Rosemary Smith
ECHOES of the HEART
Victorian Romantic Suspense Collection
GYPSY HEART
LADY OF THE LAKE
A STRANGE AFFAIR
WHERE LOVE TAKES YOU
MATTERS OF THE HEART
DARKWOOD
A STRANGER'S KISS
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ECHOES OF THE HEART
VICTORIAN ROMANTIC SUSPENSE COLLECTION
BOOKS 1-7

ROSEMARY SMITH

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BOOK 1:
A STRANGER'S KISS

1

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It was the 24th of May 1849, what a way to spend my twenty-first birthday, a birth date I shared with Queen Victoria. The coach pulled by four greys rattled along the tracks of Bodmin Moor, taking me ever nearer to my destination of Ravensmount near the Lizard in Cornwall. I looked at my maid, Tilly, and her head lolled on the glass window, her pink lace bonnet askew on her dark ringlets, her chest rising and falling as she slept.

At least she could sleep I mused, whereas I had hardly slept since I received my friend, Amelia's, letter some four weeks ago. I could hear Amelia's voice, 'Sara, I am to be married!' she had said last September, her words followed by her gay laughter, 'But I am to live in Cornwall,' she said quietly, her final words to me being, 'I am deliriously happy.'

Until four weeks ago I had not heard from her in spite of my having written to her frequently at Ravensmount, nor had she told me of Tobias Tremaine, the man she had married, except to say that he was devilishly handsome and was the master of his home Ravensmount in Cornwall.

As the never ending moor passed slowly by the window and grey skies brooded over us, our only companion was a stout middle-aged woman who snored incessantly irritating me some-what. I reached once again into my reticule for Amelia's letter, unfolding it slowly I looked again at the words I'd read at least a hundred times before.

Dearest Sara,

Please come to me for I fear I am being poisoned, someone wants me dead. In a house full of strangers I know not who the perpetrator is. I beseech you, indeed implore you, please come soon or I feel it will be too late.

Your friend,

Amelia.

The words were few, but I could sense the urgency and distress with which they had been written and had wished to rush down to her straight away, but Mama and Papa would not hear of it. Our home in Bath was a fair distance from the desolate countryside in Cornwall, it had taken nearly four weeks to persuade them to let me travel with Tilly as chaperone. As I thought of her Tilly stirred and looked at me sleepily.

'Are we nearly there, Miss Sara?'

'We can't be too far now.' I pacified her, for Tilly had loathed the journey, the swaying of the carriage had made her feel nauseous and the lodging house we had stopped in at Exeter last evening had not been to her liking.

'I slept on straw, Miss!' she told me somewhat indignantly this morning.

Looking at my fob watch pinned to the bodice of my pale green dress I could see it was twelve noon. We had been travelling for three hours so had at least two more hours to travel until we reached our destination.

The coach suddenly jolted to a halt. Looking at Tilly I could see her hand clapped to her mouth, she obviously felt ill once more.

'Come Tilly, we are to stop for refreshment,' I coaxed as the door of the coach was opened admitting well needed fresh air.

'I couldn't eat a thing, Miss,' she said quietly.

'Maybe a cup of tea would revive you,' I said gently as we were helped out of the coach into a small courtyard. As we walked towards the small stone built inn, with the welcoming sign of the Travellers' Rest, our skirts swished on the gravel beneath our feet and I felt my head starting to pound. Lack of sleep and worry about Amelia was taking its toll.

Seated on a wooded bench in the dimly lit room of the inn by a fire which was needed as the place smelt damp and musty, I pulled my cream fringed shawl tighter around me.

'Where are you travelling to?' the lady who was our companion and sat opposite us addressed me for the first time. She had boarded at Exeter and had promptly fallen asleep. Her voice was cultured which belied the simple royal blue serge dress she wore, the skirts of which revealed her voluminous, somewhat grubby, petticoats.

'We are bound for the Lizard and a house called Ravensmount,' I answered politely.

'May I ask your name?' she enquired softly.

'Why yes, it is Sara, Sara Osborne, and this is my maid, Tilly,' I said introducing us and expecting a name in return.

‘Tilly needs ginger wine to settle her stomach, and some sustenance like bread and cheese,’ our nameless companion offered. ‘Give me your hand, Sara,’ she asked unexpectedly.

I removed my cream-coloured glove and offered this stranger my right hand. The hand which took my cool one was sweaty and hot and I had a feeling of revulsion as she turned my hand over, staring intently at my palm.

I wanted to pull away from her strong grasp, but at the same time was curious to know what this woman would say. For some minutes she studied my hand, her curly blonde hair was all I could see as she bent over intent on what she was thinking.

‘You have a long lifeline, but it has a break in the middle, which I foresee as danger in the not too distant future,’ with which words she let go of my hand.

‘Is that all you can say?’ I asked, disappointed and trembling at the same time.

‘I strongly advise you not to go to Ravensmount.’ As she spoke she leant towards me and whispered, ‘Or at the very least, do not spend a night there or you will be drawn into a spider’s web. Take heed young woman for I have The Sight.’

Silence between the three of us ensued after this revelation, needless to say I partook of little although I did order Tilly ginger wine and she ate her bread and cheese as I instructed. The woman never spoke again, although she watched me, her insipid blue eyes regarding me even while she ate.

Settled back in the coach, the changing scenery from moor to countryside drifted lazily by with the sun now shining in a clear blue sky. I mulled over what the woman had said, glancing at her I could see I was no longer the object of her scrutiny for she too looked from the window. Not another word had been said and when the coach halted for her to alight I panicked and spoke to her as she stepped to the ground.

‘What is your name?’ I called some shrilly.

‘Tamsin,’ she said hesitantly and I knew she had nearly said more. Her eyes searched mine and in that brief moment I could see the beautiful woman she had once been. Then she was gone, disappearing through the streets of the small village, a carpet bag in her hand.

‘Have we far to go?’ I asked the ostler before he shut the door once more.

‘About twenty mile I reckon, Miss,’ he replied in his Cornish brogue, a language quite unfamiliar to me.

I sat back in my seat and like Tilly, drifted off into an agitated slumber. Thoughts of Amelia laughing gaily and images of brightly coloured potion bottles and spiders’ webs were all mixed up and whirling around in my head. Then I was caught in the web, my hands flailing frantically to claw my way out of the tangling mesh, but, I couldn’t get free and a petrified scream escaped my lips which served to wake both Tilly and I up with a start.

‘Whatever’s the matter, Miss?’ Tilly asked softly, her arm around my shoulders.

‘Just a bad dream,’ I uttered, my body and voice trembling.

I smoothed my green skirts with my hand and gathered myself together. Sitting up straight I looked from the window. The coach had slowed down as we were on a precipitous winding track climbing slowly to the top. I could see the sea glimmering in the sunlight on our right and was painfully aware of the sheer drop to the shingle below.

