shirt’s If Hugh could reach through the glass, he’d pull her into his arms and take her on the floor. Mayhap she’d forgive him for rushing her. But she’d claw his neck and demand more.

Mayhap he could quench himself enough to stop thinking about her. Instead of She sighed sweetly and climbed down to beam up at him with twinkling comely gray eyes.

One of them Mayhap one bout of quenching was overly ambitious. Floor quenching followed by a round or two more in his bed and several more in the morning. Much more sensible beginning.

“Will you take tea with me, Sir Hugh?”

He hadn’t For what felt like the thousandth day in a row, he battled himself against the temptation. “Aye, woman. But only if you read to me.”

Her grin could light a bonfire. “Done.”

Her hair
would ever



Try well, *March*
woman

“YOUR FATHER MADE the secretary desk?” Hugh sat facing the black wood, absently polishing his sword. But this new revelation made him pause. He first examined the impressive piece in question then eyed the woman. Her cat with slow, lazy strokes of her callused fingers.

“Mmm.” She sipped her tea with perfect nonchalance. “He retched fondness for walnut. The grain, you know. He also made the dining table with fourteen chairs. I’m not certain where Mr. Whittaker purchased the remaining six, but he was fleeced. Those are stained birchwood, a cheap imitation at best.”

Hugh glanced behind him at his own furnishings, each piece constructed from trees he’d felled and milled himself. They were the equal of her work, but it had taken him a century to master the necessary skills.

“Why didn’t you say he crafted such fine pieces?” he asked.

She shrugged. “It didn’t seem important. You’ve likely never heard of a man named Thompson and Black. His business partners moved the workshop from Lancashire to London years ago.”

“Business partners? “He was prosperous, then.”

“One might say so. He furnished many of the finest homes in England, Scotland, and Wales.”

This explained her education, her refined speech, her love of reading. A wealthy man would want to give his daughter the advantages afforded to gentlewomen. But why was she laboring as a housekeeper?

“Does his company still exist?”

She kept reading, ignoring his question.

He took another tack. “Is your mother still alive?”

Her delicate jaw flexed. “No.”

“I take it your father neglected to provide for you upon his death.”

He wasn’t prepared for her response. Mottled crimson bloomed from her collarbone to her hairline. She lifted her gaze, glaring at him with scornful fire. “My father was a saint in a world packed to the rafters with liars and thieves. He would *never* countenance leaving his wife and child destitute.”

Sheathing his sword and retrieving his dagger, he endeavored to control his fury. It arose so rarely, he forgot she was capable of it. “I wasn’t impugning his honor, only curious about your circumstances.”

Her lower lip trembled before she firmed it back into place. “The

window, shame in honest labor. If my father left me with anything, it
use. He assurance.” Flush receding, she softened her tone. “I’m sorry if my re
petting was overwrought. I miss him very much.”

“Do not apologize to me, woman. If we beg each other’s pardon for
had aslight, I shall spend half of every hour on my knees.”

ble and Her lips curved into a teasing smile. “I’d like to see that, Sir Rude.
naining Quiet fell as she resumed reading. He eyed the slender leg propp
ation at footstool. Her swollen ankle was bandaged for bracing.

“I slipped,” she’d explained earlier. “Bit of a strain. It’s nothing.”
structed He was weary to death of her insisting her injuries were nothin
father’s roaring at her to leave only made her more determined to stay.

“Listen to this,” she said, straightening to read from the book in l
“*That which we celebrate as All Hallows’ Eve and All Saints’ Day is
ard the traditions of Gaelic-speaking Scots, called salmon.*”

op from Hugh stopped polishing his dagger to frown at her.

“*Folklore suggests the veil between the world of the living and th
things as one draws closer to salmon.*”

ngland, He cleared his throat. “Saw-win.”

“Bless you.”

ding. A Stifling his amusement, he clarified, “’Tis pronounced differently
rded to appears. *Samhuinn* is the day. Salmon is a fish.”

“Oh. Saw-win. Thank you.” She smiled at him and took another
tea. “The author claims some Britons and Celts performed mystical rit
as prophesying or casting enchantments during *Samhuinn* to increas
potency a hundredfold.”

“You’re wasting your time with that nonsense.”

“I disagree.”

om her Of course she did. Her stubbornness rivaled that of the most dogge
orching he’d ever battled. “Have you begun seeking a new position yet?”

ars and Once again, she ignored his question. “Here, it says that the dim
daughter barriers facilitate communication from both directions, making
between this world and the otherworld particularly acute through the
alm her November. Afterward, however, the barrier strengthens to its utmost.”

ugning “If you don’t intend to marry, you must secure a new position.
important, woman. Your safety relies upon it.”

re is no She read silently.

is that “Adeline.”
response Swallowing, she finally glanced up.
“Please.”
or every A mournful crinkle appeared between her brows. “I’m afraid I c
that, Sir Hugh. My heart cannot bear to leave you.”
”
ed on a



April

ng. But
“HERE WE ARE, Mr. Bootle,” Adeline told the strapping blond man s
her lap, coaxing through the library doors. He was younger and handsomer tha
; *in the* had expected. Whenever Adeline wasn’t watching, his eyes strayed
bosom.

Hugh’s hand flexed into a fist. Where was his axe? He had a
ie dead yearning to swing it into something skull-like.

“See? Perfectly normal,” said Adeline brightly. “Nothing t
whatsoever.”

“If you say so, Mrs. Black.” Bootle nodded toward Hugh. “Is t
than it painting you wish me to move?”

“Yes. Just over to that wall there. I want him to have a view
r sip of windows.”

es such “Him?”

se their A shaky smile touched her lips. “The portrait will show to
advantage in good light. That’s all I meant.” She fingered her keys. “I
will be easier, too.”

Bootle nodded. “Aye, then. Let’s have done with it.”

d Scots Minutes later, Hugh could see less of the library but all five windo
Adeline beamed. “Well done, Mr. Bootle! Well done, indeed.”

inished Panting, Bootle gave her a sheepish grin. “Perhaps you’d conside
contact a ride with me on Sunday? My mother says she won’t mind acti
first of chaperone.” He held a hand over his heart. “You’re the best

Lancashire, Mrs. Black. Miss Glover might be prettier, and
This is Hemmings’s father says if I wed his daughter, I can have all his cows.
girl is finer than you.” Swallowing hard enough to bob his Adam’s
Bootle made sickly sweet calf eyes at Adeline.

Hugh stalked to his wooden training pell and yanked his axe from the wall. His first swing beheaded the thing. His second severed the trunk from the head. He wished it had ballocks. Those would have been the first thing to go if he hadn't done it. Bootle stuttered, "I—I'd be the luckiest man in Morecock Green if I could consent to—"

Hugh hacked apart the pitiful remains of the training pell until only wood was left but splinters.

"Oh, dear," said Adeline. "Was that a knock at the kitchen door? I'm a bit afraid I've been neglecting my other duties." She thanked Bootle for his help and steered him out the doors with the assurance, "I'll see you on Sunday." Hugh eyed the gleaming blade of his axe through a haze. He'd killed a fair share of men. But never had he wanted blood this badly.

When she returned, she was as calm as ever. Hands on hips, she asked, "Was it you causing all that racket?"

He didn't answer. He couldn't. Violence still pulsed with every heartbeat. "Sir Hugh?"

He scraped a hand down his face. "I'm here."

"How do you like your new perspective?"

"'Tis better. My thanks."

Another beaming smile. She glanced around the room and nodded. "Well, the way, I can sit nearer the fire and be close to you at the same time. We'll be much cozier."

Slowly, he paced to the weapons cabinet he'd built a decade ago and stored his axe away. Then he returned to the window. Bracing himself against the frame, he watched her pottering about the room, moving her favorite chair and footstool into a "cozier" position. It didn't take long for the last of his rage to drain away.

"You're so quiet today," she commented, plumping a pillow for herself and one for the cat. "Have you decided to divulge what you know about breaking the curse?"

He huffed a dry chuckle. She didn't lack persistence; he'd grant her that. "No. I haven't completely lost my senses in the twelve hours since you Missinquired."

But no, she clicked her tongue. "How is it senseless to help me free your apple, your prison?"

"Adeline. I don't wish to quarrel again."

ee. His “If I’m able to break the curse, then it can’t harm me any longer.
ie base.be free, and I would be safe.”

. “The curse wasn’t meant to be broken. It was meant to punish n
f you’dfalse hope.”

“How do you know that?”

nothing He debated lying to her or simply refusing to answer. But nothin
said thus far had persuaded her. Perhaps the truth would. “Would you
or? I’hear what happened to the first man who tried to help me?”

his help She blinked. “I suppose so.”

lay.” “He was loading me onto his cart. One leg was trapped inside the
lled hisThe other had somehow threaded itself through a nearby fence. Li;
struck out of nowhere. The carthorse bolted. He was torn in half.”

chided, Gray eyes rounded in horror. Callused fingers hovered over her so
“Th-that’s gruesome.”

artbeat. “Aye. Even more so to watch it happen to a dear friend.”

She brushed at her skirts and gathered her composure. “That
mean—”

“Shall I tell you what happened to the second person who tried
me?”

l. “This Only a nod.

ll be so “A Florentine collector. Jovial fellow. Dreadful taste in wom
mistress went mad and ran him through with a fire iron.”

go and She swallowed hard.

is hand “Then she burned his villa to the ground to disguise her misdee
ing herportrait was the only thing that survived. His brother transported n
, for thevault, where I remained for the next fifty years.”

He didn’t want to do this, but he needed her to understand.

er chair “Care to hear about the third person who tried to break the curse?”

v about This time, she didn’t bother nodding.

“Bloody good man for a Frenchman. He managed to get furth
ier that.anyone before had. Loaded me onto his ship. We sailed for Scotland, t
/ou lastwe’d defeated it. How could we fail? We were so close to victory.” I

his eyes, recalled Jean-Claude’s rollicking laugh. He’d been the h
u fromdrunkard Hugh had ever known. The bravest friend. “A squall came
nowhere. The ship sank. I watched him drown while he tried to save m

The vacant stare. The pressure of deep water. Two years of ocean

. You'dhe saw the shore.

Hugh scrubbed his face and focused on her. Always her. "Look at me with When she did, her eyes were swimming.

"This is what awaits you if you persist. The Scots called me De you, that is all I will ever be."

ng he'd Rather than retreat, as any sensible woman would do, Adeline like toswayed softly toward him. She reached out to lay a callused hand aga window. Through her tears, she smiled. "As usual, I'm afraid disagree."

wheel.
ghtning

ft gasp.

doesn't

to help

en. His

ds. My
ne to a

er than
hinking
He shut
appiest
out of
ie."
before

he saw the shore.

Hugh scrubbed his face and focused on her. Always her. “Look at me.”

When she did, her eyes were swimming.

“This is what awaits you if you persist. The Scots called me Death. To you, that is all I will ever be.”

Rather than retreat, as any sensible woman would do, Adeline Black swayed softly toward him. She reached out to lay a callused hand against his window. Through her tears, she smiled. “As usual, I’m afraid I must disagree.”



Chapter Four

May

“WED MR. BOOTLE?” Adeline laughed. “Don’t be silly. I’m not marrying anyone.”

Hugh had never been more frustrated. The thought of encouraging a woman to marry that gawping dullard sickened him. But he’d tried everything—silence, a week of raging, a day or two of arguing, and his stratagem of convincing her to pursue another man. Nothing worked.

She continued her “research.” Continued pretending the bruise on her temple from a “minor scrap with the scullery door” didn’t hurt. Continued chatting away as if he were a sullen youth who would eventually emerge from his black mood.

“You’ve declared your opposition to marriage before,” he said.

“Yes.”

“That’s a precarious position to take.”

She smoothed her skirt and arched a brow. “Not for me.”

“Care to explain?”

Sighing, she plucked a geographical reference from a nearby shelf and sank into her favorite chair. “Do you know what happens to a woman when she marries, Sir Hugh?”

A thousand visions flooded his mind—most of them involving a woman lying beneath him, gasping in rhythmic pleasure. He braced an arm behind his head and looked out the window. “I’ve a rough idea.”

Paging through her book, Adeline said, “She disappears.”

That wasn’t what he’d been thinking.

“When a man marries, he gains a wife but loses nothing. He may even offer all of Mr. Hemmings’s cows to sweeten the bargain.” She turned a page. “A woman, on the other hand, loses her very identity. She becomes now merely an appendage of her husband, so everything that is hers before

his, legally speaking. In a good marriage, this is no matter. A husband for his wife and her property as he cares for his own beating heart, knowing that to injure her is to injure himself.”

She lifted her gaze to lock upon him, steely gray and immovable.

“But not all men are good, Sir Hugh. Some whisper false assurances of care for you,’ they promise. ‘Don’t worry, dear. You haven’t a hundred numbers. Let me handle everything.’ Some men view a woman’s vulnerabilities as targets. They lay siege, take what doesn’t belong to them, discard what they no longer have a use for, and boast about their new acquisitions at a neighbor’s soiree.”

He’d known there was something in her past, a kernel of bitterness that had emerged from time to time. “Who did this? Did he hurt you?”

Her gaze fell. “Not me. My mother.”

After her father’s death, she explained, she and her mother had inherited shares of his cabinet-making business. As Adeline was only fourteen years old, her shares were placed in a trust managed by her mother.

“Papa always took care of us. Even after he was gone.” She continued fondly. “He asked his partners to advise her, left instructions and funds to maintain our home and an ample income. But Mama was ... weak. She was being a widow, having to make so many decisions on her own.” Adeline turned to gaze out at the morning rain. “She was a ripe target for a man like David Oxbridge.”

Adeline described how Oxbridge had ingratiated himself with her over the course of months, offering “assistance with any tasks she found herself and burdensome.” Meanwhile, using the fortune he’d acquired from his firm, Oxbridge had purchased a five-percent share of Thompson and Blackwell, one of the business partners, granting him access to all the company’s accounts. He’d used this knowledge to win her mother’s confidence. Before long, she was favoring his advice over that of the other partners.

“Then they married,” Adeline continued, “and soon, the ruse was obvious. He treated her no better than a potted plant.” She released a huff. “Worse. I think he might have watered a plant.”

“What happened?”

“My mother fell ill. He ignored her. Why bother with a sickly wife who spends funds on a physician?” Her hands fisted in her lap. “She died in the summer. For the rest of my life, I don’t think I shall ever smell honeysuckle.”

id cares without remembering that day.”

nowing His arms ached to hold her. He pressed his forehead against the feeling the unnatural, pulsing hum. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

She nodded and blinked away tears. “Upon her death, I became I es. ‘I’llward. As my stepfather and her husband, he took command of my tr ead for of course, her shares were his. But he had a problem. The trust my fat oman’s constructed for me expired upon either my twenty-first birthday or u o them, marriage. At that point, the shares became fully mine in the first inst fortunemy husband’s in the second.”

Hugh didn’t like where this was going. “He sought to marry you of ess that A slow smile. “Now you’re thinking like a marauder. Clever ma He selected an elderly gentleman who’d lost his faculties, someone h control easily.” Her grin broadened. “Unlike me.”

herited “Gave him trouble, did you?”

en, her She laughed. “I like to think so.”

He shoved away from the glass to pace. “When did you leave?”

smiled “Three months after my sixteenth birthday. It was the night ds. We engagement ball. I must admit, I relished the thought of his humiliac e hated almost made ceding my inheritance worthwhile.”

Adeline “Did he pursue you?”

ian like “A few halfhearted efforts. But David is fundamentally a lazy n had what he wanted. And I contented myself with knowing he would motherwonder when I might reappear to spoil his party.”

und too “Why haven’t you?”

st wife, She went quiet. Her eyes slid away.

lk from “Those shares are yours by right. Your father wanted you to have t

ledgers “I know.” Her voice weakened to a whisper. “But it would be ice, and fight. David has every advantage—funds, solicitors, a majority share . company, years to plan and bolster his position. He has my hou became goodness’ sake. Who am I? A glorified chambermaid. I wouldn’t a bitter where to begin.”

Hugh felt all his old warring instincts come alive. Finally, a b could help win. “Look at me, Adeline. Come, sweetheart. Look at me.’

e? Why She swiped a knuckle beneath her eye then focused on him.

died in “We begin where any good battle starts. We’ll map our ground. P ysuckle attack. Learn our enemy down to the blisters on his feet.”

“Oh, Hugh.” A tear slipped free. “Of course you would say that. For the glass, is what you do.”

“True. But you’re stubborn to the point of lunacy. That’s an advantage David’s most foes can’t plan for. Holding ground when saner warriors would retreat and, down their arms? Refusing to surrender when all signs point to your death? You’ll drive him to the edge, woman. He won’t know how to cope with you.”

She chuckled and traced a finger over her side of the window. “Different. When I fight for you, it’s easy.”

“Because I’m so charming?” he said dryly.

“No. Because imagining myself without you is a pain too hard to bear.”



June

HUGH BURIED HIMSELF in stacks of dry estate law—literally. He was forced to step over a pile of legal tomes just to fetch a cup of ale.

“Twenty-two years as of last Christmas, aye?” He took a drink and frowned at the labyrinthine text.

“Yes,” Adeline answered, coughing at a cloud of dust from the draught always

“Among your father’s old solicitors, are there any you trust?”