‘Oh my Gawd, Miss!’ exclaimed Tilly, clapping her hand to her mouth.

‘Don’t worry,’ I soothed, feeling anything but calm, ‘I’m sure the good man has done this many times before.’ I silently said a prayer. With some relief we reached the top of the hill where the track widened and then I saw it, a gasp of surprise escaping from me.

A massive grey stone building with two crenelated towers, one at each end, lay before me. Built on a promontory, the front of the house faced the afternoon sun. I was overawed by the size of it and as the coach came to a halt a few moments later by two large stone pillars, a large stone bird sat on top of each, I guessed this to be Ravensmount.

The door of the coach opened and I could smell the salty sea air, reminding me of Weston-super-Mare, the only seaside place that I had visited. Whereas Weston was a thriving place with a promenade, here we were in the middle of nowhere.

My trunk was placed by a stone pillar in the shelter of a tall hedge, two of which lined the short drive. From where I was standing I could see the imposing tower which made up this end of the house. Tilly and I walked up the short drive. As we reached the front of the house a host of large black ravens swooped and squawked, whirling above our heads settling on the far tower. Tilly ducked her head.

‘Please, Miss, I want to go home,’ she wailed.

‘Don’t be foolish,’ I chided her, ‘it is only a few ravens.’

Before we climbed the five wide curving steps to the door I stepped back to look at the house. Even as I looked the many leaded windows glinted in the sun, akin to a row of candles burning on a dark winter’s night. Without warning the sun disappeared, turning to look I could see the black cloud which covered it momentarily.

Everything looked different, the house took on an austere menacing look and I prayed this wasn’t a bad omen. As I thought it the sun reappeared and I told myself not to be fanciful. Reaching the large oak door with Tilly at my side clutching her luggage I didn’t get the chance to ring the large bell. The door was opened to reveal a tall, gaunt looking woman with dark greying hair drawn back off her unsmiling face. She was dressed in brown with a large bunch of keys at her waist.

‘I knew you were here, the ravens always tell us when we have a visitor.’ She spoke in a firm measured voice. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘I’m Amelia’s friend and have come to visit, I did write so she will be expecting me,’ I explained.

The woman hesitated before she spoke, looking at Tilly who cowered behind me, and I set to thinking that my maid had been a bad choice for a companion.

‘You’d best come in and I’ll fetch the master,’ she said grudgingly, ‘but your maid will have to come with me to the kitchen.’ The door was drawn back and I entered the vast hall. Highly polished dark floorboards covered by small brightly coloured rugs shone in the sunlight.

In the centre, a wide curving staircase with a polished banister beckoned to the upper floor, the odour of beeswax lingered in the air. To the left of the staircase I could see two wide wooden steps with a long wooden table beyond. It was all quite opulent and indeed not as I had expected.

‘May I ask your name?’ I ventured.

‘I’m Mrs Mallory, the housekeeper,’ she replied curtly. ‘Please take a seat while I take your maid to the kitchen.’ As she spoke she indicated a wooden chair by the doorway.

‘Please come with me,’ instructed Mrs Mallory on her return. She led me to a large oak door. On opening it I stepped into a sumptuous drawing room. Wine-coloured velvet curtains hung at the long window from which the sun streamed through.

‘I’ll fetch the master, Miss,’ and Mrs Mallory left me.

I looked around the room taking in the small polished tables on which stood various bric-a-brac and I noted the large wide stone fireplace, the mantle of which was again draped with wine-coloured velvet on which stood a large onyx clock graced by a china dog at each end.

The door opened quietly behind and I stood up. Was I about to meet my friend’s husband at last? I asked myself. I turned with my back to the fireplace as a tall dark-haired man stepped into the ray of sunlight. I was at a disadvantage as the sun fell in my eyes, but my heart missed a beat as I looked at this handsome stranger.

His eyes surveyed me as well, from my blonde hair, curls of which were visible under my pale green bonnet to my green eyes beneath which were sweeping over him. Colour suddenly suffused my cheeks and I felt hot and uncomfortable praying that he had not noticed.

‘Please be seated, Miss…?’ he queried, and realised that he did not know my name.

‘Sara, Sara Osborne,’ I offered in a quavering voice as I sat once more on the settle.

‘Miss Osborne, I am Tobias Tremaine. I understand you are a friend of Amelia’s.’ He stepped out of the sunlight as he spoke and I could see him more clearly. He had a handsome suntanned face with sparkling black eyes and his black hair curled appealingly at the nape of his neck.

‘Yes,’ I stammered after what seemed minutes following his question, and I felt foolish urging myself to pull myself together. ‘You are Amelia’s husband?’ I asked in a far steadier voice.

He didn’t answer for some time, but when he did his words surprised me. ‘No. Amelia and I did not marry for many reasons, the main one being that she loathed this house,’ he said quietly.

‘But,’ I stammered, ‘she led me to believe you are married, and four weeks ago I received a letter imploring me to come to her.’

‘Then you are on a fool’s errand, Miss Osborne,’ he informed me.

‘And why pray is that?’ I countered.

‘Because my dear Miss Osborne, your friend, Amelia, disappeared two weeks ago.’

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‘Disappeared?’ I repeated the word with disbelief in my voice, confounded by these revelations, hardly believing Amelia would lie to me, let alone disappear. What had happened within the walls of Ravensmount to turn a happy carefree young woman into a frightened dishonest one? ‘And has she taken her possessions with her?’ I continued, determined at that moment to unravel this mystery.

Tobias looked down at me.

‘A couple of gowns and night attire,’ he said in a measured voice. ‘Everything else is in her room as she left it.’

‘Then she must intend to return for it,’ I said with triumph, at last thinking positively. Then another thought occurred to me. ‘Did Amelia receive the letter I sent informing her of my plans to visit?’

‘There was a letter, Miss Osborne, but it remains unopened. I will fetch it for you.’ As he spoke he strode from the room, returning immediately with a letter in his hand which he passed to me. It was indeed the one I had sent. I turned the cream-coloured envelope over and over.

‘Did Amelia know this was here?’ I queried.

‘No, she vanished the day before it came,’ he replied. ‘I must tell you Miss Osborne, that I have endeavoured without much success to trace your friend.’

‘I’m confident you have, Mr Tremaine.’ For indeed I was. ‘Now, if I can be reunited with my maid, I will make arrangements to stay somewhere overnight.’

‘You’ve travelled far?’ he asked, surveying me as he spoke and not giving me a chance to answer. ‘Silly question, Miss Osborne. I would not dream of you leaving without some hospitality, apart from which it is some four miles to the nearest hostelry, which is of dubious recommendation. You must stay here, Miss Osborne, for tonight at least.’

‘But,’ I commenced to protest.

‘I will not take no for an answer.’ As he spoke his black eyes sparkled and I thought for a second time what an attractive man he was.

‘Very well, Mr Tremaine, I accept your offer,’ I conceded, rising to my feet. How I longed to remove my bonnet, I thought, and wash away the grime of today’s travel.

‘Splendid. I’ll ring for Mrs Mallory.’ So saying he pulled the bell by the fireplace. ‘Luggage?’ he queried, smiling.

‘Why yes,’ I stammered, ‘my travelling trunk is deposited by the gateway.’

‘It shall be fetched for you forth-with.’ As he spoke the door opened. It wasn’t Mrs Mallory who stood there, but a beautiful dark-haired woman dressed in a powder blue day dress with pearls at her slender throat. She stood in the open doorway looking at us expectantly.

‘Miss Osborne,’ said Mr Tremaine, ‘may I introduce you to my sister, Rosalind.’

As he spoke Rosalind moved gracefully towards us.

‘Please tell me, brother, who is this charming young lady?’ Her voice was soft as she spoke and I observed she had the same black glittering eyes as her brother. Her dark hair fell in soft ringlets each side of her lovely face.

‘Miss Osborne is a friend of Amelia’s,’ he said. At his words a brief expression of dismay crossed her face, but just as soon was replaced by her beautiful smile.

‘Welcome to Ravensmount, I’m only sorry that Amelia is not here to greet you herself.’ Her voice was still soft, but somehow reticent.

‘I’ve offered the young lady our hospitality for the night, Rosalind,’ said Tobias.

‘Quite right too, brother. I shall take her to the rose room which is always ready for unexpected guests.’ Both sister and brother looked at each other as Rosalind spoke, trying to convey some unspoken sentence to each other I felt.

Then I broke the spell. ‘This is very kind, and my maid, Tilly?’ I questioned, needing to know that she was taken care of also.

‘Your maid can share with Emily for a night or two, indeed you are welcome to stay for as long as it pleases you.’

I wasn’t sure if this statement of Rosalind’s was true and as I followed her up the red thickly carpeted staircase and along the wide airy corridor I set to wondering if I was indeed being lured into a spider’s web.

We stopped outside a door at the end of a corridor. Rosalind opened it and we stepped inside. The room was not as I had expected and I had a sharp intake of breath. The panelled walls of the large room were white, and rose brocade curtains hung at the long window falling to the floor. The huge

carved four-poster bed was adorned with the same rose brocade and the late afternoon sun spilled across the rose-coloured carpet.

A white marble fireplace faced the doorway, the coal and kindling wood laid ready to light in the black grate, and pink and white ornaments stood in profusion on the mantel.

'What a charming room,' I enthused, speaking to Rosalind who still stood by the open doorway. As I spoke I removed my bonnet, laying it on a small embroidered chair by the door.

'Why thank you, it is one of the nicest bedrooms at Ravensmount and was at one time occupied by our mother.' At these words an expression of sadness crossed Miss Tremaine's face, but it quickly changed and she smiled at me. 'I have no idea of your Christian name.' She continued moving further into the room standing by the window, the rays of the sun surrounding her in a warm glow.

'It is Sara,' I answered, 'and I would be most pleased if you would address me as such.'

'Then I will, Sara,' and she came across taking my hands in hers briefly, hands which were cold in spite of the warmth of the room. 'You are nothing like your friend, Amelia,' she said suddenly turning to look out of the window.

'No indeed,' I replied. 'Amelia was as dark as I am fair, also pretty and vivacious.' Silence followed my words for a couple of minutes after which Rosalind turned to me.

'What do you know of Amelia's background?' The question was unexpected and I realised that I knew little about her, for we had only met three years ago at a finishing school for young ladies in Bath.

'I know little of her background except that she lived with her uncle and aunt a short way from Taunton and had done so since she was a baby.' In truth this was really all I could say about her.

'So she is a mystery to you, Sara.' Rosalind's words were true I realised. My friend was indeed a mystery to me. I'd never thought of it before, having enjoyed Amelia's company and friendship.

'Yes, I suppose she is,' I said quietly, 'but I am worried about her wellbeing and have every intention of finding her.'

'Well, I wish you well in your quest, Sara, and now I will arrange for water to be sent up and some refreshment also, for you must be parched on such a warm day.'

These words dismissed any further talk of Amelia and I had the strongest feeling Rosalind was relieved in some way, for her manner had changed and she seemed more relaxed.

As Rosalind went to leave I asked, ‘Which room did Amelia occupy?’

For some seconds there was no reply. ‘The room opposite yours on the other side of the corridor, but no clues will be found there,’ with which words the lovely Rosalind left me.

My first thought was to look out the window, where I could see that I was at the front of the house not far from the huge tree, where the ravens sat in rows on the thick branches obviously awaiting the next visitor. The sea beyond sparkled in the sun, stretching to infinity.

The fact that Amelia had not married the handsome Tobias was indeed a shock and now she had vanished and in what state of mind? And what did I really know about my friend? And why had she not written to me until the pleading missive I had received four weeks ago? What had happened in that short time? And indeed what had happened since she had arrived at Ravensmount last September? My thoughts were interrupted by a tap at the door and Tilly entered with another young maid dressed in a white mob cap and apron over a grey cotton dress.

‘Why Tilly,’ I exclaimed, ‘you look happy.’

‘I am Miss, this is Emily.’ She introduced the young girl who was a slip of a thing with brown hair perilously escaping her mob cap. They’d brought me jugs of water which they tipped into a beautiful pink bowl on a washstand by the bed.

‘Thank you, both of you.’ As I spoke they stopped chattering amongst themselves.

‘We’ll fetch you a tray of tea now, Miss,’ Tilly informed me as they both practically skipped out of the room giggling as they went.

I had a well needed wash with a fluffy flannel, soap and towel which lay in readiness on the marble topped washstand, after which I went to the white dressing table set between the window and the door. On each drawer were small oval paintings of young women of a past age, all plump and bonny, dressed in low cut dresses with short puffed sleeves. On the glass top was a pink glass tray with matching candlesticks and trinket boxes decorated with pink roses.

I reached for the hairbrush and tidied my hair, looking at my reflection in a bevelled glass mirror which was handsomely engraved with brightly

coloured birds sat on branches of trees. It was then in the mirror that I caught sight of the portrait over the fireplace, strange I'd not noticed it on entering the room. I turned around and walked towards it, the picture was in a gold leaf frame, not large, but not small either.

I gazed at the young dark-haired woman depicted on the canvas. She stood sideways, but her cream face looked towards me, the dark sparkling eyes fringed by long dark lashes, her coal-black hair arranged perfectly back from her face. She wore a white low cut gown and a white fringed shawl was draped over her arms.