“One or two, perhaps. But I don’t know if either will remember me.”

“Which one is more intimidating?”

She took longer than usual to answer. “Mr. Brown. Very stern. He’s taller than Mr. Bootle.”

Hugh stifled a visceral flinch at the mention of Bootle’s name. “Start with Mr. Brown first. If he’s reluctant, move to your second choice. Ideally, for both men. You want to begin with a show of force.”

Her attention wandered as she busied herself opening every window in the library. “It’s stifling in here.”

Indeed, her cheeks were flushed, though the rest of her was her usual pale white. Now that he looked closer, he thought her lips might be paler, too. She covered a sneeze with her dust cloth then used it to fan herself.

The cat entered to wind around her feet. “Good afternoon, Your Highness,” she said, her words slurring strangely. “I’m surprised you

fighting outside menacing the birds.”

The cat yowled for attention.

Adeline stooped to pet him as she'd done countless times. Her head lay flattened. She listed to one side and caught herself against a desk.

Hugh shoved his book away and leapt to his feet. The ale spilled to deal some pile toppled. He didn't care. "Adeline? What's amiss?"

She straightened with a raspy chuckle and waved him off. "A bit. That's that's all."

Instincts screaming, he stalked to the window. "Sit down, woman. Tell me what you're feeling."

"Nothing." She staggered to her chair, sitting with a heaviness he'd never seen. "So hot. Aren't you hot? It's stifling in here."

He glanced at the open windows. Trees fluttered on a gentle breeze. The sky was overcast. "Something is wrong. Adeline, you must see a physician. Do you hear me? You're ill."

She didn't hear him. She slumped against her chair's wing. Her eyes closed. Her breathing shallowed.

"Adeline!" he roared. He pounded the window. "Wake up! Adeline! For hours, he pounded and raged, his fists bloody, his throat raw, his voice gone. He begged her and begged her and begged her to open her eyes. She didn't. Not that day or that night. Not the following morning.

Bootle found her.

"Fetch a physician, man!" Hugh shouted, though it was only a faint whisper by now. "God, please!"

Bootle scooped her up, kissing her forehead and murmuring assurances. Then he carried her out of the library. Out of Hugh's sight.

And left Hugh on his knees begging for mercy that would never come. He couldn't



down in

July

story

THE FIRST MONTH without her, he couldn't leave the window. Not to sleep, not to eat or bathe. Not even to change his shirt. Half of him wished he could die, but that had never worked before. Trenchers of food, piles of clothing, pitchers of ale appeared against his wishes. His prison liked to keep him

physician said I was insensible for a long while. By the time I awaking toward was too weak to leave my bed.” Her gaze dropped to her hands. With a faint smile, she confessed, “All I could think about was returning to you.”

All she could think about was him—while she lay dying. His legs gave out. He collapsed to his knees and hung his head. Everything he’d feared, everything he’d warned her about was here. Death was coming unless he stopped her.

“It’s going to kill you, Adeline.” He had to force air past his throat. Unspeakable words from his lips. “It came too close this time. It won’t happen again.”

She absorbed his statement silently.

“I am begging you, sweetheart. Please.” His voice ground in her chest, echoing off the stones of the great hall. “Please leave me before you go outside.”

Tears spilled down her white, thin cheeks.

“If you live, I can last another five hundred years. Knowing that you were full, that you were loved, that you had babes and a dozen ridiculously titled cats. That will see me through.” She wrapped her arms around her middle and rocked back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth.

A stiff “But if you die because of me, I will disappear into the madness and never return.” He pressed his forehead to the glass. “Do you want that?” She shook her head.

“You must go. Please. You must.”

With agonizing slowness, his beautiful woman struggled to her feet. He laid a kiss upon her callused fingers and touched where his head was buried.

Without another word, Adeline Black walked out of the library and toward Sir Hugh Marshal to begin his eternity without her.

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“It’s going to kill you, Adeline.” He had to force air past his throat, force unspeakable words from his lips. “It came too close this time. It won’t miss again.”

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Tears spilled down her white, thin cheeks.

“If you live, I can last another five hundred years. Knowing that your life was full, that you were loved, that you had babes and a dozen more ridiculously titled cats. That will see me through.”

She wrapped her arms around her middle and rocked back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth.

“But if you die because of me, I will disappear into the madness and never return.” He pressed his forehead to the glass. “Do you want that?”

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Chapter Five

September

ADDY WAS SURPRISED by how much her body had recovered considering her heart was missing. Four weeks after conceding to Hugh's plea, she sat in her small chamber near the kitchen, folding her last few garments into her valise. She was still exhausted after walking into the village early in the afternoon. But she'd wanted to say goodbye.

Her deepest regret was for Mr. Bootle, who was a fine man deserving her love. Sadly, she had none to give. She'd encouraged him to pursue the adoring Miss Hemmings. The girl's cows were only her third most attractive feature.

Princess protested Addy's closed door, so she opened it for him. Immediately, he leapt onto her bed then stretched out on her neatly folded stockings. She didn't have the heart to admonish him. Instead, she picked him up and snuggled him for as long as he would tolerate. Finally, she fell through the motions of their bedtime ritual.

She prayed this night would be different, that she wouldn't ache so badly or weep for quite so long. But as Princess's purring warmth cupped her back, Addy lay in bed staring at her packed valise and swiped away at her

Daft tears. What did they solve?

Tomorrow was the first of October. Starting in the morning, she would take the letter of reference Mr. Evanston had given her and begin looking for a job somewhere new. Perhaps Bedfordshire. Or Hampshire. She'd heard good things about Hampshire.

She wiped her cheeks on the edge of her blanket.

All this moping over a man who lived in a portrait. "Such nonsense," she said, sniffing through a clogged nose. "He doesn't have arms to hold me or a mouth to kiss me. Or eyes to see how much I ..."

She curled into a ball, aching unbearably. This couldn't go on. It had to

death had already come for her; she just kept moving through her days hadn't.

"Perhaps we need one last visit, Princess. For finality." Her quickened as she contemplated her new—and brilliant—idea.

Would he be as she remembered? Would she hate him now? Perhaps time apart had diminished her affections for the man. His beard, for example. Would it tickle when he kissed her? Perhaps she would loathe the serf who had once loved her. Who could say? She hadn't contemplated the question more than a few times. A farewell visit could be just the thing she needed to bring her without regrets.

She tossed aside her blankets and stuffed her feet into a pair of slippers. She didn't bother with a dressing gown or a cap for her wild hair. She hurried that bearded man to fall out of love with, and there was no time for dawdling.

Pausing only long enough to light a candle at the kitchen hearth, she hurried through the dark house and up the staircase. She took the long hallway at a near run. Halting at the library doors, she rested a hand on her throbbing galloping heart.

How strange to feel it beating again.

She thrust open the door and strode inside. His portrait was there, but she didn't sense him nearby. Disappointing. Yet now, she could examine his plucked flaws without him being present.

Yes! Her second brilliant notion of the night.

Setting her candle on the corner desk, she peered up at his beard. It was quite so long enough to be dark and thick but trimmed neatly enough to be handled. Drat. She still found the beard dashing.

What of his eyes? She dragged the footstool in front of the portrait and climbed up to examine them more closely. A perfectly ordinary color would be green. Leaves were green. Grass and leaves were positively every color again. She tilted her head. She supposed his eyes were more like evergreen than lovely. With steel spikes. And morning sunlight. Spikey evergreen boughs on a sunny morning. Before a battle. Requiring a man of strength and heart.

A man like no other.

"He is," she sighed and traced a finger over his lips. Even they were attractive. Or a Not perfect, mind. A scar split the lower one. It only made her want him more.

Adeline?

as if it Quickly, she withdrew her fingers.

You shouldn't be here.

breath She tucked her hands behind her back, feeling like a thief caught
act. "I came to bid you farewell. I'm leaving tomorrow."

ps their A lengthy pause. *What are you wearing?*

ample. She glanced down. Her chemise was translucent in the candleli-
isation, could probably see her nipples. Strategically, she draped her hair o-
v dozen bosom. "I—I was in a rush."

k away *You might as well be naked, woman.*

lippers. "Nobody is here. Well, except you. And Princess. He doesn't give
for my appearance." She glanced behind her as the cat in question
e had ainto the room. "Isn't that right, Your Highness?"

ig. "Mow. Rewl."

th, she She reached up to fuss with her hair. She must look like a wild c
gallery with her hair falling loose to her waist.

ver her Another lengthy round of silence. Was that a groan?

She cleared her throat. "I've arranged with Mr. Evanston to trans-
to the south drawing room. There are no locks on those doors, so you
but she tended regularly, and the view is vastly superior."

him for *Are you chilled?* His voice sounded raspy. *You look chilled.*

She frowned. A roughened voice. Signs of delirium. Could a ma-
enchanted prison fall ill? "I'm much improved," she assured him
. It was recovery has been remarkably swift, in fact. The physician ca-
dsome. 'miraculous.'"

*Aye. You appear hale and ... bounteous. By God, woman. You
rait and ceaseless torment.*

: Grass Her head snapped back. "That's a fine thing to say to me—"

ywhere. *I didn't mean—*

oughs. "—after I troubled myself to come here in the dead of night—"

is on a *'Tis only that you're standing there on full display—*

. *—to visit a prisoner in his cell before my departure—"*

—and I'm not made of stone. He paused. *Despite appearances
ractive. contrary.*

to kiss She raised her chin. "My aim was to fall out of love with
Congratulations. You're helping immensely."

Silence.

“It wasn’t even necessary to dislike your beard.”

My beard?

“Likely it would chafe when we kissed, anyway. I’d walk constantly flushed and swollen from the friction.” She sniffed. “Really good thing you drove me away. My skin thanks you.”

I didn’t drive you away—

“Well, it certainly wasn’t my choice.”

’Tis for your safety. You know that.

“My safety would be secured if you would simply tell me how to reverse a figthe curse.”

I’m not having this argument again.

“It’s the most rational course. I know the remedy has something with transporting you to Scotland. But there’s more to it. Why won’t you create a remedy?”

Because of this. You’ll never let go if you believe you can save me.

She threw her arms wide. “Precisely! You said yourself that you’d persevere for my persistence.”

Admire? Woman, you’d terrify any sane man.

“Now I recall why I dubbed you Sir Rude.”

She sensed him beginning to pace. *Mayhap you could find a way to warm me in an blanket. Anything.*

1. “My skin is colder than usual.” In fact, her right side felt chilled.

Have you retained a solicitor yet?

“No.”

You must, Adeline. You’ll need allies.

She glared at him, her fury rising. “Why should I fight? I’m supposedly a mighty warrior, the Scourge of Scotland, the bringer of order. And yet, you’re content to forfeit our most critical battle without so much as a volley.”

She wondered if it was her rage making the room seem brighter. Her eyes turned to the knight. “If a legendary knight cannot overcome his cowardice, then why should I?”

“Do not bloody speak to me of cowardice. You haven’t lost the battle. You haven’t watched good friends die before your eyes.”

“I am not your friend!”

Then what are you?

“The woman who loves you! The woman whose heart you’re tearing apart about asunder by refusing to fight!”

“Yes, it’s a woman,” *Adeline*, he said hoarsely. *Surely you know that in tearing you apart asunder, I am grinding my own to dust.* His voice sounded close, as if he stood a breath away. *I love you beyond all sanity, you mad, stupid beautiful woman. If I thought we had a chance of winning the war, I would ...* He paused, his energy shifting ominously. *Adeline, why is this so breakbrighter?*

She frowned. Turned. And recoiled in horror. “Dear God. It’s on fire!”

Finally, the smell of smoke registered. It was a thick, black smoke billowing down to dowrthing against the ceiling. The heat she’d dismissed earlier blazed like you tell blacksmith’s furnace. Flames raced to the top of one wall and engulfed the top of another.

Frantically, she scanned the room. “Princess!” she cried. “Princess, where are you?”

He was nowhere to be seen. But he’d been there. The brass candlestick she’d brought with her lay toppled on the floor next to a pile of books and wax. The fire had spread from the corner desk, using a pile of pillowcase as kindling.

Get out, Adeline! Hugh roared. Go now! Run!

She shook her head, panic seizing her throat. “I can’t. It’s already too late. The doors are closed.”

The windows, then. Open the windows.

“It’s thirty feet to the ground.”

No matter. A broken leg won’t kill you, but fire will.

She scrambled off the footstool and edged closer to the nearest wall. As if the flames sensed her intentions, they snaked their way along the wall as much as like an undulating dragon. Heat burned her skin to a blistering point. She recoiled as it drove her back toward Hugh.

“It’s no use,” she panted, wincing at the pain in her hands. “I can’t do anything.”

Surrounded on all sides but one—the side with his portrait—she realized this had always been her fate. It arrived with utter terror, but she knew she had to do something more.

Love.

She turned to face him. “Don’t watch, my darling.” Her eyes filled with tears.

would do nothing differently.”

tearing NOOO! God, please, no! The concussive noise of his pounding to metallic pang, as if he struck a steel wall with his blade over and over.

her heart She flattened herself against him, laying her cheek where his heart was if he be. Flames licked closer, seeking to devour. Seeking to kill.

unborn, “It’s all right. This is not your fault. I would die ten thousand times in a fight, I meant I had a chance to love you.”

the room Incoherent roaring sounded in her head. She wasn’t certain whether it was the fire or him.

there.” “Close your eyes,” she whispered. “Don’t watch.”

monster A strange sensation hummed beneath her cheek. An anguished, low like roar sounded in her ear. Her hands felt cooler, as though they rested against cold metal. Then they hummed, too.

What an odd feeling, she thought. Like sinking into cool, rushing water, where a vise gripped her wrist. Her body wrenched forward through water like a waterfall. Suddenly, she was being squeezed from head to toe against something powerfully muscular. And very, very loud.

whispering “... mad, impossible woman!”

she and a She blinked. Her head was being taken between a massive pair of lips. Hugh crushed her lips with his own. Her chin tickled by a dashing beard.

in front Red, frantic eyes caught hers as the mouth and beard retreated. Her eyes were red. Bloodshot evergreen.

She began to shake. Blinking up at the man she’d only ever imagined, she reached up to stroke his beloved face. “H-Hugh? Am I dead?”

“No,” he growled. “But I might kill you for being so bloody red.”

He kissed her. Then his mouth claimed hers again, and Adeline decided it didn’t matter how she died. Living or dead, she’d landed in heaven.

Adeline. She



Adeline

HUGH WASN’T GOING to make it to the bed. He wasn’t even sure he could make it without disgracing himself before he managed to strip away her flimsy nightgown.

She felt softer, tasted sweeter, and aroused him more than he’d probably ever been. More than his Adeline-starved senses could stand.

Adeline. “I

He thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, earning himself a feminine look on a face and a hitch of surprise. His hands roamed from her delicate throat collarbone, instinctively feeling for injuries. She had none.

But she did have bosoms. Lovely, ripe, sweet bosoms with hard, pointed nipples. He groaned against her lips and cupped one in a shaking hand.

He wasn't going to make it. God's bones, he wasn't going to make it.

She moaned and clasped his hand tighter, rubbing against him to increase the friction. "Hugh ..." Her breath washed hotly against his beard. "I'm ..."

She clasped his other hand, tugged it over her other breast, and forced him to squeeze. "Ooooh," she moaned. "That's so—heavens-gritted better."

He didn't mean to shock her. Later, he'd be appalled with himself. The urgent, lustful haze made chivalry seem ridiculous. He lifted her.

Warning, stalked to his pallet of sheepskin and woolen blankets, and what felt to his knees.

She squeaked, gripped his neck hard with both arms, and opened her mouth to another invasion. She even sent her tongue out to dance with God, she was delicious.

He only allowed a momentary separation to strip her nightgown from her dark, luscious body and pull his shirt off over his head. Her eyes flared upon his nakedness, so he quickly distracted her with more kissing.

His palms slid over her firm, plump breasts, chafing and squeezing the pebbled pair of raspberry nipples until she moaned for him again.

He wasn't going to make it. He felt the urgent pain in his groin, the ache of all the centuries he'd spent waiting for her. His Adeline. His "impossible woman."

Laying her flat beneath him, he frantically kissed a path down to her responsive nipples, flushed and swollen for his tongue. He suckled, stroked, nibbled and laved. All the while, he hoped it was enough to satisfy her.

He shoved down his hose and pulled out his cock, which raged and avoided starving monster. Spreading her thighs wide, he used the blunt tip to stroke the swollen folds hidden within inky curls.

Slick.

Wet.

She was gasping, panting like a bellows. Her nails scored his neck.

ne gaspback arched high.

to her He wasn't going to make it.

He pressed against her tight, virginal opening, letting her feel his poutingunderstanding her flare of alarm.

. He wasn't going to make it.

it. He surged past the tiny barrier, taking her flinching grunt into his increaseHe sank into his woman with ecstatic triumph. His. She was his. No 'I thinkcould be sweeter.

ist, and He wasn't going to make it.

—much She closed around him, fist-tight and rippling with uncertain welco

He wasn't going to make it.