I was intrigued as she looked almost familiar and I searched my mind as to why, but no matter how hard I tried the answer eluded me. A sudden thought came to me. While all was quiet I would take a peep in Amelia's room. I could see the bedroom door almost opposite mine and swiftly I walked across to it and turned the large enamelled knob, but to no avail, no matter how much I turned and shook the door would not budge and I realised that for some strange reason it was locked.

Deciding I did not wish to be in my room for the rest of the day, I walked back along the corridor. Before I reached the main staircase I spied a small wooden one at the same side as my room. This must lead to the back of the house, I reasoned, and with that thought in mind I lifted my skirts at the front and made my way down the steep steps which twisted to the left and led into a dark dismal corridor quite unlike the one I'd just walked down.

There was a studded metal door on the left which reminded me of a prison. I shuddered at the thought and walked on feeling quite cold in the damp atmosphere. Thankfully there was a door ahead of me and I could see chinks of daylight through the cracks in the wood. As I opened it I was startled to bump headlong into a man who caught my arms to steady me.

'Why, Mr Tremaine,' I uttered, 'I am sorry, I wished for some fresh air.'

'Do I know you?' he queried setting me at arm's length, and I realised foolishly it was not Tobias Tremaine, but he was so like him I could be forgiven for my mistake. As I looked over his shoulder through an arch of honeysuckle I caught sight of a young woman.

'Amelia!' I called loudly, for I was certain it was her. 'Amelia,' I reiterated, but my captor, for that it what it seemed, restrained me from running after her and tears of frustration filled my eyes as I looked into the dark ones of the man who held me against my will.

‘Please let me go,’ I pleaded with annoyance, wriggling to try and set myself free, but he held my arms tighter and with one first had caught hold of my wrist. ‘How dare you?’ I almost spat at him.

‘I have no intention of letting you go until you tell me who you are and what you know of Amelia?’ By his voice I could tell he was amused and I fought harder, bending suddenly to bite the hand which held fast my wrist so tightly it was painful, but I only managed to graze his skin.

‘Blast you!’ I shouted.

‘Young lady, I have no intention of harming you. Just tell me who you are, for you could by logic be an intruder.’

‘My name is Sara Osborne,’ I obliged him, ‘and I am a friend of Amelia’s. Tobias Tremaine has offered me a room for the night, as I appear to have travelled all the way from Bath today on a fool’s errand.’

‘Have you indeed,’ he said quietly. ‘Now I am going to release you and I beg you not to run from me.’ As I struggled once more he held me tighter. ‘Promise?’ he said laughing.

‘I promise,’ I conceded, for my wrist was sore and as he released me I could see how red it was from his strong grip. I smoothed my hand across it gently, all the while meeting the dark eyes of this stranger who stood watching me with some amusement.

‘I apologise profusely,’ he said quite sincerely, ‘but you could have been anyone.’

‘I really don’t know if I can accept that apology, Sir, and now I’ve told you who I am, may I ask the same of you?’ I realised that I spoke with a trembling voice, the whole incident had upset me far more than I cared to admit.

‘Miss Sara Osborne,’ he said startling me by taking my hand and kissing the back of it, ‘I am Michael Tremaine, Tobias’ brother.’

‘Well,’ I said in confusion, ‘I’m not going to say I’m pleased to meet you for I can’t say that I am.’

‘Let me redeem myself, please, Miss Osborne, and walk with you in our beautiful garden,’ he implored, the amusement leaving his voice.

‘Very well, if you must,’ I agreed, ‘for I am in need of some fresh air.’ Michael crocked his arm for me to take which I did with little grace. We stepped through the arch of the honeysuckle into a garden which took my breath away. The heady fragrant scent of dog roses invaded my nostrils and the garden before me was wild and beautiful.

I wondered momentarily what other surprises Ravensmount would hold as Michael Tremaine led me to a stone seat set on a small grass lawn from where I could see a small wooden bridge which spanned the tiniest of streams.

'So you like our garden?' my companion asked as I seated myself on the stone seat decorously arranging my green skirts.

'Yes, it is beautiful,' I said honestly as Michael sat beside me.

'I feel, Miss Osborne, that we have started on the wrong footing,' he said softly reminding me of Rosalind.

'I fear so, Mr Tremaine, but there isn't anything that can't be mended,' I assured him smiling and thinking how like his brother he was.

'You don't know how relieved I am to hear you say that.' As he spoke Michael laid a hand gently across mine. 'Now tell me,' he continued, 'what you know of Amelia. And did you really think it was her crossing this very garden?'

'I'm convinced of it,' I said adamantly, 'if you hadn't prevented me from doing so I would have ascertained the fact.'

'But I can assure you that no-one has seen Amelia since she disappeared. Lord knows I've looked for her high and low. I believe it was a figment of your imagination, Miss Osborne. Maybe you wanted to see her.'

His implication that I was prone to fanciful thoughts marred the kind thoughts I had started to have of this brother of Tobias and I snatched my hand away from his somewhat rudely, an action I regretted almost as soon as I'd done it and I reached my hand out to him.

'Forgive me, Mr Tremaine, but it has been a long day and one full of surprises, most of which were not pleasant.' As I spoke I noticed the light was starting to fade, but it was still warm and the combination of the scent of honeysuckle and dog roses suddenly felt overpowering. I rose to my feet, closely followed by Michael.

'Tell me, what has been the most unpleasant surprise for you today?' he murmured.

'Apart from Amelia disappearing, I think the fact that she lied to me about marrying your brother,' I said quietly with resignation. 'Do you know why she didn't marry Tobias, Mr Tremaine?'

There was a silent pause before his answer drifted across to me. 'Because, Miss Osborne, Amelia fell in love with me.'

This admission beat any other revelation told to me today. I stepped back from him.

‘So my friend married you, Mr Tremaine.’ This was a statement rather than a question, my voice was harsh and I wondered why I felt a sense of betrayal.

Michael Tremaine’s reaction to this statement was to throw back his head and laugh. I felt like pounding on his chest with anger, but I’d already behaved in an unladylike manner towards this man in the space of little more than an hour already.

‘Why are you laughing at me?’ I almost shouted at him.

‘Because you have reached your own conclusion, totally the wrong one in the space of seconds, Sara,’ he said, merriment in his voice.

‘So tell me then, what happened between you and Amelia?’ I challenged him, sitting back on the seat.

‘Nothing, absolutely nothing. Her love for me was not reciprocated I assure you. I am surrounded by dark-haired women, I certainly wouldn’t want to marry one.’

As he spoke, the merriment in his eyes and voice suddenly died. ‘I much prefer fair-haired women and a very beautiful one has stumbled headlong into my path today.’

At his words I didn’t know what to do or say. I felt foolish and confused at the same time and didn’t wish to discuss the matter further.

‘I must return to my room, Mr Tremaine, but I cannot walk back through that dark passageway,’ I said with a calm I didn’t feel.

‘Then I’ll show you round to the front,’ he said, kindly offering me his hand.

3

The ravens flew noisily overhead as I ascended the steps to the front door for the second time that day. As I stepped into the hall I saw Rosalind standing at the bottom of the staircase. Was she waiting for me? I wondered.

'So you've met our brother, Michael,' she commented, and I realised she must have watched us from the window alongside the great door.

'Yes,' I replied, not wishing to tell her the circumstances in which we had bumped into each other.

'Your maid, Tilly, tells me it is your birthday today,' said Rosalind dismissing the subject of Michael for which I was grateful.

'Indeed, I am twenty-one today and haven't yet opened Father and Mother's present to me,' I told her.

'You must join us for dinner this evening, so we can at least toast your special day.' She spoke with enthusiasm and I realised that her life may in some way be dull and her days repetitious.

'It is kind of you, Miss Tremaine, but I feel weary and would not be sparkling company,' I admitted.

'Then stay for a few more days,' she pleaded, 'and we shall have a party for you.'

'Why thank you, I would like that and it would give me time to try and trace Amelia's whereabouts,' I said, having no intention for some reason in telling this young woman I had seen my friend not long since walking in the garden. Or had I seen her?

At the mention of Amelia the lovely face changed, and she was about to speak just as another young woman joined us in the hall. I'd thought Rosalind to be beautiful, but the young woman who now stood at her side, dressed in a day dress the colour of a beautiful mauve, matching the wearer's expressionless eyes surpassed even Rosalind's beauty.

'Did I hear mention of a party?' the newcomer said in a tinkling melodic voice, but still her eyes were void of any emotion.

'This is our sister, Violet,' said Miss Tremaine, 'and this young lady,' she said, speaking to her sister as if she were a child, 'is Sara, a friend of Amelia's.' At these words Violet ran over to me, her dark ringlets bobbing up and down, and she caught my arm.

‘You must come to my studio and see my ravens,’ she said excitedly, ‘Amelia loved them, but she hasn’t been to see me for a long time.’ At which words she stamped her foot and tears rolled down her cheeks. ‘No-one likes me,’ she wailed and I realised this lovely young girl was still a child inside a woman’s body.

‘Come, Violet,’ coaxed her sister, ‘we will go to your room and prepare for dinner.’

Before they walked together up the wide staircase, Violet looked at me. ‘You will come tomorrow?’ she pleaded, and I knew I would, but only for her sake as I felt compassion for her. As I made my way to my room I wondered if there was anyone in this household that I hadn’t yet met. I didn’t realise then that there was someone else I would meet on the morrow and that the whole day would be fraught with minor incidents drawing me further into the lives of the family at Ravensmount.

As I stepped into my room, the first thing I noticed was a cheery fire burning in the hearth for which I was thankful as now the sun had gone and the large room felt chilly. Tilly, with Emily’s assistance, was arranging my clothes in the large rosewood wardrobe which stood in an alcove on one side of my bed. I could see my open trunk standing at the foot of the bed.

‘Your tea’s gone cold, Miss Sara,’ grumbled Tilly indicating a tray which stood on a small table next to the armchair which had been pulled up by the fire, ‘and the bread will be curling at the corners no doubt,’ she continued to chide me.

‘I’m sorry, Tilly,’ I said, realising how hungry I suddenly felt and Rosalind’s invitation to dinner crossed my mind. Picking up one of the sandwiches, I could see that the bread had indeed dried out a little, but I ate it nonetheless, a thought coming to me. ‘Tilly, have you come across my birthday present?’ I asked.

‘Yes, Miss, it’s on the dressing table.’

Swiftly I retrieved the tissue wrapped gift which had been tied with an emerald green ribbon. I sat on the armchair and carefully unwrapped it. The paper contained an oblong green velvet box and opening it I could see a necklace of creamy pearls with diamonds set into the clasp. They were beautiful and I suddenly felt homesick. Tilly came over to look, Emily hovering in the background.

‘They are lovely, Miss Sara,’ Tilly whispered. ‘Oh Miss, don’t feel sad,’ she said suddenly as she caught sight of a large tear which trickled down

my cheek. ‘We’ll be back home before you know it. Shall we leave the rest of your things in the trunk, Miss? Seems silly getting everything unpacked.’

‘No, empty it please, Tilly, for we are here for a few more days,’ I replied.

As I snuggled between the crisp white sheets later that evening, the candle beside my bed cast eerie shadows on the walls and ceiling. I wondered just how long we would stay at Ravensmount and whether my search for Amelia would prove to be fruitful. Before I fell asleep I recalled Tamsin’s words, ‘Do not spend a night there.’ I dismissed the thought, certain no harm could befall me.

*

The squawking of the ravens awoke me with a start the next morning. Surprisingly I’d slept well. Early daylight filtered into the room tinged with a rosy glow from the curtains. I slipped quickly out of bed and donned my pale blue dressing gown, recalling Mrs Mallory’s words on my arrival.

I was eager to know who the visitor was at this time of the morning, causing the birds to swoop to the tower, for I could see by the small marble clock at my bedside it was six-thirty. Pulling the curtains back I caught sight of a young woman in a royal blue cloak, the hood of which covered her head, but I recognised the cloak and knew it to be Amelia’s.

‘Amelia!’ I called her name in vain for she disappeared round the corner in the direction of the garden with an older woman who was her companion. Quickly I ran to my door, running along the corridor with bare feet, totally oblivious of my attire or the fact that my long blonde wavy hair flowed behind me.

I sped down the staircase one hand on the polished banister to be met at the bottom by a startled Mrs Mallory who was crossing the hall. She caught my arm, preventing me from my intention of opening the front door, which even as I looked I could see was chained and bolted top and bottom.

‘Miss Osborne,’ the housekeeper admonished me, ‘have you any idea how unseemly the sight of you in your night attire, your hair loose and your bare feet would appear to a gentleman.’

‘No, I hadn’t thought of it,’ I replied, snatching my arm away from her. People in this house seemed intent on catching hold of the same arm, I thought.

‘From where I’m standing it’s a pretty sight I assure you!’

I whirled around to see Michael Tremaine smiling at me from the open doorway of the drawing room.

My face was scarlet and as Mrs Mallory ushered me up the staircase, my hair and night attire flowing behind me, I looked back to see him lounging against the doorframe an amused expression on his handsome face.

As I thought of his handsome face, glittering black eyes and dark curling hair I realised I wished to make a good impression on him and I could easily understand how Amelia had fallen in love with him.