But an He went deeper because he *needed* to be deeper, even though he withoutpained her, as any virgin would be pained. Even though she gritted her lroppedand wriggled her hips and tried to reposition herself to take him more

If he could speak, he would have told her there was nothing easy about ed her He wasn't going to make it.

with his. A stroke. Another. Another. She relaxed a bit. Widened her thighs.

He wasn't going to make it.

om her His thrusts quickened. Her teeth gritted harder, and her thighs a seeingagain, her knees bending.

He wasn't going to make it.

easing a "Hu-Hugh."

He wasn't going to make it.

e agony Deeper. Deeper. He yanked her thigh higher on his hip and to sweet,nipple deep into his mouth. A hard suck. A firm thrust.

He wasn't going to make it.

o those "I think you ... uh ... oh ... hmm. I think it would be better if you ed andfinish without ... ooooh." She gasped. Angled her hips in a way that preparehis ballocks to fire. "That's ... oh, my ... different."

He approached the brink. Truly, he wasn't going to make it.

l like a Between her rhythmic grunts as he pounded faster, he felt ti test herfluttering squeeze. A breathless pause. She stared up at him in wond

Her eyes rolled back in her head. Her mouth opened on a long, low And a seizing cataclysm exploded inside his woman's sheath.

He made it.

ck. Her Just barely.

An instant later, his own explosion ignited in wave after wave of unimagined bliss. He filled her as she milked him, kissed her as she kissed him, loved her as she loved him.

And five centuries of waiting suddenly seemed a small price to pay for the treasure in his arms.

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r moan.

An instant later, his own explosion ignited in wave after wave of unimagined bliss. He filled her as she milked him, kissed her as she petted him, loved her as she loved him.

And five centuries of waiting suddenly seemed a small price to pay for the treasure in his arms.



Chapter Six

October

ADDY'S FIRST FORTNIGHT with the man she loved was both wondrous and educational. Who knew a woman could find so much pleasure in being over a chair, let alone upon a table? Certainly not Addy. She would have guessed lying in the bed might be pleasurable enough, but standing in with her legs wrapped around him while his hands gripped her backs and he thrust with all his strength?

Wondrous indeed.

She also learned more about herself. How much she enjoyed a man with a beard, for example. How good she was at riding astride. Or new and inventive uses for both her mouth and his.

Really, the surprises were too numerous to name.

Another surprise? Sir Hugh Marshal's prison had some redemptive qualities.

"Injuries heal within minutes here," he'd explained shortly after arrival. "The prison won't let me die, so it does whatever is necessary to keep me alive."

Addy had healed just as quickly from her burns and bruises, so she surmised she was subject to the same rules as he was. Which meant she was immortal, like him.

And a prisoner, like him.

On a cheerful note, the food was lovely. The castle was a bit cold and drafty, and the world eerily devoid of birdsong, buzzing insects, or splashing fish. But there was some mild weather—soft rain occasionally increased wind—and day-and-night cycles matched the world beyond the black window. They could wade along a saltwater beach or swim in the sea or stroll through lush woodlands. They could read for hours together in the two-story library.

Hugh's prison was rather pleasant if one ignored the torturous and malevolent design.

Addy couldn't ignore it. This place had driven him into alternating of torturous sanity and deep, numbing madness for centuries. She saw evidence of it everywhere—his cellar full of destroyed furnishings, a cabinet full of vicious weapons, the books he "requested" from his enormous library. No man needed three references on decapitation techniques.

So, on the thirteenth day of her fortnight with Hugh, Addy planned an escape. When he wasn't watching, she'd been testing the black window and pressing her hand against it. She'd discovered that whatever imperious and riddled force contained Hugh inside his prison wasn't so impenetrable for the world to have fact, with enough pressure, she could send her hand halfway through a river glass.

And if she could breach the barrier, she could return to the outside world to break the curse. Which was why she had to deceive the man she loved, believing she intended to stay with him.

Her plan began the night before she left.

"I'm curious," she said following a spectacular round of lovemaking in front of the library's hearth. "What did the widow say about breaking the curse?"

He ignored the question at first, shifting her in his lap to lift her breasts to his mouth. Nuzzling the tender flesh with his bearded chin, he chafed her until her nipple readied.

Pleasure surged as always, and she cradled his head against her. "I'm curious," she breathed. "Come, now. Satisfy my curiosity." She swallowed the words. "It's not as if the truth is a danger any longer."

A master of distraction, he slipped his hand between her thighs and felt a pulsating stroke. "Why do you want to know?"

"I told you. Curiosity."

He sighed. "Stubborn woman."

"What if I promise to perform that little trick with my tongue for you, or so much?"

"You just finished doing that, sweetheart. I might need a short rest to fully appreciate an encore."

"Hmm. Point taken." She swirled a finger in his chest hair. Really, a man should have luxuriant, strokable chest hair. "Perhaps I could

solation refuge for your weary manhood while we wait for him to recover his strength.”

“He grinned. “I think he likes that idea.”

She turned to straddle him, sinking to take his not-so-weary hands, his inside. “Better?”

His “aye” became a groan as she squeezed.

She kissed him and whispered against his lips, “Good. Now, tell me what happened here. “The frame must be—God’s bones, woman—returned to the site by the window by was cast.”

“Which is?”

“One of the MacLellan strongholds, Dunlogan Castle. It was destroyed a century after my imprisonment, but Jean-Claude believed the old ruins would suffice. I tend to agree.”

She rewarded him with a slow, rhythmic ride. Not too much, but just enough to get into subtle strokes.

“You learn too well.” His eyes glowed fiercely as he kissed her forehead with his huge hands threading through her hair. “I can’t resist.”

“What are the other conditions?”

“Only one.” He stroked her naked back tenderly, eyes alight with desire. “I must wed a member of her clan.”

She stopped. “A MacLellan?”

“Presumably.”

“Is that everything?”

“Apart from the timeline, aye.”

“Once every hundred years, on or around *Samhuinn*, after which the window closes for another century. Do I have that right?”

Nodding, he gripped her hips and urged her to resume. “You’ve completed your work, woman. There’s more to do.” He gave her a firm thrust.

“Oh. Mmm. Yes.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and settled in to enjoy for a bracing ride. “Never let it be said that Adeline Black neglected her duties.”

rest to



7, every
offer a

ver hisADELINE CROSSED THROUGH the black window into the south drawing room after nightfall with only fifteen days until her deadline. This was going to be a tight.

ardness The fire had—oddly enough—failed to spread beyond the library, and Evanston had transferred Hugh’s portrait here while arranging for the sale. Her first task was to locate Princess. She found the cat in the wicker chair outside the kitchen. As if eager to reclaim territory he’d lost, Princess purred where it hid his head over every inch below her knees. She snuggled and kissed and petted for as long as he would tolerate—a half hour longer than normal.

After seeing to Princess’s bedtime ritual and lighting a lantern, she had journeyed to the green drawing room. Everything in the library was packed on the ground floor, which included most of Mr. Whittaker’s books. But the one she sought was an incredibly old, very costly relic from the thirteenth century—a book of Small, maps for the British Isles.

She opened the case she’d dusted dozens of times and carefully examined the pages. There, along the southwestern coastline of Scotland, Dunrobin Castle. The lettering was odd, but she recognized the topography. She’d been there the past fortnight there, after all.

desire. A tight knot formed as she thought about Hugh. She’d left him sleeping in their bed. She couldn’t bear to imagine how angry and confused he’d be when he awakened.

Mustn’t be mired in sentiment, she thought. There was work to be done.

Quickly, she mapped out her travel route north through Carlisle, just across the border at Gretna, and west to Dunloggan. She could probably make it within the day, but it would be close, especially with a loaded wagon. Which she’d have to load.

haven’t She nibbled her lip and mentally girded her loins for what lay ahead. A hard time for reticence had ended. The time to become a warrior had now begun.

The following morning, she persuaded Mr. Bootle to grant her the use of his wagon and his strapping strength. She’d never done so much lying before in her days.

First, she explained that she’d had a “change of heart” about her current courtship. Then she flirted shamelessly. Then she told him Mr. Whittaker had directed her to transport the gigantic portrait in the south drawing room to a researcher in Scotland for “further study.”

Mr. Bootle questioned none of her dubious claims. He was to

g roomstaring at her bosom and her hair. He trailed her into the south drawing
ing to belike a pup, asking only, “Are you certain you don’t wish me to driv
Black? I’d be more than pleased to—”

so Mr. “Oh, that’s not necessary.” She turned to place a hand on his arm,
repairs.him a soft stroke and a flirtatious grin. Apparently, being thoroughl
oodpilefor a fortnight increased one’s womanly wiles. If she didn’t feel so d
rubbedabout using them on the wrong man, she might be more pleased. “I’ve
ed anddriving since I was a girl. But I do need a big, strapping man of to
l. strength to load big, heavy things into my wagon. You’re the first
rn, shethought of.”

as ash, He swallowed. Licked his lips. “The first?”

ght was “Mmm. The very first.”

ook of Distant thunder sounded, followed by the distinctive sound of
striking stone. A familiar bellow raged, *Woman! If you say one*
amined*provocative thing to this cretin, I’m going to slaughter him.*

inlogan He’d been shouting all morning. In fairness, she had lied to him. *A*
d spent him. And done precisely what he’d told her not to do.

But it was necessary. When it came to saving Hugh, Addy
leepingscruples.

he’d be Using leverage, straps, and a cart, Mr. Bootle managed to load Si
onto his canvas-covered wagon, securing the portrait in place with
done. Then Addy loaded Princess, her valise, several pillows, three blankets
past the small basket packed with smoked salmon and bread.

within a Mr. Bootle held his hat over his heart as he watched Addy drive aw
must be *Everyone you involve in this suicidal endeavor is at risk. You real*
don’t you?

ad. The She directed the horse onto the road north. “I’m taking preca
egun. Aren’t I, Princess? Yes, I am.” She reached into the cat’s pillow ba
e use ofgive him a scratch. Addressing Hugh, she explained, “The less he
g in alloffers you, the more diluted the misfortune. Mrs. Crosby, for ex
merely dusted you for a year. She couldn’t hear you, couldn’t help you
out hismeaningful way, and therefore suffered only a few bumps and bruises
ker hadbreaking her leg. Thus, I shall spread the tasks more thinly. I’ll hire so
om to ato help me unload and a MacLellan girl to marry you.”

How are you planning to pay for all this?

io busy “Mr. Evanston was exceedingly generous during my recovery. I

g roomme thrice my wages and provided for my every need. I suspect he fe
e, Mrs. for me.”

I suspect he wanted to bed you.

, giving “Nonsense. Mr. Evanston is a gentleman. Those flowers and gif
y loved simply his way of expressing regret for my circumstances.”

readful He grunted. *You’re mad if you believe the curse will allow itse
ve been broken. Every step closer is a chance for attack. How can you fail
owering that?*

man I “I do see it. Now, go polish your sword and give me and Princess
peace, hmm?”



f metal

e more THIRTEEN DAYS LATER, after biblical-scale flooding, a grassfire set by lig
three fallen oaks, several urgent digestive complaints, two blizzards
And left maddened bull, and five broken wagon wheels, Addy had to admi
might have had a point.

had no Still, as they crossed into Scotland with one day to spare, si
hopeful. Persistence was its own form of power.

r Hugh She entered the first inn—a fine little place called the Muckle I
ropes. with Princess’s basket under her arm and a belief that persistence
s, and a prevail. Hours later, she questioned everything about her life.

Princess escaped to chase, of all things, a mouse.

ay. Nobody knew of a single unwed MacLellan lass.

ize this, Everyone thought she was deranged for talking to her wagon.

And Addy’s digestive complaint returned with a vengeance.

cautions. As she exited the privy, however, her luck took a turn. A young, f
asket to man with strapping shoulders hovered outside, shifting from one foo
elp one other.

ample, “Evenin’, miss.” He tipped his cap and entered the privy. She wa
in any him, which he found quite strange, and offered him coin to help her tr
before the portrait to an empty plot of land near the coast.

omeone He resisted until she named the sum. “When shall we depart, miss?”

The following morning, at the fourth inn they entered, Addy as
freckled young Mr. Stewart why he’d told her, “There’s nae MacLellan
he paid

It sorrytae speak of here, miss.” The two blind innkeepers were both MacLellan and their daughter, Flora MacLellan, had served Addy and Mr. Stewart with oversalted stew.

ts were “She doesnae count, miss.” He took a bite and winced.

“Is she married?”

lf to be “Nae.”

! to see “Is she a MacLellan?”

“Aye.”

a bit of “Then she counts, Mr. Stewart.”

He squinted across the inn’s taproom at Flora MacLellan clarifying, “She’s ... unpleasant.”

Addy, in turn, clarified that she didn’t give a fig if Miss MacLellan shrew from the bowels of Hades. She would do.

lightning, Flora, on the other hand, took a fair bit of convincing. Nothing good, onegodforsaken quest could be easy. Mr. Stewart’s dislike of the “unpleasant Hughlass” was heatedly mutual. So first, Addy assured Flora that their journey would be short and the terms generous. Flora glared at Mr. Stewart, he washed her arms, and said, “How much?”

Addy named her sum. She’d noticed the shabby state of the inn, Buck—was well off the main roads. She’d also noticed Flora had two blind brothers and several younger brothers to provide for.

Flora’s flame-red brows arched high. She darted a glance at Mr. Stewart who was pushing his spoon around in his bowl with a mutinous expression. “A wee marriage and a quick annulment, aye? I cannae be away long. The lads dinnae cope well with the supper crowds.”

Addy glanced around at the empty inn. “Not to worry. We’ll be back here before the sun rises tomorrow.”

t to the Flora nodded. “I’ll fetch my cloak, then.”

Mr. Stewart drove while Flora rode stiffly beside him. Initially, she seemed hostile. But after he helped Flora down from the wagon so she could transport “find a wee hedge for a wee moment,” the pair fell into a friendlier conversation.

Flora seemed to appreciate the man’s chivalry, and Mr. Stewart seemed to be judging her as less “unpleasant” than he’d thought.

ked the Addy preferred to ride in the bed of the wagon with Hugh. He’d been in a lass’s quiet most of the day. Princess had been keeping him company. Rain had started to fall as they drove west, but it was nothing like the storms they’d

MacLellans, weathered.

Stewart *I'm sorry I doubted you.*

Addy blinked. Hugging her knees for extra warmth, she preferred to speak to Princess, which most considered less deranged than talking to the painter. “Careful. Soon, I’ll have to stop calling you Sir Rude.”

He chuckled. *Don't be too hasty. I'm still vexed.*

Smiling, she murmured, “I know.”

By the time they arrived at the barren, muddy site where Dunlogair had once stood, Mr. Stewart and Flora MacLellan were chatting and laughing like bosom friends. Addy was glad someone was benefiting from this joint-jarring ride.

As dusk arrived while they were unloading the portrait, Addy directed Stewart to lean Hugh up against a large boulder where the great fire in this gargantuan hearth had been. Then he and Flora returned to the wagon with a pleasant lantern.

Addy grinned at Hugh. “We made it, my darling. We’re here.”

The first thing I'm going to do is turn you over my knee.

“Mmm. Don’t promise unless you can deliver.”

Mouthy woman.

Darkness thickened, though the moon was rising. Frowning, she moved toward the wagon, where Mr. Stewart and Miss MacLellan seemed to be having a rather ardent conversation. They glanced up and waved. She waved back politely, saying through her teeth, “How long does it take your mind to fetch a lantern?”

The pair finally headed back toward Addy, lantern in hand. But she hadn’t noticed, something had changed. They were holding hands.

“Mr. Stewart, you may place the lantern there,” Addy instructed MacLellan, if you would kindly step closer to the portrait and speak your vows, as agreed.”

Flora’s proud, beaming grin gave Addy her first chill of foreboding. “I do, Mrs. Black. We’re wed.”

The chill spread. Swelled. Became numbness. “You’re ... what?”

“Adam—that is, Mr. Stewart and I, we spoke our vows. All was well. It’d been proper.”

Mr. Stewart nodded and wrapped an arm around his new wife’s shoulder. “Turns out Flora’s had a soft heart for me since I helped her da repair the wagon.”

roof. She thought I'd snubbed her. Can ye imagine? The finest MacLellan lass north of the border? 'Tis a lucky lad I am."

ided to Addy shook her head. "No. No, it's not legal. It can't be."

ng to a "Course it can," said Flora. "Happens all the time here. Some blacksmith to bear witness, but we have you."

"I didn't ..." Addy couldn't breathe. She couldn't breathe. "I witness anything."

Castle "Aye, ye did. Ye were, what, twenty feet away? Ye looked right at me and waved."

ig from "That's not ... no." Desperately, she turned to Hugh. "Noooo." She brushed away a tear, she stalked to Flora, grasped the girl by the arm, and dragged Mr. Stewart to the portrait. "Speak your vows. Do it now."

t hall's "But I—"

to fetch "This is what I paid you to do. Now, SPEAK!"

Flora complied, though her voice had turned tremulous and wary.

Addy faced Hugh. "Now, you."

Adeline, stop.

"I will not. Say your vows, Sir Hugh."

A heavy sigh. *Very well.* He spoke marriage vows to a MacLellan lass.

glanced And nothing happened.

d to be The wind blew. The rain stopped. The moon rose.

smiled And Hugh's prison remained.

take to In the moments that followed, the new Mr. and Mrs. Stewart retreated toward the wagon. They likely thought she was mad. Perhaps she was. Addy's ears buzzed faintly. She braced a hand against Hugh's shoulder, wondering why the enervating hum felt stronger than before.

. "Miss Stewart, *Come back inside, sweetheart. We don't have much time left.*

ak your She nodded, blinking at the world she must leave behind. Who will take care of Princess? Perhaps the Stewarts. They seemed pleasant enough. "Tis one didn't mind all the cooing.

Addy grieved the children she might have had with her beloved. She grieved the thought of never seeing him become a father or rocking her to sleep. But at least she would be with him. That was what mattered. Perhaps someday, they would find a way to free themselves.

oulder. Stepping forward, she placed her hands flat against the painted wall and pressed. She felt the hum, the cool rush. Then she felt resistance. Mc

clellanbefore. She pushed harder, wedging her boots against the stones for lev

What's amiss?

She frowned. "It's stronger this time. I'm having trouble"—she r
refer ait with her shoulder, bruising herself and gaining nothing—"b
through."

didn't She tried everything—ramming, kicking, battering it with ston
even recruited Mr. Stewart to shove her against the barrier. Nothing v
us andIt was as impenetrable as an iron door.

By the time she realized she was never going to break it, the mo
wipinghigh in the sky.

ged her *It's nearly midnight. Come close so I can hold you one last time.*

Slowly, she went to him and laid her cheek over his heart. Tea
though she didn't feel them. Too numb. Too spent.

*You are the most persistent, resourceful, courageous warrior I'
known, he said gently. It has been the greatest honor of my very long
fight alongside you, Adeline Black.*

She closed her eyes. She could almost feel him stroking her hair.

Soon, you won't hear me any longer.

lass. "I'm keeping you with me. I'm not leaving you."

Adeline.

"No. I don't care if I must steal you away in Mr. Bootle's wagon a
you inside my bedchamber for the next eighty years. I cannot marry a
etreatedso don't ask it of me. I cannot have another man's children. I cannot."

ie was. *You may change your mind. I want you to find happiness.*

frame, She controlled a sob and pressed harder against him. "You
husband of my heart, Sir Hugh Marshal. And though I may never see
hear you or lie with you again, I shall love you and keep you with me
wouldhusband until my dying breath."

ough if *And you, Adeline Black, are the wife of my heart. Though you ma
hear my voice again or feel my arms around you, be assured that I a
knight,That I will have no other. And that I shall love you and keep you as
r babesuntil my dying breath.*

d. And In the distance, thunder cracked. She paid it no mind.

Lightning flashed. She paid it no mind.

ng and Then the hum beneath her cheek grew hotter. The light beyc
re thaneyelids grew brighter. Her hands where they pressed against the windc

verage. toward his.

She opened her eyes.

ammed The frame was alight in a brilliant blue glow. Feeling singed
reakingswelling heat, she stumbled back, catching herself against a crumble
wall. She had to shield her eyes as orange light spiked out in the shap
es. Sheframe's hashed symbols. The canvas caught fire.

worked. But the fire wasn't orange. It was blood red.

The light was too much. She raised an arm to shield her eyes, feel
ion was same blistering heat as the library fire.

Abruptly, everything went quiet. Heat and light vanished. T
stopped. Addy lowered her arm to peer toward the portrait—or wh
ars fell, portrait had once been. Because all that remained was ash.

And a man she thought she'd never see again.

ve ever She lost her breath. She nearly tumbled off the stones. "Hugh?"

g life to He was covered in ash, dusting it from his shirt, his hair, his be
shook himself like a dog. Ash scattered everywhere. "Bloody hell." C
as he waved away the cloud, he looked around the dark landscape
riveting upon her. "God's bones, woman. What did you do?"

She blinked. "Me? You're the one who broke out of a prison!"

He looked around with great perplexity. "Aye, but how?"

nd prop "Does it matter?"

mother, "A bit. I'm curious what happened to my weapons. I was fond o
the axe in particular."

She burst out laughing. Then weeping. She surged to her fe
are thelaunched herself into his arms.

you or He caught her against his chest and wrapped her up ferociousl
e as my "There's my woman," he rasped in her ear. "Back where she belongs."

y never

m here.

ny wife THEY DIDN'T DISCOVER why he'd been freed until they, along w
bewildered Stewarts, returned to the MacLellans' inn. Flora's kindly
served them breakfast while Hugh and Addy discussed the his
Dunlogan Castle.

nd her "The last time a MacLellan occupied the stronghold was before I
ow sank



glanced at the blind Mrs. MacLellan, who listened intently. “Before the English laid siege in 1333.”

by its “Oh, aye,” said Mrs. MacLellan. “I recall the legends. The Mad Stonewidow held the castle in her husband’s stead for seven days.”

of the “Only one day, really,” Hugh muttered.

Addy swatted his arm.

“What? I’m very good.”

ling the Mrs. MacLellan carried on, “’Twas said auld Lady Douglas cur man who killed her man. She was a mad one, for certain.”

thunder Addy frowned. “Lady *Douglas*?”

ere the “Aye, her maiden name. MacLellans wanted no part of her and called upon the Black Douglasses to retake the castle. Bad blood, there.

Mr. MacLellan added from the taproom, “MacLellans countenance witchcraft and such.”

ard. He Addy’s scalp tingled. She caught Hugh’s eye.

oughing “What’s amiss?” he asked.

before “Do you know what my father’s name was?”

“Black?”

“Douglas Black. His great-grandfather changed the surname after moving from Glasgow to Lancaster. Our original name was Douglas.”

Slowly, he grinned. “So, when I wed you, I wed a Douglas lass.”

f them, “I suppose you did.”

et and you gain from this union?”

“Hmm. A strapping set of shoulders?”

y tight. He glanced side to side at said shoulders. “Easily hired.”

“A beard to tickle my chin?”

“Cats are softer.”

“I have it: Strong arms to hold me and a strong heart to love me.”

ith the “Somehow, I think I’ve made the better bargain.”

parents She drew him close and kissed him tenderly. “My darling Sir Hu tory of afraid I must disagree.”

—” He

ore the

cLellan

sed the

ter she

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dinnae

moving

What do

alluses.

gh. I’m



Epilogue

December 1833
London, England

HUGH AND ADELINE Marshal launched their siege of Thompson and I week before Christmas. Among their trusted allies were Mr. Brown, s of Fleet Street; Mr. Edward Thompson, former cabinet ma Knightsbridge; and Mr. Joseph Thompson, former upholste Marylebone.

But as Addy saw it, all they needed was Hugh.

David Oxbridge had been comfortable for seven years. With her r twenty percent, Addy's thirty percent, and his own five percent, I majority share enabled him to pillage the company unchallenged. Cl to lower-quality woods and faster-but-flimsier construction had drive her father's hard-won customers and skilled craftsmen. A once-business became a ruined shell.

Edward and Joseph Thompson were powerless to steer their co back to a prosperous course. When Addy and Hugh arranged a mee propose a siege, the Thompson brothers were overcome with gratitu determination. They'd readily agreed to the plan, offering a trove of and innovations they'd been developing but hadn't wanted to implem failing enterprise. Mr. Brown and his associates drafted the documents advised on David's vulnerabilities—his laziness, his greed, the bitter his victims.

Hugh and the Thompsons visited Douglas Black's finest craftsman by one. He demonstrated his prowess with a chisel and lathe. He de his plans to establish a new workshop in Lancashire with Addy primary shareholder. All ten craftsmen agreed to work for him.

Then they planned their attack on David Oxbridge's stronghold chose their weapons and assembled their army with Hugh as their

commander.

“We must strike with full force and no warning,” he’d explained. “It is better if we can catch our target off-balance. Mutiny from within is a disaster without equal.”

Today, Addy and Hugh entered the house adjacent to Thompson Black’s workshop. The butler showed them upstairs before stopping to address Addy. “I admired your father greatly, Mrs. Marshal.” Casting a bitter glance at the drawing room doors, he said, “May I say how pleased I shall be to see his legacy restored.”

She nodded her thanks. Having worked in household service for Thompson Black a few years, she understood what this man was risking to help them. It was a good measure of David’s character that the butler had so readily agreed. Moments later, they heard the front door open as he departed.

A wave of sudden nausea panged through Addy’s middle. Hugh braced her lower back. She glanced up and smiled.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded.

His eyes lit with a hard, anticipatory gleam. “For Douglas.”

Laying a hand over her belly, she echoed, “For Douglas.”

They found David Oxbridge precisely where his third wife had feared he would be—entertaining his mistress in the drawing room. The black trousers were around his knees, a vulnerable position for any man. The company eyes widened upon their entry. He scrambled to tuck himself away waiting for the mistress’s expression went from boredom to surprise to amusement.

“Jamison!” he shouted. “I said no disruptions!”

Addy’s mind flashed through her memories of this man. He’d once been content in a handsome, tall, and blessed with a false dignity that fooled many. Now Addy’s face now sagged with age. His lean frame had developed a paunch. The silver-threaded hair was down to wisps at the crown. And a man struggling to fasten his trousers had no claim to dignity, false or otherwise.

It wasn’t all bad, she supposed. He was still tall.

She relished his humiliation a bit more than she should. “Mr. Jamison has left your employ. He’s been offered a new position in Cheshire.”

While the mistress made a discreet exit, David stammered and blurted out demanding to know their names and their intentions.

“Hugh Marshal,” her husband replied. “This is my wife, Adeline.”

Raking a hand through his hair, David peered at her. Finally, he spoke. “Evensparked. “Addy.” His eyes narrowed. “Where the devil have you been weapongirl?”

“No need to hide,” she said. “Your ineptitude was ample protection on and He looked at Hugh and lost some color. “You’ve married, then.” solemnly “Indeed.” She looped her arm through her husband’s.

David eyed Hugh’s superior height, superior shoulders, and superior everything. His color tinged somewhere between gray and green. “I want to leave.”

“Oh, we shall,” she said. “But first, we have something for you.”

“What’s that?”

She smiled, picturing her weary mother, her proud father, and a younger self. “Justice.”

Addy hadn’t expected David to weep like a girl who’d lost her position in fairness, Hugh’s battle plan was devastatingly thorough. First, Addy would legally reclaim her shares. Second, she and the Thompsons would make use of an obscure clause Hugh had unearthed in the company’s charter. Thompson and Black could be dissolved with a three-quarters majority vote. What happened that Addy’s thirty percent and the Thompsons’ forty-five percent said headed up splendidly.

Thompson and Black would be shuttered. Its assets would be sold to pay Wastreldebts. In the end, David Oxbridge’s twenty-five percent would result in a pile of precisely fifty-two pounds and a cessation of all future income.

Meanwhile Addy, having befriended his downtrodden wife, encouraged Mrs. Oxbridge to seek reconciliation with her eldest son, who had once been David. This morning, his wife had left him to reside with her son’s father. But his Bath.

Additionally, several of David’s swindling victims had retained the services of Mr. Brown and his associates for filing lawsuits on grounds of contract fraud.

David would be beggared within a year.

Upon delivering news of his grim fate, Addy and Hugh departed Lancashire to resume their new venture: Marshal & Douglas, Cabinet Makers, Upholsterers, and Upholsterers of Fine Furnishings. Their specialty was library furniture. As investors, the Thompson brothers took an advisory role, but Hugh actually ran the business. Hugh had already completed a large order for a C

gnitionbaroness, which had given them funds to purchase a home near Lancas
hiding, Technically a castle, the house was a bit worn around the edge
tower was missing a window, the staircase was missing a banister, a
1.” kitchen was missing a floor. But it sat between a river and the sea.
woodlands surrounded it on three sides. And the library was two storie

Hugh was keen to begin working on the bookshelves. Addy was
superiorfurnish their nursery.

ant you On Christmas morning, she sat curled up with her husband bes
library fireplace. Nearby, Princess sprawled belly-up on his tufted c
Wet snow dripped from the eaves beyond the window.

Addy sighed with perfect contentment and sipped her tea. “What
nd hergirl?” she asked.

Hugh nuzzled her cheek, tickling her with his beard. “What if it is?
ny. But “We can’t name a girl ‘Douglas.’”

7 would He looked pointedly at Princess.

ake use “That’s different. He’s a cat.”

charter: “At last, you admit the absurdity.”

ty. It so She offered him a neutral “hmm” before taking another sip. “How
percentMuriel? It was my grandmother’s name.”

“I like Douglas.”

l to pay She clicked her tongue. “You’re too stubborn.”

let him His laugh was deep and rich. “’Tis a rare irony to hear that fro
woman. I’m honored.”

ouraged She laid her cheek against his chest. “I can hear your heart.”

espised “Aye?”

mily in Closing her eyes, she savored the sound: *dra-DRUM, dra-DRUM*
DRUM. “I think it’s speaking.”

ied the He chuckled.

unds of “Shh,” she admonished. “Let me listen.”

“I can already tell you what it would say.”

“What’s that?”

ted for He kissed her hair and slid a palm over her belly. “Happy Chri
Makerswife. I am yours to keep.”

ies. As She moved his hand up to her heart. “And keep you I shall. For c
d Addyeternity together and all the eternities to come.”

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The End

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- The Scoundrel's Rules for Marriage (Book 3)
- The Duke's Rules for Scandal (Book 4)
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Elisa lives in the Pacific Northwest, where you’re constitutionally required to like the colors green and gray. Good thing she does. Other things on the “like” list include cute dogs, strong coffee, and epic movies. Of course, her favorite thing of all is hearing from readers who love her characters as much as she does.

If you’re one of those, get in touch on www.elisabraden.com, sign up for Elisa’s [free email newsletter](#), and be sure to connect with her on social

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Once Upon a Haunted Horn and Hoof

Elizabeth Rose

Once Upon a Haunted Horn and Hoof

Elizabeth Rose



Chapter One

*Horn and Hoof Tavern
Glasgow, Scotland, 14 Century*

WORKING FOR MAD old Callum MacKeefe at the Horn and Hoof wasn't an easy task. Then again, Keithen was a MacKeefe now, and alone made it a worthwhile situation.

"Come here," whispered Callum, his gaze darting around the room. He waggled a boney finger, calling him over. Callum's long, white hair stuck out in all directions, and his beard reached down to his chest. "I have to tell you somethin' but ye must keep it a secret," he hissed through broken teeth.

The old man grabbed Keithen by the sleeve and pulled him behind the drink board. He really was an odd one, just like everyone had warned him when he took the job here a fortnight ago.

"Aye?" asked Keithen, bending closer, trying to ignore the odor of alcohol on the man's breath. He did not care to know his secret or anything else about him, but he tried not to anger Callum since he was known to have a hot temper.

"The Horn and Hoof is haunted," whispered Callum, almost to himself. Keithen laughed aloud. "It's haunted, but ye canna tell a soul. How can ye understand?"

"Believe me, I willna repeat that!" Chuckling, Keithen picked up a rag and headed across the tavern to wipe the tables and join his friends.

"So, brathair, how do ye like yer new life with the MacKeefes workin' in their tavern?" asked his sister, Yvaine who had recently married Cam MacKeefe after the death of her husband, who had been a chandler. Her first marriage had been a living hell, but this time, Yvaine said she was in heaven. It had been nearly a year now since she'd married Cam. Keithen looked so happy tonight that Keithen swore his sister glowed.

"It's . . . interestin'." Keithen glanced back at old Callum standing

the drink board, ranting about a few drops of his precious Mountain that a customer had spilled. The crazy old loon had a secret recipe for the strongest whisky in all of Scotland and England combined. He insisted not a drop be wasted. It was said that many people tried to find out how he made Mountain Magic, but Callum guarded his secret and went to his grave without divulging that information.

“If by interestin’ ye mean insane, then, aye, we understand.” Yvaine’s husband, sat next to her at the table with a tankard of Mountain Magic in his grip.

Keithen had once owned his own tavern in a small Scottish Lowland village, and knew damned well that no one but the Madmen MacKeef could get that whisky from such a large vessel as a tankard.

“Did Callum make his big announcement yet?” Gavin MacKeef sat down next to his good friend, Cam. He, too, gripped a tankard of the same old whisky. “He’s been talkin’ about it all night.”

“No’ yet,” Cam reported. “But we have an announcement of our own to make.” Yvaine smiled shyly at Cam. Avianca, Cam’s six-year-old daughter, who had been with another woman, ran over and climbed atop his lap. She was Cam’s child now, and happy about it.

“Da, Pa-papa is goin’ to ring the bell,” the wee lass told him, using a special name for Callum. She then stuck her fingers in her ears as if to block out a clang that he had mounted on the edge of the drink board. The awful clanging sound filled the air, getting everyone’s attention.

“I thought he took that damned bell down,” grumbled Cam, swiping a stray strand of blond hair from his eyes.

“Cam, please dinna curse around our daughter,” Yvaine scolded him. “God’s eyes, I hope he’s not makin’ another set of his silly tavern pieces.” Gavin picked up his tankard and took a drink.

“Gavin, there is a child present!” Yvaine took Avianca onto her lap, and kept the girl away from the cursing men. “When is Davita arrivin’?” she inquired about Gavin’s wife.