Looking out of the window once more, I could see the ravens were silent now and back in the tree. The sea looked grey, ever tumbling towards the steep cliff and I thought for an instant that I had imagined seeing Amelia, but dismissed the thought just as quickly.

But why would the Tremaine family dismiss her being here? I came to the conclusion that one or all of them were lying. But who? And also why?

I sat in the armchair and nodded off to sleep to be woken by Tilly carrying a breakfast tray which she deposited on the small table at my side. My feet were freezing and I wished the fire was lit, but the ashes still lay forlornly in the cold grate.

'It's a grey day today, Miss,' said Tilly, stating the obvious as I turned to look at the grey clouds scudding across the sky. 'What will you wear, Miss?' she asked, opening the wardrobe.

I suddenly felt I'd lived here for a very long time and had a feeling of déjà vu, and my eyes were drawn to the young woman in the portrait. No matter where I was in the room her eyes surveyed me and I felt quite unsettled by it, making a mental note to ask someone who she was.

'Miss Sara, are you with me or not?' Tilly's' exasperated voice cut into my thoughts. She was still standing by the open wardrobe, waiting patiently for an answer. I picked a rose-pink day dress, the bodice v-necked and buttoned to the waist.

I had no notion as to what I intended to do today, but my main aim was to avoid Violet. Don't be uncharitable, I chided myself at the thought. Stepping into the corridor I looked to see if anyone was around. On seeing the coast was clear I once again tried the door of Amelia's room. It was shut fast against me.

I knocked gently on the door with some thought that she may be in there, but all was silent within and I made my way towards the main staircase with a sinking heart, realising that I knew little of the layout of the house and thinking that because of this I had no hope of looking for my friend.

I stopped by the wooden staircase, an idea occurring to me. Without the intention of doing so I made my way downward, lifting my skirts as I walked along the threadbare carpets to the metal door I had discovered yesterday. I lifted the large latch and had expected the door to be firmly closed, but it swung back easily with little noise and I could see the hinges were well oiled, which led me to believe the door was used frequently.

Stepping inside I could see why; the stone walled room was full of racks of wine and my heart sank, disappointment flowing through me just as I felt something move under my skirts. Looking down I could see it was a mouse and I screamed. The mouse scuttled off.

'You are surely not afraid of mice, young lady.' A deep masculine voice arrested my attention as the sound of it reverberated around the walls. A voice I didn't recognise and I knew instinctively it was an older man. I turned round to face him.

'I am afraid I am, Sir,' I said sheepishly.

'Then you should not be poking and prying around in wine cellars which don't belong to you.' As he spoke I met his gaze. The voice was harsh and I knew the words weren't meant in a light-hearted way.

'I'm sorry, I thought ...' I commenced, but thought better of it as I was sure this man, whoever he was, wouldn't understand that I had imagined my friend may be here. My wish was to escape, but his solid frame blocked the doorway and he stood firm, intent on ensuring I would not poke my nose anywhere it wasn't meant to again.

He was a striking looking man with thick silver-coloured hair, a firm jaw and the dark glittering eyes of the Tremaine family. But whereas until now I had seen softness and mirth looking at me, his eyes showed anger and hostility.

'I take it you are Sara Osborne from Bath,' he said, taking a small jewelled snuffbox from his pocket and then proceeding to sniff at the powdered tobacco.

'Yes, I am,' I said demurely, all the while looking at him praying that I could soon escape, not just from this cellar but from Ravensmount itself. Maybe Tilly should have left half my belongings in the trunk after all.

'My family are foolish, every one of them,' he said with a derisory tone, placing the snuffbox back in his pocket. 'Not one of them married, and why? I'll tell you why, because they fall in love with the wrong people and

I will not have any one of them marrying without my approval. Let my words be a warning to you.'

'But Tobias is the master here,' I said bravely, thinking that I would marry whoever I liked.

'What gave you that notion, Sara Osborne, I cannot imagine, for I, Abraham Tremaine am master of Ravensmount and will be until I take my last breath.' As he spoke the words, he stepped to one side, the doorway open to me. I took this as a sign of dismissal and scuttled past him without a sideways glance, hoping never to incur his wrath again.

Before I looked for Tilly to ask her to help me pack our things in readiness for our departure, I made my way to the arch of honeysuckle and the tranquillity of the garden. Sitting on the stone seat where only hours ago I had sat with Michael, I recalled my short encounter with the true master of this house. My knees were still trembling at the thought of Abraham Tremaine's overbearing presence. Thankfully his personality had not been passed on to his children Tobias, Michael, Rosalind and Violet.

The thought of Michael made me smile and I recalled this morning's incident when I had stood vulnerably at the foot of the staircase. I would be sad not to see Michael again, and what of Amelia? Would I be letting her down if I left so soon? Was I making the right decision? The thought of the incident in the wine cellar brought me to answer. Making my way once more through the hall I encountered Rosalind again.

It was like a re-enactment of the previous evening. 'Lunch will be served in the small dining room,' she said, indicating a room behind the staircase next to the drawing room. 'From twelve noon until two. You are most welcome to join us and I have spoken to Tobias about a small party in your honour tomorrow.' She talked with little chance of me to interrupt.

'It's kind of you, Miss Tremaine, but I shall be leaving in the morning if it can be arranged,' I said quietly, noting that today she wore a cream-coloured gown which gave her the look of the young woman in the portrait in my room.

'Surely not, Sara,' she said softly, 'I had hoped we could be friends, for life is dismal here and Violet is such a trial, not to mention ...' Here she broke off and I had the distinct feeling she was going to name her father as another trial. I was just about to reply when someone took my arm. Turning away from Rosalind I could see it was Violet.

‘You promised to see my studio, Sara,’ she said excitedly, tugging at my bell sleeve, ‘I’ve been looking for you all over.’

I looked at my fobwatch. An hour until luncheon. ‘I have an hour, Violet,’ I said kindly. She was indeed like a child, although a beautiful woman in truth. ‘Excuse me, Miss Tremaine. I accept your kind offer for luncheon when we may continue our conversation.’

Rosalind watched Violet and I as we walked up the staircase, Violet leading me by my hand to Lord knows where and practically pulling me over in her haste as I quickly gathered up my pink skirts in one hand.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked as we turned into the opposite side of the corridor to where my room was situated.

‘To the south tower,’ she said. ‘Silly you, not knowing. Everyone knows my studio is here.’

‘But I am new here, Violet,’ I said breathlessly due to exertion as she led me up a steep flight of stone steps at the end of the corridor. On reaching the top I took a moment to get my breath as Violet fumbled in the side pocket of her mauve dress for what was obviously a key to the door. So she kept it locked, I thought momentarily and wondered why.