“She’s no’,” Gavin answered. “Her father had to go on a short trip and she stayed back at Hermitage Castle. She wanted to help out in town at Yvaine family’s cordwainer’s shop until he returns.”

Davita’s family made shoes, and because of it, everyone in the Lowlands behind always had new shoes to wear. Hermitage Castle in the Lowlands below

the MacKeefes, and they had a camp in the Highlands as well. That was making both Storm MacKeefe and his father Ian were chieftains. With the distance between their holdings, they needed a ruler in each spot.

“Listen up! I have an announcement to make,” shouted Callum, his clenched fist in the air as he made his way over to Keithen and the

Keithen wondered if he was going to tell everyone about his supposed Cam, after all. He really hoped not. For Callum’s sake. After all, his reputation already suffered, and he didn’t need another reason to be called crazy.

“We have our own announcement to make first.” Cam jumped up from the bench so quickly that he almost knocked Gavin to the floor.

“Careful, Cam. Ye ken old Callum will make me lap the whisky floor if we spill a single drop,” Gavin grunted, steadying himself as he sipped from his full tankard.

“Cam, no’ yet,” whispered Yvaine, placing her hand on his arm. “Be polite, and wait for Callum to make his announcement first.”

“Nay! If ye have somethin’ to say then spit it out before I knock ye out for interruptin’ me,” growled the cantankerous old man.

“We’re pregnant,” Cam blurted out, smiling from ear to ear.

“Yvaine, that is wonderful news,” said Keithen, reaching down to hug her. “And this time, yer bairn will survive, so dinna worry.” Callum whispered in her ear, since she’d lost her last baby.

“That is good news. Ye’re goin’ to be a faither. Again,” said Keithen, slapping Cam on the back. Everyone in the tavern cheered and congratulated the couple. Several of the women wandered over to congratulate the couple.

“Am I goin’ to have a sister?” Avianca looked up at her mother with wide, green eyes.

“Yes. Or a brathair.” Yvaine told their daughter, giggling and hugging the girl to her chest.

“Nay, I want a sister,” protested the little girl, as if she thought she had no choice in the matter.

“Are we done with this clishmaclaver now, so I can talk?” asked Keithen, so she said in a sarcastic tone. “After all, it is my tavern, unless ye’ve forgotten.”

“Nay, we havena forgotten. Ye will never let us forget that,” mumbled Gavin into his tankard.

“What is it, Callum?” asked Keithen. “Tell everyone what ye heard today.” When he was sure his employer was going to tell everyone

as whyridiculous story about having a ghost, he said something totally differ such aKeithen wasn't expecting at all.

"When ye started workin' here a fortnight ago, Keithen, I told ye I'd be wavinghire ye, but that ye had to do somethin' for me in return." Callum crossed his arms over his chest.

"Aye, that's right," said Keithen, still smiling from his sister's good reputation."What did ye want me to do? Change the rushes on the floor? Or help ye make that secret recipe for your famous Mountain Magic?"

"Nay!" spat the old man, his face turning red at the suggestion. "I'm no' goin' to learn my secret so dinna even try. No one ever will. The rushes are fine and dinna need changin'."

"Then what is it, Callum?" asked Cam, sitting back down and putting his arm around his wife.

"Keithen is a MacKeefe now, is he no?" asked Callum.

"Callum, ye ken he is," Gavin answered. "Storm invited him into the house ye sillywhen his sister married Cam."

Callum snorted. "I still dinna consider him one of us. After all, he'd have to prove his worth."

The mood suddenly grew solemn.

"Well, what can I do to prove to you that I honor bein' a MacKeefe," he asked Keithen. "Just name it, and I will do it."

Gavin, "Keithen, nay," he heard Cam's urgent whisper. When he looked up, he saw both Cam and Gavin scowling at him, shaking their heads in some silent warning not to agree to a thing.

"Anythin'?" asked Callum. He narrowed his eyes, and his long-lashed chin jutted up in the air.

"Aye. Anythin' at all." Keithen had no worries. After all, he was tall and strong, and the old man probably needed help moving something heavy. Even if he had to muck out the stables, he'd willingly do so to be accepted into the prestigious MacKeefe clan.

Callum Cam cleared his throat, and Gavin faked a cough. Keithen looked at his friends again. Now they were waving their hands in the air along with the others, shaking their heads. He wasn't sure what was going on.

"I'm glad to hear that," said Callum in an approving tone. "Maybe ye can earn yer title of bein' a MacKeefe after all."

Keithen was once naught but a commoner who lived in a town

ent that Lowlands. He had done more than his share of jobs that most people find disgusting or appalling. Nothing could bother him in the least. He would himself on his ability to be adaptable, and make the crazy old man access his along the way.

“Ye’re gettin’ married,” announced Callum.

ed news. “What?” Keithen’s head snapped around, and he stared at the o perhaps with wide eyes. “Nay, I’m no’. I assure ye, I’m no’ gettin’ married neither do I want to do so right now. I dinna even have myself a lass.”

‘Ye are “Ye do now,” said Callum.

And the Cam and Gavin both groaned. Keithen swore he heard one o whisper *I told ye so*. Suddenly, the room went silent as everyone l ting his intently.

“Keithen, ye are in for it now,” said Cam.

“Ye never should have agreed to willingly do *anythin’* for Callum, he clan Gavin. “That was yer first mistake.”

“What’s this all about?” Keithen shrugged, feeling totally confuse s yet totellin’ ye, I do no’ have a special lass, and I dinna plan on gettin’ mar a long, long time yet.”

“Yer bride-to-be is Lorna MacNeil,” Callum continued. “She’s Keefe?” here in the mornin’ to marry ye right away. Now, be sure no’ to do a to scare her off.” Callum turned to go back to the drink board, but l up, he grabbed him by the arm.

sort of “Wait a minute. Ye are no’ serious about this?”

“Callum never jests,” mumbled Cam.

bearded “The MacNeils are our mortal enemies,” Gavin spoke up.

“They’ll be our allies once Keithen marries the lass,” said the ol s young prying Keithen’s fingers off of his arm. “Now get back to work, K heavy. This tavern needs a good cleanin’ before yer betrothed arrives.”

accepted All of a sudden, a scream was heard from the stairs above. followed by the sound of several slamming doors. Keithen looked ove over at staircase to see two of the tavern’s strumpets running down the stair ing with dressed. Behind them were the men—their customers, pulling o clothes, hopping on one foot and almost falling over as they ran a ap ye’ll women.

“What’s the matter?” Keithen called out.

in the “I’ll no’ work here ever again!” cried one of the girls, running

ould door.

prided “Neither will I,” said another whore, following on her heels.

ept him Keithen reached out and grabbed one of the men by the arm.
happened?”

“I’ll find another place to bed my whores,” said the man, shaking
ld man Keithen’s grip.

ied and “Wait. Why?” Keithen didn’t understand this at all.

“He’s what happened.” The second man looked up the stairs and r
Then both men ran out the door together.

of them Keithen heard a low moan, and looked over to see a man in white t
listened down the stairs. He looked transparent. Keithen rubbed his eyes, thin
was dreaming. “What in the devil’s name is that?”

“It’s a ghost!” one of the women at a table shouted, gathering
” added children and high-tailing it for the door as well. The Horn and Hoo
place where everyone was welcome. Families with children came to e
d. “I’m the patrons consisted of Highlanders, Lowlanders and also an occ
ried for Englishman as well.

The ghostly figure released a bloodcurdling scream and waved h
arrivin’ frantically above his head. That sent the rest of the patrons running ou
nythin’ tavern, tripping over each other, anxious to leave. The only ones left
Keithen Keithen and Callum were Cam, Gavin, and Yvaine, who was holdin
Avianca tightly in her arms.

“W-who is that?” Gavin slowly stood, his hand going to the hil
sword.

The ghostly figure moved through the tavern, heading over
ld man, Callum, who stood behind the drink board with a bottle of Mountain
Keithen clenched in his fist. The ghost’s eyes were large, dark holes. If I
wasn’t mistaken, the ghost’s neck was broken, since his head hung at
It was a angle.

r to the “I’m scared,” whimpered Avianca, hiding her eyes against Y
s, half-chest.

n their “Yvaine, get Avianca out of here. Now,” ordered Cam, jumping
fter the escorting his wife to the door. He closed the door after them, turning
with his sword drawn. “Are ye ready, Gavin?” asked Cam.

“I am.” Gavin drew his sword as well.

out the If Keithen had owned a sword he would have done the same. Inst

picked up a stool and held it out like a weapon.

“What are we goin’ to do?” asked Cam.

“What “Kill it, of course,” said Keithen, taking a step forward.

The ghost heard him, and spun around. His eerie holes for eyes glowed as he focused on Keithen. He held out a ghostly sword.

“Arrrrrrgh!” cried the ghost, aiming the tip of his sword at Keithen’s heart. Then he flew across the room, surprisingly going right through Keithen. Keithen dropped the stool, surprised to find he wasn’t dead. Still, his sword was knocked from his body. Cam and Gavin rushed over to help. Keithen was floating. Standing back to back, they looked around the room with their swords held ready.

“Where did it go?” asked Cam. “What happened to it?”

“I don’t know. It just disappeared,” shouted Gavin.

“Am I dead?” Keithen’s hands went to his chest and he patted himself. “I saw his sword go right into me. He went right through me.”

“We’ve got to kill it,” commanded Gavin.

“Nay! Put down yer swords, ye fools.” Callum hobbled over to the front of the room. “Ye dinna seem as surprised to see a ghost as the rest of us, Callum. Besides, ye canna kill the ghost, because he is already dead.”

“Ye dinna seem as surprised to see a ghost as the rest of us, Callum. Besides, ye canna kill the ghost, because he is already dead.”

“Nay, I’m no’.”

“Ye kent the ghost was here?” asked Gavin.

Keithen turned a full circle, still patting himself and looking for wounds.

“Of course, I did,” said Callum. “He’s been here since I took over the inn toward Horn and Hoof many years ago.”

“I’ve never heard of a ghost occupying the tavern,” said Gavin.

Keithen “That’s because I’ve seen to it that the bastard stays quiet,” explained Cam. “However, he’s been causin’ trouble lately, knockin’ things over and slammin’ doors. He has gotten out of control.”

“I’ll say,” gasped Keithen. “He tried to kill me. Why? Why does he want me dead?”

“It was probably because you spoke of killin’ him,” Cam pointed out.

“Nay, that’s no’ why.” Callum popped a cork out of the bottle of whisky and took a swig.

“Then why now? After bein’ silent all these years?” asked Gavin.

“He’s upset,” said Callum. “But I figured out a way to settle him down.”

“What does that even mean?” asked Keithen, feeling more confused ever.

“That ghost is Lennox MacNeil,” said Callum. “The grandda of es nowthat Keithen is about to marry.”

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Chapter Two

“WAIT A MINUTE,” said Keithen, slowly lowering himself atop a wooden bench, still trying to catch his breath. “Ye mean to tell me I’m marryin’ a ghost’s granddaughter, and he doesna like it?”

Callum shrugged. “Mayhap no’. But once we have an alliance, he’ll be down I’m sure.”

“Well, I’m no’ sure,” snapped Keithen. “How do ye ken this isna what has him upset in the first place?”

“I dinna,” said Callum. “So, that is why ye’ve got to get rid of him now, as well as marry his granddaughter for the alliance. I dinna want to be scarin’ off my customers or stoppin’ this weddin’.”

“I will no’!” Keithen’s anger grew. He didn’t like his life being put in the hands of a madman.

“Ye are a MacKeefe now, and need to prove yer worth,” Callum reminded him. “Ye will do what I say, or I’ll make ye an outcast and ye’ll never be welcomed back here.”

“Ye dinna want that,” mumbled Gavin.

“Bein’ an outcast isna a good thing. We ken from experience,” Callum said to Cam.

“Callum, isna Lennox MacNeil the man ye killed, thereby makin’ the two clans enemies in the first place?” asked Gavin.

“It wasna my fault. I didna kill him. No’ really. It was an accident. I was with Callum, taking another swig of whisky, looking the other way.”

“What happened? I mean, how did the man die?” asked Keithen, wanting to know this answer.

“Lennox and I were friends at one time,” explained Callum. “It surprised me one day when I was makin’ whisky in my still out in the woods. While sittin’ atop his horse, he tried to find out my secret recipe. When I leaned over to see what I was doin’, I pushed him away. Well, th-

reared up on him. The bloody fool Lennox—who had drunk too much in the first place—fell and broke his damned neck. Honestly, I think it was his fault since I found out afterwards he was only tryin’ to steal my secret recipe and sell it to our enemies.”

“That’s just speculation.” Gavin shook his head. “Nothing has ever been proven.”

“I say it’s true, and that is enough proof!” Callum seemed to be a bit more convinced by Gavin’s words.

“Either way, I’m no’ marryin’ the man’s granddaughter, and neither am I goin’ to get rid of a ghost.” Keithen reached over and snagged the bottle from Callum, taking a swig to calm his nerves. “That ghost wants me dead!”

“Ye have to marry the girl to make peace,” said Callum. “It’s more important now than ever.”

“Make peace with who?” Keithen’s eyes opened wide. “It is not Lennox who doesn’t want peace. He wants my head.”

“The betrothal is set and the girl is en route,” Callum reminded him.

“He’s right,” agreed Gavin. “If ye break the promise, our clans will be plunged into a bloody battle on our hands. It is the last thing we want or need.”

“And if I go through with it, it’ll be my blood that’s spilled in the ground,” Keithen ground out, wondering if anyone really cared what happened to him.

“Ye need to find a way to make Lennox leave my tavern,” said Callum.

“If no’, I will be ruined. Ruined, I say! He has already scared away our customers.”

“I agree,” said Cam. “I dinna think anyone will return after what we witnessed here tonight.”

Gavin put his hand on Keithen’s shoulder. “The MacKeefe clan depends on the sales from Callum’s Mountain Magic. It is our main source of income. Without it, we’ll really struggle. It’s up to you now to save the clan from failing.”

Keithen didn’t want the clan to struggle. Neither did he want the clan to fail, since he and his sister were now part of the family. Since he was now a MacKeefe, he wanted to do whatever he could to help out. And his favor in Callum’s eyes couldn’t hurt him any, either.

“How do ye suggest I get rid of a ghost?” Keithen’s head spun. It was a real horse concern, and he desperately needed suggestions. After all, this was something he had ever encountered before.

h in the Callum shrugged his boney shoulders. "I dinna care how ye do it, his fate, dinna let yer betrothed ken that the ghost of her grandda is trying to r
eceive tomarrriage. If she finds out, she might be the one to break the alliance in
warn ye, only trouble will result in either side breaking the betrothal."
er been "Ye think so?" Keithen felt his heart racing. He needed this man
work out more than the rest of the clan, because he was the one with th
angered at stake.

"Ye'll do it, then?" asked Cam.

er am I "I dinna see that I have a choice," mumbled Keithen, taking anothe
le from of whisky. "But how the hell do I kill a ghost?"

' "Nay! Ye canna kill him," shouted Callum, his hands waving in
s more like a madman once again. "He's already dead. Ye just need to convi
to leave, that's all. Leave here for good, and never return."

o secret "If only it were that easy." Keithen ran a weary hand through hi
blond hair, wishing he had the skill of the Highland warriors and a
1. cunning of old Callum. Sadly, he had neither.

ill have The door to the tavern burst open, and in walked a line of High
clothed in dark green plaid. Since the MacKeefe's plaid was purple,
instead," and green, he knew they weren't men from his new clan.

o him. "So, where is this man who'll be marryin' my daughter?" asked th
Callum, looking man who was surely the chieftain. He held an air of pri
all my command about him. He also wore more weapons than the others.

"Oh no," said Keithen.

at they "I thought they werena comin' until mornin'," commented Cam.

"He's right here, Laird Bhaltair MacNeil." Callum hurried ac
lepend's room, grabbing Keithen by the arm and pushing him forward. "His i
n come. Keithen. Keithen MacKeefe. He's the groom."

in from "So, ye're the MacKeefe who is goin' to marry my wee Lorna?" T
was big and burly, with a long, reddish-brown beard and thick brows.
clan to had the largest sword strapped to his side that Keithen had ever see
was alive.

earning "Aye. I am Keithen," he said, clearing his throat. "But I'm no'
Mac—"

in with "Best MacKeefe in the clan," said Cam, slapping Keithen hard
wasn't back to shut him up. "Go with it," he whispered from the side of his m

"That's right. Keithen will make a wonderful husband for yer da

but just Laird MacNeil,” added Gavin.

The newcomer’s head snapped around, and he scowled at instead. “Chieftain. Call me Chieftain,” growled the man, looking no happier this arrangement than Keithen was at the moment.

Keithen opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say a word the most beautiful lassie marched in, stopping next to Chieftain MacNeil.

“I thought I told ye to wait outside,” Chieftain Bhaltair MacNeil said to the girl.

“If I am the one marryin’ the man, then I have a right to meet him or no’ be kept in the dark. Well, which one is he?” she asked, looking at the men in turn.