The sight that met me as we entered the room made me feel physically sick. Black ravens filled the room, either cast in stone and painted black or depicted on canvas, some alive, some lying dead, the blood seeping from various wounds and every eye faced me as I looked, even those in death. Quickly I turned away and wished fervently I had my smelling salts with me.

‘Does it frighten you, Sara?’ asked Violet, dancing around me with glee. ‘It does most people, but Amelia loved them, like I do. She was a kindred spirit. Tell me where she is, I liked Amelia.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said gently, ‘but I need to go back to my room.’

‘Not yet, Sara. I have a secret. Come with me.’ She quickly locked the door, and no matter where she took me next I was never so glad to see the back of anything as I was that studio, and as we traced our footsteps back along the corridor the nausea which had risen in my throat started to fade.

Violet stopped at an archway without a door. On passing through I could see a balcony with polished railings.

‘See?’ she said excitedly as she pulled me to the railings.

And I did see, for as I looked over I could see the hall of Ravensmount and I realised I stood in a minstrels’ gallery. I could see the front door of the

drawing room and the staircase.

As I looked, Tobias stepped down the staircase and made his way to the small dining room. On the wall between the two rooms was an immense portrait I recognised as the man, Abraham Tremaine.

‘They will play music here for your party,’ shrieked Violet, ‘and I shall watch everything.’

‘So this is your secret?’ I asked quietly.

‘Oh no, Sara. I cannot tell you my secret or it would be a secret no longer.’ So saying she ran off, her shrill laughter pounding in my brain.

4

As I stood there after Violet's departure, I saw her run down the staircase and enter the dining room. It must be time for luncheon, I mused, and was unsure whether to join the family or not. It was then I saw Michael leave the drawing room and walk slowly to join his siblings. The sight of him made my mind up for me and I made my way to join them myself.

Entering the room I could see all five of them there. Abraham sat at the head of the table watching me, indeed as they all were, and my thought was to make my excuses and leave, but Abraham stopped me from doing so.

'Be seated, young lady, we've waited long enough.' As he spoke he indicated a chair opposite him. The table only held places for six and as I sat dutifully on the chair I idly wondered how long it had been since the mistress of the Ravensmount had occupied it. Violet sat next to her father and I noticed his hand was laid across hers protectively.

Rosalind sat by her father, also opposite her sister. She now looked down at her plate not meeting my eye. Michael sat to the left of me and Tobias to the right. Strange, I thought, how they all had dark eyes like their father except for Violet, but as she looked at me with a sardonic expression on her lovely face, I realised she was the one most like her father, cruel and manipulative.

'We will bow our heads,' commanded Abraham, and I saw they all did. Before closing my eyes I caught Michael looking at me and as our eyes locked he smiled encouragingly, which served to make me feel better and doubting my resolve to leave.

'Are you comfortable?' asked Tobias as he handed me a glass dish which contained a salad.

'Why yes, thank you,' I replied looking at him and thinking once more how ruggedly handsome he was, more so than his brother.

'And where are you sleeping, Miss Osborne?' Abraham's voice was loud and demanded an instant answer. I looked towards Rosalind not sure as to what I should say.

'I have given Miss Osborne the rose room, Father.'

As she spoke Rosalind looked down at her plate. At her words a look of thunder crossed Abraham's face then disappeared as quickly as it had come.

‘You know, daughter, that I do not wish that room to be occupied,’ Abraham admonished.

‘But Father, it is such a pretty room, far prettier than any other bedroom in this house,’ Rosalind pleaded her case.

‘My thought is to leave tomorrow,’ I cut in, hoping to distract Mr Tremaine from taking Rosalind further to task. My words had a various effect on the Tremaine family as they all looked at me.

‘But you can’t leave,’ wailed Violet, ‘I have so much to show you.’

‘You surely don’t intend to leave us so soon,’ Michael said quietly.

‘The girl can leave when she wants,’ observed Abraham sharply, ‘after all she is but a stranger. Now eat, and that’s an order.’

For some reason his words cut me to the core, but they were true, I was indeed a stranger, although I felt that in less than twenty-four hours I had come to know them all.

‘If you’ll excuse me,’ I managed to utter. Michael and Tobias stood. I noted that Abraham Tremaine did not, he just watched me with callous amusement. All was silent as I left the room except for my heels clicking on the polished floor. I stood for some moments at the foot of the beautiful staircase intent on gaining some composure.

‘Miss Osborne,’ a deep mellow voice caused me to turn around to see Tobias walking purposefully toward me. ‘Please stay.’ At these words I was stunned. To have heard them from Michael I could have understood.

‘It would seem, Mr Tremaine, that your father would prefer me gone,’ I replied quietly.

‘But I wish you to stay. You have brought a ray of sunshine into this house. Please come with me to see Lizard Point this afternoon. It is so beautiful there and it may help you change your mind. Please say yes,’ Tobias urged.

‘Very well,’ I agreed. For how could I say no, the mouth which had uttered the words ‘please stay’ was so beautifully shaped I had a sudden urge to kiss it, but Tobias would never know my thoughts.

‘Please give me half-an-hour to refresh myself,’ I said, noticing the afternoon sun was starting to spill through the drawing room window. The door was open and I thought of only yesterday when I had first set eyes on this man in a beam of sunlight.

‘I will organise the pony and trap this instant.’ With which words he was gone.

Before I ascended the staircase I looked across the hall to see if I could locate the minstrels' gallery. It was there, but quite high in the wall and I needed to raise my eyes upward to see it. Even as I looked at the polished railings I could see Mrs Mallory watching me. As I observed her she stepped back into the shadows out of view and my thought was that she would report the scene she had just witnessed, but to whom?

Settled in the trap, my pink skirts placed decorously around my legs and my prettiest pink bonnet with the brim decorated with tiny violet flowers on my head, I watched my companion climb deftly onto the seat beside me and expertly take up the reins, urging the pony forward.

'Are you warm enough?' Tobias asked me solicitously.

'I am fine, thank you,' I answered, smiling at him. The afternoon sun behind us warmed me as did thoughts of my good fortune at sharing this glorious afternoon with a handsome stranger. What Papa and Mama would think of it I could only imagine.

'A penny for your thoughts,' said Tobias, bringing me out of my revelry.

'I was thinking of Amelia,' I replied quietly. It would have been so easy to have told him a white lie, but for some reason I wished to be completely honest with this attractive man.

'What exactly are you thinking?' he enquired as we bowled along the lane through the pleasant countryside, not a dwelling in view.

'To be perfectly honest, Mr Tremaine, I was asking myself how Amelia would feel if she could see me with you,' I answered tentatively. 'For you must have loved her once.'

As I spoke I looked wistfully at my companion who pulled the reins, causing the pony and trap to come to a halt.