Keithen was tongue-tied by her beauty. She had long, golden hair spun sunshine. It was braided and entwined with colorful wildflowers. She held a sprig of heather in her fingers, twirling it around and around. He waited for her answer. Her eyes were bright blue like the sky, but filled with intense scrutiny, like a hawk. Her figure was curvy in all the right places. Her lips were full and red, and her cheeks were rosy. Keithen had seen a lot of women around whores his whole life while working in his tavern. However, with all their tricks to look enticing to men, none of them could hold a candle to this lassie’s natural beauty.

“I – I am Keithen. Yer groom,” he finally managed to say.

“Yes. I can see that.” She raised a curved brow and nodded. Then when Keithen realized Cam, Gavin, and even old Callum were all peering directly at him behind his back. “These are my friends, Cam and Gavin, the tavern’s proprietor, Callum MacKeefe,” he introduced the others.

“Ye seem as if ye were hesitant to admit ye are the groom,” said Bhaltair.

“I warn ye, if ye ever think of lyin’ to my daughter, or doin’ a thing like that in the manher, I’ll personally have yer head.” The chieftain’s beefy hand covered the hilt of his sword.

“Of course no’. Why would I even think of doin’ somethin’ like that?”

Keithen asked nervously, not able to push the thought from his head. “Really?” Callum told him he had to keep the ghost a secret. Wasn’t that the same as lying? God’s eyes, he hoped not! And now that so many had seen the ghost, did it even matter what he said?

“Where is everyone?” asked the girl, quickly scoping the room.

“Aye. If ye’re goin’ to support my daughter, I’d think this tavern

be busy, which it's no'." Bhaltair stared with dark, penetrating eyes through Gavin, right through Keithen. This didn't feel good at all.

"It's early yet," explained Callum. "It'll be busy soon. Right,

Callum glared at Keithen and his friends, as if they actually had a word, a customer came to the tavern or not.

"Right," said Cam.

"Sure," agreed Gavin.

Both of them just stood there.

"Well? Go see what is takin' the customers so long to get here each of Callum through gritted teeth. "Bring them in here anon."

"Yes, we'll do that." Keithen took one step forward, but his path was blocked by Bhaltair, who crossed his thick arms over his broad chest.

"I'd think ye'd want to stay here and get to ken yer betrothed, Lorna MacKeefe," said the gruff man. His intentions to keep Keithen from leaving without were clear.

The

LORNA MACNEIL WATCHED as two of the MacKeefes ran out the front door, even one named Keithen, who she was to marry, seemed to want to leave a candle but her father stopped him. She couldn't blame her future groom. As

her father was demanding, overbearing, and downright rude. He was anyone who met him.

"Faither, I'm sure my betrothed would like to show me to the room I am to stay until the weddin' takes place. I am tired from the trip, and I like to rest."

"Yer room," repeated Keithen, his gaze roaming over to Callum and Bhaltair. He nodded slightly. "We happen to have a few rooms vacant upstairs, perhaps ye'd be more comfortable stayin' elsewhere."

"Elsewhere? Like where?" asked Lorna. "Do ye have a castle near

I can stay in?" She knew full well the answer, but was just trying to get that man to talk so she could get to know him. After all, he would soon be her husband, and he'd barely said much to her at all. She actually preferred the same as a silent type, since her father was so boisterous that it was a nice change in spirit, her husband should be strong, able to stand up for and protect her. It

didn't look like the rest of the Highland warriors, and he wasn't even carrying any weapons other than a small dagger.

It would

at went “Nay, the MacKeefes only have a camp in the Highlands,” I informed her.

boys?” “Hermitage Castle is ours, but it’s too far for ye to journey there ntrrol ifthe weddin’,” said Callum. “I’ve made plans for the ceremony to right here at the Horn and Hoof in three days’ time.”

“Three days?” Both Keithen and Lorna said together.

“That soon?” gasped Keithen, sounding as if he wasn’t fond of th Actually, she wasn’t sure she liked it either.

,” said “We havena even posted weddin’ banns yet,” Lorna pointed out Keithen and I dinna ken each other.”

ath was “No need for postin’ banns. And ye’ll get to ken each other onc married,” Callum told them. “Now, the marriage should happen righ

KeithenOur clans have been enemies for too long, and it is time for an a walkingChieftain MacNeil, come to the drink board with yer men. I’ll pour y Mountain Magic. No charge.” He extended his skinny arm, showing th

“I have heard good things about yer whisky, though I’ve never t or. The for myself,” said the chieftain.

as well, “Nay? Why no’?” asked Keithen with a chuckle. “I thought ever, fter all, Scotland has had it at one time or another.”

scared “My faither died over that whisky,” said Bhaltair through clenche “On second thought, I dinna think I want any at all. Mayhap this 1 wherealliance was a mistake.”

I would “Nay! Nay, it’s no’ a mistake. I have to marry yer daughter Keithen, sounding a bit desperate for some reason.

m who “Ye *have* to?” questioned Bhaltair.

irs, but “Want to. He meant that he wants to marry her,” said Callum, th Keithen a look that could kill.

by that Lorna didn’t want trouble between the clans. She just wanted get the married, and who better to wed than one of the strong MacKeefes? “ be herDa. Just have a drink. To celebrate my betrothal.”

red the While her father was a hardened, headstrong man, Lorna was usua e. Still, to get him to bend to her will. Since she was his only daughter, he Keithen favored her, and sometimes Lorna took advantage of that.

wearing “Well, mayhap just one drink.” Her father and the other men traveling party headed over to the drink board with Callum, leaving alone with Keithen.

Keithen “Well, will ye show me to my room now?” asked Lorna. She walked to the stairs with Keithen, looking up to see a man watching them from the upper floor. As soon as she noticed him, the man ducked down the corner and disappeared. “Who is that man above stairs who seems to be watching us?”

Keithen stopped so fast that she went crashing right into the back of his arms. He turned and caught her, keeping her from falling. His arms felt strong around her. She looked up into his oaken eyes, noticing the slight shadow of a smile. “And woodsmoke and whisky on him. A heat engulfed her from just being touched by this handsome man.

“Mayhap I’ll show ye the kitchen first, since I’m sure ye’re hungry after the journey,” he suggested.

“Nay.” She reluctantly pushed out of his arms, knowing if she stayed with him another minute, she’d want to kiss him to see how it felt. That was the way it bode well with her father watching. “I’d prefer to go to my room for a moment.” She looked up the stairs again, and once more she saw the flash of a man hiding at the top landing. He was dressed all in white, and looked very young. “That man up there is acting odd. Is it safe for me to stay here?”

“What man?” growled her father from the drink board. She was about to tell her father what she’d seen when Lorna’s father wholeheartedly interrupted.

“No one, Chieftain. There is no man, nor anyone else up there, so don’t worry,” Keithen blurted out. “Come, Lorna, let me escort ye to the kitchen.” He put his hand on the small of her back and led her away.

It felt good to be touched by him, and Lorna quickly forgot about the strange man upstairs lurking in the shadows. Since it made her feel a little more comfortable, she decided to stay with Keithen for now. After all, the only thing that really mattered at the moment was getting to know the man who would be her husband. Please, she would be his wife in just a few short days.

Lorna
her father

of the
; Lorna

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Chapter Three

KEITHEN HADN'T SLEPT well at all, tossing and turning all night long, worried about his future with the MacNeil lass. He thought he heard a noise and woke to find the ghost of Lennox MacNeil standing over him at the head of his pallet.

"Aaaah!" Keithen bolted upright, grabbing for anything he could reach to get off the spirit who seemed to want him dead. Unfortunately, the closest thing to grab was his shoe from next to his pallet that sat directly on the floor. "Back, or I'll do somethin' ye'll regret," he spat, realizing as soon as the words left his mouth how stupid the threat sounded. After all, MacNeil had a dagger strapped to his side, and Keithen only had . . . a shoe.

The ghost laughed deeply, his body bobbing up and down in the air above the boat on the water.

"Ye are the one marryin' my granddaughter are ye no?" His eyes were no longer big, gaping holes, but still looked dark and void of life.

"I—I am," said Keithen, scooting to the end of the pallet, terrified to know the ghost could speak. Slowly, he stood. His eyes flashed over to the table where he'd left his dagger, and he carefully side-stepped his way to it.

"I dinna want a MacKeefe marryin' her. The MacKeefes can't be trusted."

"I heard about how ye died," said Keithen, trying to keep the conversation going by talking so he wouldn't realize he was going for his dagger.

"The Madman MacKeefe killed me!" This thought only seemed to comfort the ghost, and now Keithen regretted mentioning it.

"Now, calm down," said Keithen, holding up his hands. "I know Callum is crazy, everyone kens that. But I assure ye, he didna mean to hurt me—I mean—ye were his friend."

"A friend would give me his secret for makin' the best and st

whisky in Scotland.”

“And sell it to the enemy as well?” he mumbled.

“What did ye say?”

Keithen suddenly regretted voicing his thoughts aloud. “I ass Callum will no’ even tell his own son how he makes it. Dinna personally.”

“I want to ken how it’s made, and ye’ll find out for me or ye’ll noorryingmy granddaughter—and ye’ll be the one to suffer. Do ye understand, and head hung at an odd angle as he spoke, only reminding Keithen of foot of necks. His hand went to his own neck in a form of protection.

“I would if I could, but he willna tell me!” Keithen could see his situation getting worse and worse, and he was helpless to change a thing. “I a st thing marryin’ Lorna to make an alliance with our clans.” He made it to the door. “Get With his hand behind his back he reached out for the dagger. The ghost words getting so angry that Keithen was sure he’d try to take off his head again a sword he needed a way to defend himself.

“Do it!” screamed Lennox, just as Keithen was about to close his door like a around the dagger. But before he could, the ghost waved his hand through the air and an invisible force pushed him down. His dagger went flying.

There were no Keithen’s eyes widened as he saw the door to his room open, and his dagger embed itself into the wood right next to Cam’s head.

Confused to “What in the bloody hell are ye doin’?” Cam jumped to the side of the door, which was right behind him.

Keithen toward “I didna do that,” protested Keithen, getting to his feet. “It was his hand pointed to the ghost, but Lennox MacNeil was gone.

Keithen dinna be “Who?” asked Gavin. “I dinna see anyone here but ye, Keithen.”

Keithen “It was the ghost,” said Keithen, walking over and yanking his dagger from the ghost of the wood. “He was here, and he threatened me.”

Gavin riled the talk so loud. We dinna want Lorna to hear ye.”

“Or her faither,” said Keithen with a nod.

Keithen old “Thankfully, her faither left with most of his men to get supplies for the wedding,” Cam told him. “He said Callum didna have enough food for the guests he invited. He’ll be back on the day of the wedding.”

Keithen longest “He left only a few guards, who are still sleepin’ down in the tannery,” Gavin told him.

“What about Lorna?” asked Keithen.

“Yvaine and Avianca went to Lorna’s room to help her prepare for the day,” said Cam.

“I hope she didn’t hear the ghost.” Keithen hurriedly dressed as he went to take his friends.

“What did Lennox say?” asked Cam.

“He wants me to find out and tell him Callum’s secret of how he got his Mountain Magic better than anyone else’s whisky.”

Gavin laughed. “Callum will die before he gives up that information.”

“And so will I if I don’t give the ghost what he wants.” Keithen sat in the chair to don his boots. “Plus, he said he didn’t want me to marry my granddaughter.”

“What are ye goin’ to do?” asked Cam.

“I have to find out Callum’s secret and tell Lennox before the ghost kills me. Then I need to marry Lorna before her father kills me. No’ to me means I need to bring back business to the Horn and Hoof before Callum kills me with his fingers that’s all.” Just saying this aloud brought a knot to Keithen’s stomach.

“That’s a tall order to fill.” Cam chuckled.

“Ye two are goin’ to help me.” Keithen told, didn’t ask, his friends.

“Nay, no’ me,” said Gavin, holding up a halting hand.

“I’m no’ gettin’ involved either. I’m a married man now with a baby on the way,” said Cam. Both men shook their heads and looked in the same direction.

“I’m yer family now,” Keithen pleaded with them. “My sister has seen her first husband die. Do ye think she wants to see her brathair die well?”

Cam looked back over his shoulder without really turning his head. “Now, that’s no’ fair.”

“Neither is the position I’m in fair to me. Have ye two been able to get back the customers yet?” Keithen inquired.

“No’ yet,” said Gavin. “They’re pretty scared by what they’ve seen for the goin’ to take a lot of convincin’.”

“Damn it, ye’ve got to try harder.” Keithen rubbed the back of his head, already feeling Lennox’s blade against his skin. He wasn’t sure if he could really kill him or not, but he wasn’t willing to find out. He rather had his head mounted on his shoulders.

“What about ye?” asked Cam. “What are ye goin’ to do to help?”
for the “I’m goin’ to go to that old barn where Callum makes his w
Keithen told them his plan. He stood and put on his belt, slipping his
e talkedthrough it. “With any luck, mayhap I can figure out Callum’s secret,
Lennox without Callum ever finding out. At least that would solve one
problems.”

“Did Lennox agree to leave the tavern for good if ye gave h
information?” asked Gavin.

“Well, nay. I didna think to tell him that,” Keithen admitted.

“Ye need to make a deal with him,” said Cam. “Tell him if ye gi
in’ hiswhat he wants, he has to promise to leave here and never return.”

“And to let the weddin’ progress as planned,” added Gavin.

“Aye. I’ll do that as soon as I see him again.” Keithen wasn’t
ost killsforward to another encounter with the ghost, and neither was he excite
ntion, Ihaving to sneak into the barn where Callum kept his still. Either c
ills me,things was more dangerous than anything he had ever done since hid
fact that his sister had killed—or thought she killed—her own h
“Make sure Yvaine keeps Lorna busy until I return. And tell Callum I
town but will be back soon.” Keithen got to the door and stopped. “C
try yer hardest to get the customers to return and stay quiet about wh
airn on saw. We wouldna want any of the MacNeils findin’ out about th
e otherbefore the weddin’.”

“Anything else, yer highness?” asked Gavin sarcastically. Both C
alreadyGavin glared at him. Keithen had no right to tell anyone what
r die asespecially not a Highlander. But in this situation, he had no choice.

“Aye,” said Keithen, flashing a quick smile. “Make sure neither
s head.nor Lennox follow me. And if I live through this, I want ye both to t
to wield a sword, because about right now it would certainly come in h
o bring



en. It’s

“ENTER,” LORNA CALLED out, hearing the knocking at her chamber do
is neck,had just finished dressing, and was about to go look for Keithen and s
a ghostday.

er liked A woman poked her head around the door. “Hello, I am Yvaine,

Cam MacKeefe. This is our daughter, Avianca.” She pushed the door wider to reveal a young girl standing next to her. “May we come in?”

“Yes, of course. I am Lorna MacNeil. I’m happy to meet ye.”

“Come on, Avianca,” said Yvaine, entering the room, but the little girl stood at the door, not wanting to enter.

“I’m afraid the ghost is in here,” said Avianca.

“Ghost?” asked Lorna with a chuckle, thinking it was just a child until she saw the look on Yvaine’s face.

“Shhh, Avianca,” said Yvaine, with a finger to her lips. Then he flashed over to Lorna. “I’m sorry. Ye weren’t supposed to hear that.”

Yvaine grabbed her daughter by the hand and pulled her into the room.

“Is there really a ghost?” questioned Lorna, her eyes moving back and forth from the woman to the child.

“He was scary, and chased all the customers away.” The child looked at her with frightened eyes.

“Avianca!” Yvaine pulled her daughter closer.

“It’s all right. Ye can tell me,” said Lorna. “I’m not afraid of ghosts.”

“Ye would be of this one,” said Yvaine, looking out to the hallway, and quickly closing the door. “I’m sorry. My daughter never should have heard that. We were warned to keep quiet.”

“Whatever for?” Lorna chuckled again.

“Because the ghost is yer grandda,” admitted Yvaine.

“And Callum is the one who killed him.” Avianca got another name from her mother.

“What?” Lorna’s smile faded. “Is this true?”

“Well, yes and no,” Yvaine quickly answered. “The ghost is real at yer grandda, Lennox MacNeil. That part is true.”

“Nay,” gasped Lorna, holding her hand to her mouth. She slowly let herself sit atop a chair.

“However, Callum swears the man’s death was an accident. Lennox fell from his horse and broke his neck while Callum was trying to keep him from learning his secret.”

“Secret? What secret?” asked Lorna.

“How to make Mountain Magic,” said the little girl.

“Do ye mean the whisky?”

“That’s right,” answered Yvaine. “Callum has kept it a guarded secret.”

or open these years, and never told a soul. Not even his own son.”

“Well, I hardly think something as silly as that is worth dyin’

Lorna couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She knew their clan had little girl enemies, and it had something to do with her late grandfather, but her father had never wanted to talk about it or even tell her more.

Yvaine continued. “The MacKeefes dinna think their coveted wish is fearsilly, I assure ye. And honestly, every clan in Scotland would like to get their hands on the information of how to make it, because it brings in a lot of yer eyesmoney. I’ve heard from my husband that Lennox was goin’ to steal the information and sell it to an enemy of the MacKeefes.”

“Does my da ken his own faither is a ghost?” asked Lorna.

“Nay. And neither do the MacKeefes want him to find out,” answered Yvaine.

Yvaine, seeming very worried now. “Oh, please, Lorna. Dinna tell his secret. I would not want to be looked at dinna let anyone ken that Avianca told ye, or I will be in a lot of trouble.”

“Of course no’,” said Lorna, putting her hand on the woman’s shoulder.

“Yer secret is safe with me. Now, let’s go find somethin’ to eat. And then ye can tell me all about yer brathair. After all, if I am goin’ to be married to a man in a few days, I’d like to ken how brave and strong he is.”

“Uncle Keithen is no’ a Highland warrior like my da,” blurted out Lorna. “Avianca told me he was a warrior like my da.”

“He’s no’?” asked Lorna.

“What she means is that Keithen doesna wield a sword like the other warriors,” Yvaine quickly spoke up.

“He doesna? Why no’?” asked Lorna.

“Oh, please dinna ask me that.” Yvaine wrung her hands together.

“Nay. I need to hear the answer,” said Lorna, wondering what the MacKeefes were hiding from her.

“Lorna, I hope this willna cause ye to change yer mind about marryin’ yer brathair. I mean, he’s one of the nicest, yet bravest men, ye’ll ever know,” Yvaine continued.

“Tell me,” she demanded.

“My brathair and I were naught but commoners until I married the MacKeefe, and their chieftain allowed Keithen into the clan as well.”

“So, he’s no’ a warrior then?”

“Nay. I was the wife of a chandler, and Keithen owned a tavern at Hermitage Castle.”

“I see,” said Lorna, knowing her father wouldn’t be happy about it.
“So, Callum MacKeefe deceived my da, by makin’ the alliance.”

“Nay! Never. I’m sure it just never came up, or Callum would have
his own. This marriage is important. For peace between yer clans. Please
let this change yer mind about my brathair.”

“Where is Keithen now?” she asked.

“I—I’m no’ sure,” said Yvaine.

Through the open window, Lorna heard voices and the sound of
a horse snorting. She walked over and looked out to see Keithen
mounting his horse, talking to his friends.

“Excuse me,” said Lorna. “I want to catch up with yer brathair.”
She opened the door, exiting through the kitchen to avoid her guards, who were
in the tavern area, probably still sleeping. She entered the barn, but Keithen
was already riding away, and his friends had left as well.

“I need my horse saddled, anon,” she told the stableboy.

“I was told by yer faither no’ to let ye leave,” said the boy, stepping
in front of her.

“I do no’ take orders from ye. Now, out of my way.”

“I have my orders,” the boy protested.

She was about to push him out of the way but didn’t need to. The
boy’s eyes opened wide and he ran screaming from the barn. When she turned
to look at what had frightened him, she saw the same man she’d seen at the
stairs yesterday. Now, she realized he was transparent.

“Looorna,” wailed the ghost.

Lorna’s heart raced. “G-Grandda?” she asked, only having known
her grandfather for a short time when she was a very young girl.

The ghost floated closer to her, making her feel very uncomfortable.
The sight of him was frightening. Lorna was all alone without anyone to
meet. She mounted her horse without a saddle, sitting astride like a man
and rode from the barn. The horse ran right through the ghost, taking her
away when it happened.

She rode like the wind, looking back over her shoulder, but thankful
her dead grandfather didn’t seem to be following. Taking the road she
was on for Keithen’s travel, she soon came upon an old, broken-down barn deep
in the woods. There was a horse tied up outside, and she recognized it as
the one she’d seen Keithen riding.

ut this. Dismounting, she tied the reins of her horse to a tree and hurried i
barn. She took two steps inside and stopped in her tracks, seeing the s
ive toldthe casks stacked up around the barn. This, she realized, must be wh
, dinnaCallum MacKeefe made his whisky.

A hand clasped around her mouth, and she struggled as a man pu
into an empty stall.

“Keep quiet and ye willna get hurt,” she heard the low voice wh
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Dismounting, she tied the reins of her horse to a tree and hurried into the barn. She took two steps inside and stopped in her tracks, seeing the still and the casks stacked up around the barn. This, she realized, must be where old Callum MacKeefe made his whisky.

A hand clasped around her mouth, and she struggled as a man pulled her into an empty stall.

“Keep quiet and ye willna get hurt,” she heard the low voice whisper in her ear, making her think that by running from the ghost she had inadvertently ran into even more trouble.



Chapter Four

FROM A CROUCHED position in the barn near Callum's still, Keithen had his hand over Lorna's mouth, watching Callum at work. The girl had just announced her presence, which would have caused the old man to know he was being spied on.

Lorna looked back at Keithen, and her tense body slowly relaxed.

"Shhh," he said, removing his hand from her mouth. This close to her, Keithen could not only feel her body pressed up against him, but was also aware of her tantalizing scent of wildflowers and fresh air. "Dinna ken we are here," he said, his mouth up against her ear. He swore softly as her breath and her eyes closed. Then, he felt her body go limp against his chest.

If he hadn't been looking at her, he would have noticed the MacNeils' guards run into the barn, followed by the damned ghost.

"Callum, it's the ghost! Do somethin'," shouted one of the men.

Callum put down the funnel and his hands went to his waist.

"Lennox MacNeil, ye are no' welcome here," shouted Callum.

"It's my grandda," whispered Lorna.

"Ye ken he's the ghost?" asked Keithen.

"I do. What does he want?"

"He wants the secret of how to make Mountain Magic."

"But he's dead. He's a ghost," she said. "What does it matter now?"

"Leave before I have my guards run ye through with their swords," Callum threatened the ghost.

A deep laughter filled the air. "Yer men canna harm me, and ye ken it." Lennox flew right through one man, and the other went sailing through the air as if the ghost had pushed him.

Lorna gasped and held a hand over her mouth. The guards ran from the building in fright.

“Ye dinna scare me, ye mischant spirit. Now leave!” shouted once again.

“Ye ken what I want, Callum. Now give it to me.”

“Never!”

Right before Keithen’s eyes, he saw a large cask of whisky rise from the stack and then come crashing down, letting loose the others with a loud bang. The barrels rolled right toward Callum.

“Nay!” shouted Keithen, darting out from his hiding place, running almost toward Callum and pushing him aside to get hit by the barrels instead. How that

“NAY! KEITHEN!” LORNA ran out to help her betrothed while the ghostly grandfather flew back and forth wailing, causing a shiver to run up her spine. Keithen pushed up from the ground, facing the ghost head-on. Callum lay silent on the ground.

“Ye will leave here now and never return!” Keithen shouted to the ghost. “Ye willna ever hurt any of the MacKeefes again, and neither will ye stand in front of my weddin’ to Lorna.”

“Ye ken what I want,” said the ghost, the apparition getting dimmer as his voice fading as if it were losing energy. Then, in a wisp of fog or smoke, the ghost disappeared.

“Keithen, are ye all right?” Lorna ran to him and threw her arms around him. “That was so brave, what ye just did.”

Without being able to stop herself, she pressed her lips against his in a deep kiss. Keithen’s arms closed around her waist, and he pulled her close, returning the kiss.

“Mmmph,” came the groan of Callum from the floor. Keithen released Lorna and they both ran to his aid.

“Callum, are ye hurt?” asked Keithen.

“Can ye stand?” Lorna wanted to know.

“Och, hell. She saw the ghost.” Callum picked straw out of his mouth and sat up.

“It’s all right. I already kent about him,” Lorna admitted.

“Ye told her, Keithen? How could ye?” growled Callum as Lorna helped him to stand.

“Nay, it wasna him. It was the child, Avianca, who told me, but

Callumdinna punish her or her mathair.” Lorna didn’t want the woman and get in trouble, but neither did she want Keithen being blamed for something he had not done.

“Is nothin’ sacred anymore?” growled Callum. “I like my privacy from the two of ye even here? No one is allowed at my still, and no dog and bang guards are allowed outside the barn.”

Lorna looked at Keithen, realizing he must have hidden here trying to get the information of how to make Mountain Magic to give to the ghost. It wouldn’t sit well with Callum at all, so she had to act fast.

“We’re sorry. We wanted to get away together. Alone. To get to know each other before the weddin’.” She purposely reached out and caressed Keithen’s cheek for show. Keithen caught on to what she was doing and bent over. Callum lay on the floor and kissed her on the mouth once more.

“I am just glad to have been here to be able to help ye, Callum,” said Keithen.

“Aye. If he hadna been here, ye might be dead under all those barrels of whisky right now,” Lorna added, not sure if it was true, but saying it with emphasis.

“Callum, what are we goin’ to do?” asked Keithen. “Lennox was the secret recipe, and we’re never goin’ to get him to leave until ye tell him to go around.”

“He’s a ghost. Why does he even care?” asked Lorna. “I mean, can he drink whisky?”

“It’s his longin’ to ken my secret that has kept him trapped here in this land of the livin’ so long,” said Callum.

“So long?” asked Lorna. “The ghost has been here before now?”

Callum nodded. “Lennox has been plaguin’ me ever since the day he died.”

“What do ye mean?” asked Lorna.

“Most people think I’m mad,” said Callum. “But the reason I am thought of as mad is because I’ve had to take the blame for lots of mishaps that the ghost caused. The only way to keep him a secret, and to keep my customers from leavin’, was to take the blame and allow people to think I’m mad.”

“Ye should have told the MacKeefes before now, and mayhap they could have helped ye,” suggested Keithen.

“Aye, I suppose so,” Callum answered with a sigh. “But the damne thing usually stays here in the barn. That is another reason why no one but

girl to allowed near my still. I set up the betrothal between ye and Lorna be
nothing thought peace between the MacKeefes and the MacNeils would
Lennox, and he'd finally leave."

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"But instead, it only made things worse," said Keithen, getting a nod from Callum.

"Why dinna ye just tell the ghost yer secret to makin' the Mountain Magic?" asked Lorna. "After all, he's a ghost, so he's never goin' to really use it."

"Haud yer wheesht, child!" snarled Callum. "I've never given in to the fool's demands when he was alive, and I am certainly no' goin' to do so now that he's dead. It is out of the question."

"Then how are we ever goin' to get rid of the ghost?" asked Lorna.

"I have an idea," said Keithen. "However, it's risky."

"I'll do anythin' to get Lennox out of my life once and for all," said Callum. "What is it?"

"All right, if ye say so," said Keithen with a nod. "However, I am more than sure that ye are goin' to hate what I am about to propose."



Chapter Five

“YE ARE INSANE, Keithen. Ye canna trick a ghost!” Later that day, Callum scowling at Keithen from the stool pushed up to the drink board in the kitchen and Hoof. Gavin was with him. Keithen stood behind the drink board.

“Shhhh.” Keithen’s eyes scanned the room. “Lennox might hear ye.”
“What does Callum have to say about this?” asked Gavin.

“He says he’ll never give the ghost his real recipe for makin’ Magic, but he’s willin’ to write down a fake one.”

From across the room, Lorna headed over. “This is dangerous, and I’m no’ sure it’s a good idea, Keithen.”

“Lorna, it’s fine.” Keithen took his betrothed’s hands in his, looking deeply into her eyes. He decided he was going to like being married to this beautiful lass after all. “Just have faith in me. I’ll fix this, I swear I will.”

“Well, all right,” she said, looking up at him shyly. A blush colored her face. “After all, it’s for the best.”

“Ye’re damned right it is.” Keithen boldly leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. If there had actually been patrons in the tavern, he wasn’t sure he would have done this. And certainly not if her father was present.

“Oooh, I think I saw him up at the top of the stairs,” Lorna said in a low voice.

“Get Callum, quickly.” Keithen pretended to be wiping off the drink board.

“I’ll get him.” Lorna ran off to the kitchen, and returned with old Callum limping along behind her. “We’re ready,” she whispered.

“Callum, where are ye off to?” Keithen spoke the rehearsed words.
Callum scowled at him. “Ye already forgot?”

“Just go with it,” said Keithen from the side of his mouth. “Do exactly as planned.”

“Och, aye. Of course.” Callum cleared his throat and almost s

“I’m off to work at my still. Now, where did I put that secret recipe down? I’m always forgettin’ it, so that is why I wrote it on a parchment.” He dug into his pouch, really not able to find it.

“Try inside yer tunic,” said Keithen, his eyes flashing up to the top stairs where he saw the ghost of Lennox peeking around a corner.

“Ah, here it is.” Callum pulled a piece of parchment out from under his tunic and held it in the air. “I’ll just go use this now. But it’s a secret. Even Sam satone can see it.” He over-acted, and in Keithen’s opinion it wasn’t believable. He hoped the Horn in the least. Hopefully, the ghost wouldn’t notice. Callum opened his mouth to say more, but Keithen stopped him.

“That’s enough,” he said in a low voice. “Ye’ve got his attention. Go!”

Callum hobbled to the front door, purposely dropping the parchment. Keithen watched as the ghost of Lennox slowly floated down the stairs and toward it.

Just as Callum reached out to open the door, someone opened it from the other side. A breeze blew in, and the parchment fluttered across the floor to the Chieftain! “What the hell are ye doin’ here? Ye’re goin’ to lose everythin’,” spat Callum.

“Oh, hell,” mumbled Gavin from his stool.

“This canna be good,” said Cam.

“My da is here?” Lorna spun around to see.

Keithen groaned. Sure enough, Chieftain MacNeil marched into the tavern with several of his men right behind him. Then, a woman walked into the tavern as well.

“Mathair is here too?” whined Lorna.

“Bloody hell.” Keithen could see that things were going from bad to worse.

“This is my wife, Anna,” announced Bhaltair. “Anna, this is MacKeefe, who owns the tavern.”

“Hello,” said the woman, seeing the piece of parchment on the floor. “I think ye dropped somethin’.”

“Nay, I didna. Now go! Leave. Hurry!” Callum’s hands swished through the air as he tried to wave them away.

Keithen saw the ghost heading for the parchment just as Anna bent down to pick it up. He hurried across the room, but he was too late. Anna sat

I wrote and screamed as the ghost of Lennox MacNeil made a loud wailing noise as it flew out the door, right through her.

“Mathair!” cried Lorna, running to her.

One of the Bhaltair and his guards all drew their swords.

“What the hell was that?” shouted one of the guards.

Under his “Not what, but who,” said Bhaltair. “I’m pretty sure that was the ghost of my father, Lennox MacNeil.

Believable “Ooooh.” Anna’s eyes rolled back in her head and she swooned, and her husband reached out to catch her.

“MacKeefe, what is this all about?” shouted Bhaltair.

Now, since there were four MacKeefes in the room, they all answered and nothing made sense.

“Haud yer wheesht, the rest of ye,” said the angered Bhaltair, cradling his wife. “I want only one of ye to tell me.”

“Bhaltair? Was that a ghost?” Anna’s eyes flickered open. “We can’t let our daughter stay here. It’s not safe.”

“Mathair, I’m safe with Keithen,” said Lorna. “Ye dinna need to worry.”

“Someone, tell me about the ghost,” Bhaltair commanded.

“He’ll be gone soon, I promise.” Keithen stepped forward. “He’s a ghost, and canna harm anyone.” He swallowed forcefully and rubbed his throat, hoping to hell this was true.

“What is the ghost of my father doin’ here? And why didna ye tell me about the Callum? Why did he appear now after all this time?”

“Calm down, ye fool. The damned ghost has been here for decades. Callum. He only wants to know how to make my Mountain Magic, never tell a soul.”

“Is that what is written on this parchment?” Anna, still grasping it, asked.

“Nay. That’s just a fake recipe to trick the ghost into leaving Callum.”

“Oh, Lennox is goin’ to be madder than ever now.” Cam walked up to the rest of them.

“Bhaltair, we need to break the betrothal and take Lorna home with us.” Anna pulled her daughter to her.

“Nay, Mathair. I want to marry Keithen.”

“Mayhap she’s right,” said Gavin. “Callum, ye never should have been here.”

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“Nay!” came Bhaltair’s strong answer. “The weddin’ will cont
planned.”

“Chieftain?” Keithen questioned his decision. “Even with the ghos

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“Ye? What can ye do that we havena already tried?” asked Cam.

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“And neither do I plan to.” Bhaltair sheathed his sword.

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“Bhaltair, what are ye sayin’?” asked his wife.

“My faither always gave me anythin’ I asked for,” Bhaltair explained. “But he died before he could give me the thing I *really* wanted.”

“What was that?” asked Keithen.

Bhaltair looked over at Callum and shook his head. “I’m sorry to have to tell ye this, Callum, but it wasna my faither who wanted to steal and sell yer secret recipe to give it to the enemy. It was me.”



Chapter Six

SHOCKED BY WHAT she'd heard, Lorna was sure this would be the end of the betrothal, and the start of a new feud between the clans.

She heard the sound of scraping steel as the MacKeefes drew swords. Her father's guards did the same.

"I dinna want bloodshed in my tavern!" shouted Callum. "It's not enough tryin' to get my customers to return, but if killin' is goin' on, they'll never come back."

"He's right. Put down the blades," Bhaltair said to his guards.

"But Chieftain," one protested, "they've still got their weapons and we will die to protect ye and yer wife."

"Put yer swords away, ye fools!" Callum growled at Cam and Keithen. "Canna ye see we are tryin' to solve a problem, no' create a new one?"

Everyone slowly lowered their blades.

"Callum, I'm surprised ye are no' angry with Bhaltair for admitting he was the one who wanted to steal from ye," said Keithen.

"Everyone wants to steal my secret, so what's the difference?" said Lorna's old man. "Even though I should have yer head right now for deceiving me, Callum glared at Lorna's father.

"It seems to me ye both deceived each other," Lorna spoke up. "If Keithen could say a thing.

"So ... what are we goin' to do?" asked Cam. "We seem to be at a standstill."

"There is only one thing we can do," said Bhaltair. "Get the guards to leave so we can get on with the weddin'."

"How do I ken ye'll no' still try to steal my secret?" asked Lorna, looking at Bhaltair from the sides of his eyes.

"I dinna need to ken how ye make Mountain Magic anymore," said Bhaltair. "If my daughter is married into the MacKeefe clan, then I'll

much whisky as I want. Right?”

“That’s right,” Keithen spoke up. “The MacKeefes drink for free, and sure Callum will extend that privilege to ye and yer clan as well, since ye be part of the family.”

“Nay, I willna,” protested Callum. “I have no customers anymore and willna give away the main means of income for our clan by servin’ the MacNeils free whisky.”

“Then how about just my mathair and faither?” asked Lorna. “The MacNeils will pay if they drink.”

“Lorna!” snapped her father, wanting to shut her up.

“Bhaltair,” said her mother. “I think that is a fair trade.”

“Callum? What do ye say?” asked Keithen.

The old man thought for a while and finally nodded. “Aye, but Bhaltair gets rid of the ghost.”

“Shake on the deal,” said Keithen, not wanting either of them to be drawn, Reluctantly, Bhaltair held out his hand. “I suppose that would be fair.”

“Ye’re damned right it is,” said Callum, grasping his hand and shaking Gavin. “And ye should be thankful I’m no’ goin’ to lop off yer head for malin’ live like this for so long.” The men shook and then pulled apart.

“Ye werena the only one to suffer. I had to live with the guilt of the tthin’ he happened,” said Bhaltair.

“So, it was really yer fault yer faither died and no’ the MacKeefe,” said the Anna.

“It’s no one’s fault, since the horse reared up, so let’s forget about it and figure out how to rid ourselves of a ghost,” said Keithen, coming before rescue and making Lorna want to kiss him for stepping in and stopping a brawl that was about to begin.

“I need to talk to the ghost of my faither,” said Bhaltair. “But we need to get him here first.”

“Now that he’s probably realized he’s been tricked, he is goin’ to be angry,” Callum pointed out.

“I heard what ye said,” came a voice from the top of the stairs. When the ghost floated down, the MacNeil guards turned and ran out of the house,” said Lorna grabbed her mother’s hand when she saw the woman’s face turn pale.

“Da,” said Bhaltair, with a catch to his voice. “Ye dinna have to have the MacKeefes any longer. We dinna need the recipe for Mountain Magic.”

wrong in wantin' to steal it."

and I'm The ghost hovered over the chieftain as he spoke.

ce ye'll "I tried to make ye happy, Son."

3, and Ithe MacKeefes." "It would make me happy if ye left and stopped hauntin' this tave

all the "Nay!" shouted the ghost.

"Nay?" questioned Cam. "Oh, hell, this canna be good."

rest of "Grandda, what will it take to make ye leave?" asked Lorna.

"I want to be at yer weddin'," said the ghost.

"Oh." Lorna looked over to Keithen for help.

"Surely, that can be arranged," said Keithen, surprising her.

"And I want a drink of Mountain Magic as well as this entire taver
only ifwith people, or I'll never leave."

"Of course," said Keithen. "Ye will have it."

ck out. "Good!" With that, the ghost disappeared into thin air.

ir." "Keithen, why did ye agree to such a daft thing?" spat Callum. "I
king it.that no one will even come inside if the ghost is here."

kin' me "He's right," said Bhaltair. "Ye saw my guards run from the room.
we canna fill this tavern, my dead da will no' be happy, and I'm asha
of whatsay he may never leave."

"We'll fill the tavern with people. He'll have what he requests," I
s," saidassured Lorna's father.

"Keithen, are ye a simpleton?" hissed Gavin. "No one will step
out thishere because of the ghost. And ye think they're goin' to want to att
g to theweddin' with the ghost present? I'm afraid we're goin' to be hau
pping aLennox forever."

"Nay, we'll do it," Keithen assured them. "Gavin and Cam, send v
'll havethe MacKeefes that they are all invited to the weddin' in two days' tim

"That's no' enough time to get a message to Hermitage Castle ar
' to beeveryone return," Gavin pointed out.

"Then just send word to the Highland camp," said Keithen.

hen the "Keithen, they'll run as soon as they see the ghost, and then we
tavern.doomed." Cam shook his head.

pale. "Only invite the bravest warriors then," was Keithen's suggestion.

unt the "Faither, I think some of the MacNeils need to be here for the wec
2. I waswell," Lorna spoke up. "After all, this is an alliance bein' forme

Grandda used to be the clan's chieftain."

"I canna ask that, and I refuse to demand it," said Bhaltair with a sc

"This is important, Da," said Lorna. "If the MacKeefes are brir
rn, and some of their brave warriors, then I think we should do the same. And
my family present for my weddin'."

"I dinna ken," said Bhaltair. "Once they hear about the ghost,
think they'll come, and I refuse to trick them."

"Then the ghost of Grandda will never leave," said Lorna sadly.

"I'm sure I can get yer brathairs and even yer uncles to show up
Anna. "But we'll have to make it worth their while."

"How about free Mountain Magic for a month for anyone who
n filledour weddin' and stays until the end?" asked Keithen, looking over at C

"That sounds good," said Cam. "What do ye say, Callum?"

"Fine," mumbled Callum, followed by a few choice words. "But n
than a month. And everyone has to spread the word that the ghost
Ye kenforever so my customers return."

"See, Lorna? Everything will work out for us after all." Keithen
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"I canna ask that, and I refuse to demand it," said Bhaltair with a scowl.

"This is important, Da," said Lorna. "If the MacKeefes are bringin' in some of their brave warriors, then I think we should do the same. And I want my family present for my weddin'."

"I dinna ken," said Bhaltair. "Once they hear about the ghost, I dinna think they'll come, and I refuse to trick them."

"Then the ghost of Grandda will never leave," said Lorna sadly.

"I'm sure I can get yer brathairs and even yer uncles to show up," said Anna. "But we'll have to make it worth their while."

"How about free Mountain Magic for a month for anyone who attends our weddin' and stays until the end?" asked Keithen, looking over at Callum.

"That sounds good," said Cam. "What do ye say, Callum?"

"Fine," mumbled Callum, followed by a few choice words. "But no more than a month. And everyone has to spread the word that the ghost is gone forever so my customers return."

"See, Lorna? Everything will work out for us after all." Keithen smiled and held Lorna's hands, filling her heart with love.

"Yes. Yes, it will," she said, eager now to be married to the handsome Keithen MacKeefe and become part of their clan—their family.



Chapter Seven

KEITHEN LOOKED AROUND the tavern the day of the wedding, happy to see a room filled with both MacKeefes as well as MacNeils. The atmosphere seemed tense as everyone waited for the ghost of Lennox MacNeil to appear. Still, Keithen decided he wouldn't let this ruin his important day. He was about to be married to Lorna, and the lass looked bonnier today than ever.

The piper started playing, and Keithen stood next to the priest with Gavin at his side. Lorna walked up to them, holding onto her brother's arm. Dressed in the MacNeil green plaid, after today the clans would be aligned, and Lorna would wear the MacKeefe colors.

Keithen looked around the room, seeing his chieftain, Storm MacKeefe, there with his wife, Wren. Then there were the Madmen MacKeefe: Aidan and Ian, who were some of the bravest and craziest men of the Old Callum had positioned himself behind the drink board, protecting and guarding his precious Mountain Magic.

Yvaine and little Avianca were seated next to Lorna's mother. There were a handful of MacNeils there, but most of the crowd was made up of MacKeefes.

Keithen leaned over and whispered to Gavin, "Where are North and Nash? I dinna see them." North and Nash were twins and good friends of Cam and Gavin. At one time, they were considered outcasts, but had found their way back into the clan.

"They'll be here," Gavin whispered back. "They're always late, and they'll come to make a grand entrance."

Sure enough, just as Lorna took her place next to Keithen, the tavern doors burst open, and North and Nash entered with their swords drawn.

"We're here," said Nash.

"And ready to protect," added North.

The music stopped, and everyone became silent, staring at the twin

Callum ran over and grabbed them both by the front of their tunic away the blades, ye fools. Canna ye see this is a blasted weddin’?”

“Sorry, sorry,” said both men, sheathing their swords and slinking into the crowd.

“Let’s proceed, shall we?” asked the priest, looking back anxiously and nervously.

“Yes. Please,” said Keithen, hoping the ghost wouldn’t show up to see them after their vows were taken. “And make it fast.”

“My pleasure,” said the priest, making this the shortest wedding ever. “Do ye, Keithen MacKeefe, take Lorna MacNeil for yer wife? And ye, Lorna, take Keithen for yer husband?”

Keithen and Lorna looked at each other and almost laughed since then. Camso rushed. Then they both said “aye” at the same time, and just like that their father’s wedding was over.

Everyone rushed over to congratulate them, but then the sound of a horn mounted on the drink board rang out loudly.

“Callum, do ye really have to do that on our weddin’ day?” complained Keithen, covering his ears.

“It’s no’ me,” said Callum. “I didna touch the bell. It was Lennox.”

Keithen’s head snapped around, and his eyes settled on the ghost of Lennox MacNeil standing at the end of the drink board. No one said a word.

Keithen was afraid people might start running if he didn’t do something up of “Come with me, Lorna,” he said, grabbing the hand of his new wife and hurrying over to the ghost.

“G-Grandda,” said Lorna, flashing a smile. She tried to act calm, but Keithen could feel her arm shaking.

“Callum, some Mountain Magic for Lennox please,” said Keithen. “I’ll pay for all, that was part of the deal.”

Callum grumbled, but made his way back to the drink board, picked up a tankard of whisky, and slid it down the drink board to Keithen, who caught it.

“W-we have the tavern filled with people,” Lorna pointed out. “Just like ye wanted, Grandda.”

“Both MacKeefes and MacNeils,” Keithen added.

“Aye,” said the ghost in a booming voice. “That ye do. And now ye’re married. Congratulations.”

Keithen noticed the women and little Avianca stirring. A few couples

as. “Putstood up. He looked back at Gavin and Cam and nodded. Gavin rush to guard the front door, and Cam did the same to the kitchen door as p g awayThey would stop anyone from leaving until the ghost was satisfied ar forever.

d forth “Thank ye,” Keithen told the ghost, holding out the tankard. “Wel is just one thing left before ye go, I guess.”

ip until “That’s right. I want my drink of Mountain Magic,” insisted Lenr reached out for the vessel, but of course his hand kept going through it

er. “I want it!” shouted Lennox, causing the entire room to stir restle l do ye,his anger grew.

“I’m givin’ it to ye,” said Keithen. “I’m sorry, but I dinna ken h e it waswill work.”

hat, the “My faither is never goin’ to leave if he canna get his drink Bhaltair from behind Keithen.

the bell “If he doesna leave, my business will be ruined,” said Callum, mak way over to Keithen. “Give me that.” He grabbed the tankard from Ke

plained “I want my Mountain Magic,” the ghost insisted.

’ “Then take it any way ye can!” To everyone’s surprise, old Callu the tankard, throwing the whisky from the vessel right at the ghost.

host ofright through the spirit, hitting Cam, who was guarding the kitchen doc a word. “What the—” Cam’s tunic was soaked with whisky, but as soo

g fast. realized Callum was the one to throw it, his face lit up in a smile. “C rife andYe are no’ just spillin’ Mountain Magic, but throwin’ it around the roo

“Ye’re breakin’ yer own rule,” Gavin called out from the front doo lm, but Still, everyone remained quiet.

“Are ye satisfied now, ye wretched spirit?” Callum thunked the . “Afterdown on the drink board and put his hands on his hips. “And if ye say

wring yer neck and stomp on ye until ye are naught but a pile of oured aCallum moved closer to the ghost. Keithen smiled when he realized th

ught it.was more afraid of the little old man than Callum was of him.

ust like “Mmm,” said the ghost, licking his lips. “It’s just what I needed.”

“Then leave! And never return again. Do ye hear me?” Callum wa crazy. He picked up a bottle of whisky and threw it at the ghost next.]

r ye arepicked up a stool and threw that at the ghost as well.

“I’m out of here,” said Cam, ducking every time the items throw of themright through the ghost and smashed against the kitchen door, almost

ed overhim.

lanned. “I’m satisfied and will never return, because ye are a *madman*, and gone MacKeefe,” said the ghost. “Goodbye, Lorna. Bhaltair. I will never again.”

ll, there The ghost disappeared, but Callum continued to smash things and make a mess, breaking almost every one of his own rules.

rox. He “Whoa, that’s enough, Callum.” Keithen took the man by the shoulder. “The ghost is gone and will never return. Let’s clean up the mess and celebrate my weddin’.”

“He’s gone for good?” asked Callum with a raised brow.

ow this “That is what the ghost of my grandda said,” Lorna told him.

“My da is a man of his word. Or he used to be,” said Bhaltair. “(“,” said yer tavern will no longer be haunted.”

“What about my customers? Will they return?” asked Callum.

king his “We’ll all make sure everyone kens the ghost is gone,” said Keithen. “However, I canna guarantee they’ll return if they think ye’re goin’ to somethin’ at them.” Cam stood up from his hiding place behind the bar, took board, brushing off the front of his tunic.

It went “We’re married, Lorna,” said Keithen, kissing his new bride and pulling her into his arms.

n as he “Our clans are aligned,” shouted Bhaltair.

Callum? “I’ll drink to that!” The MacKeefe chieftain, Storm, walked over, holding a tankard high above his head. “Grandda, a round of Mountain Magic for everyone,” he called out as the music started back up. “Today is an important day, and we will all celebrate the marriage of Keithen and Lorna, and the alliance of the MacKeefes and the MacNeils.”

no, I’ll “I’ll get the Mountain Magic,” grumbled Callum, not at all satisfied. “But first, this mess needs to be ghostcleaned up.” He pushed a broom into Keithen’s hand.

“What?” asked Keithen. “It’s my weddin’ day. Ye expect me to work?”

“Now that ye’re an accepted member of the clan, ye’ll do yer part. I don’t want to lose yer job here at the tavern.”

Then he Keithen smiled from ear to ear, liking the fact that he was now accepted and had earned his way into the MacKeefe family.

m went “Lorna, I’m sorry, but I think I’d better clean up this mess. I didn’t want to hit to anger Callum.”

“Dinna be sorry. I’ll help ye,” she said, giving him a quick peck
Callumcheek.

see ye “I really wanted this to be a special weddin’ that ye’d never forg
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The End

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“I really wanted this to be a special weddin’ that ye’d never forget,” he told her.

“Oh, it was, and still is,” said Lorna with a wink. “After this is over, mayhap the event will even be mentioned in the king’s Highland Chronicles.”

“Aye, we might be mentioned,” agreed Keithen. “But unfortunately, I’m afraid our weddin’ will be titled somethin’ crazy, like *Once Upon a Haunted Horn and Hoof!*”

The End

From the Author

I hope you enjoyed Keithen and Lorna's story of how they had to fight against a ghost. I always love writing about old, crazy Callum MacKeefe and the Horn and Hoof Tavern.

My series often continues with next generations of characters making guest appearances in other books. Especially MacKeefes!

Keithen was first introduced to my readers as the brother of Yvonne in [Highland Flame](#), Book 2 of my Highland Outcasts Series. If you've read more about Gavin and Cam and their friends, North and Nash, Keithen is featured in one of the books of the [Highland Outcasts](#).

The Horn and Hoof Tavern, Callum MacKeefe, as well as others from the MacKeefe clan, were first seen in my book, *Lady Renegade* from my *Legacy Blade Series*. If you enjoy Highlanders, my MacKeefe clan can also be found in my *Madman MacKeefe* and *Highland Chronicles Series*, among others.

You can follow me on social media, and learn more about the books I write by using the following links:

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Thank you,
Elizabeth Rose

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Thank you,
Elizabeth Rose

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[Highland Ghost \(Novella\)](#)

About Elizabeth Rose

Elizabeth Rose is an Amazon All-Star, and bestselling, award-winning author of nearly 100 books and counting! Her first book was published in 2000, but she has been writing stories ever since high school.

She is the author of contemporary, western, paranormal, and her favorite – medieval romance. You'll find sexy, alpha heroes and independent heroines in her books. Sometimes her heroines can even swing a sword. She loves adding humor to her work, because everyone needs a little more in life. Her ***Bad Boys of Sweetwater: Tarnished Saints Series*** is inspired by people, places, and things in her own life. The location is the small town of Michigan where she grew up visiting her grandparents.

Living in the suburbs of Chicago with her husband, she has two sons and one granddog – so far. A lover of nature, Elizabeth can be found in the summer swinging in her “writing hammock” in her secret garden, creating her next novel. Her secret garden is what inspired her series, ***of the Heart***, which of course centers around a secret garden too!

Elizabeth's current and upcoming books will be published by *Dragonblade Publishing* and independently too under *RoseScribe Media*.

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