'I thought I loved Amelia, Miss Osborne, but the more time I spent in her company I came to realise that despite her gaiety and happy disposition, Amelia was transparent and for the want of a better word, boring. I soon came to realise that she was not the wife I imagined that I wanted and then ...' Here he paused, turning away from me and looking out over the green fields deep in thought.

'And then?' I prompted him.

'Nothing, Miss Osborne,' he said urging the pony forward, 'I feel I have said too much already. Let us forget Amelia and enjoy our outing.'

'But Amelia is the reason I came to Ravensmount,' I replied.

As I spoke I noticed we were coming into a small village which had rows of thatched cottages either side of the dusty track, with a small general store, a blacksmiths and a delightful looking teashop.

'How lovely!' I enthused, pointing to the small pink cob stone building which boasted the name Teashoppe on a plaque above the door.

'Yes, it is a pretty little place isn't it,' agreed Tobias. 'It is the only place like it for miles,' he informed me.

'If I stay I shall make a point of partaking tea there one day,' I said gaily, for my mood had suddenly changed and I realised it was the thought of Amelia which plunged me into moments of gloom.

As we reached the far side of the small village I observed a very small cottage set apart from the rest. There was a border of brightly coloured pansies, their tiny heads turned towards the sunshine, and sat alongside in a rocking chair was a slight elderly woman with wispy white hair drawn back of her kindly face. Tobias slowed down as we passed and she raised her hand in greeting, smiling pleasantly.

'Who is that?' I asked innocently.

'She was our nurse until a couple of years ago. Her age meant she had to leave Ravensmount. We are all very sad about it, for life is not the same without our dear Millie Sutton to turn to.' Tobias' voice held a sad note.

'I'm sure she is still there for you and always will be,' I soothed.

'Oh yes, Miss Osborne, you are right. My brother, Michael, visits her frequently,' he said, his voice sounded stronger for which I was thankful. 'And here we are.' He continued reining in the pony once more.

'Why it's beautiful here,' I whispered, overawed by the scenery before me.

Cliffs rose some two hundred feet above the sparkling water, broken here and there by small rocky coves for as far as the eye could see, to the tip of the Lizard. 'What is that green rock I can see?' I asked excitedly.

'It is Serpentine, quite unique and very fashionable for ornaments to be made from it to grace the houses of our present society.' As Tobias spoke he jumped down from his seat and assisted me to the rocky ground.

'I wish I'd thought to bring my parasol,' I laughed nervously, not daring to look at him as his strong hand still grasped my smaller one.

'Are you too hot?' he enquired with concern in his voice.

'I'm fine, really, Mr Tremaine.' We stood closely to one another in companionable silence, looking out over the sea.

‘The dreaded reefs of the Manacles lie off shore a little further along the coast, many a seafaring man has been drowned there,’ Tobias said sombrely.

‘That is hard to believe when the sea is as calm as it is today,’ I commented.

‘The sea has many moods, Miss Osborne, always be aware of it. Today it quietly slumbers in the warm May sunshine, but it can awaken suddenly and be a menace to ships and sailors alike.’

As he spoke Tobias turned to me still holding my hand and taking the other one also in his strong grasp. ‘Please stay, Miss Osborne, if only for a short while. Rosalind has planned a party for tomorrow evening in honour of your twenty-first birthday. I wish to see you in your most beautiful gown, your face flushed with pleasure, your green eyes sparkling,’ he said seriously. ‘And above all I wish to dance with you.’

For some moments I looked at him before I answered. ‘Your earnest request is not in vain, Sir,’ I said. ‘I will stay for a little while longer. Not just because of your entreaty, but also because I feel some loyalty to Amelia.’

On our way back in the pony trap I thought of my decision to stay. Tobias’ words had been most persuasive and I had felt drawn to him. But what of Michael, and I recalled the cruel way he had only yesterday secured my wrist akin to holding me prisoner.

I truly believed Tobias wanted me to stay and my earnest hope was that we would form a bond between us, one that couldn’t be broken. And then there was Violet, what other horrors would she show me? And had Amelia really loved her studio full of ravens?

Abraham would loathe the fact that I was to stop at Ravensmount longer, he had the authority to turn me out. I had not forgotten Rosalind, but as beautiful as she was, Rosalind was a quiet, silent figure in the household who would step back into the shadows out of the spotlight and keep the peace. She said that she had wanted us to be friends, and I made the resolve to do just that for I was sure she needed female companionship.

‘What is the village called?’ I asked Tobias as we passed through it. Millie Sutton was not sat in her chair on our return, in fact both her and the chair had disappeared. It took some time for Tobias to reply.

‘Moll’s Bay.’ The words drifted across me. I noticed we had turned into a side lane. It was a dead end and I marvelled at the beautiful view which lay

in front of us.

‘Why Moll?’ I asked him as I looked out to sea.

‘Two hundred years ago, Moll stepped into the water with no intention of returning,’ he said quietly.

‘And why was that?’ I asked him curiously.

‘Because her lover forsook her. I would never do that to you, Miss Osborne,’ he said quite unexpectedly, and as we looked at each other I knew not what to say.

On reaching Ravensmount the ravens swooped noisily overhead to the tower and I marvelled at the fact that I had arrived here only yesterday. On entering the beautiful hall I encountered Abraham Tremaine.

He was standing at the foot of the staircase as if to bar my way and my heart started pounding.

‘Did you enjoy your outing, Miss Osborne,’ he asked with some sarcasm in his voice.

‘I’ve had a lovely afternoon,’ I replied sweetly, for indeed I had.

There was a pregnant pause before he said quietly, ‘Beware my son, Tobias, young woman, for he is fickle.’

These few words quite spoiled the whole day and as I made my way to my room I wondered if they were true and prayed not or I would die.

5

I didn't go back downstairs that evening. Tilly brought me some supper and I retired early to bed and spent the night sleeping and waking. Thoughts of Tobias and Michael were racing around in my head. I woke with a start at one point, candlelight still flickering on the walls and ceiling and me imagining I was wet from top to toe after walking into the sea, and who would it be to cause me to do such a thing? Michael or Tobias?

And so my thoughts ran on until I awoke at daybreak, the light filtering through the curtains. Putting on my robe I walked across to the window and drew back the drapes. There was a pink glow lying across the water and the sea was tranquil and still. Then I thought of the winter with an angry sea and a wind howling around the house and through the ravens' tree, with dark clouds bearing down on the landscape and rain lashing at the windows.

I was studying the portrait of the young woman which hung over the mantel when there was a tap at the door, which opened slowly to reveal Rosalind looking calm and serene in a dove grey morning dress.

'I'm sorry to disturb you so early, Sara, but I was anxious to know if you are truly staying for a while longer, for Tobias mentioned it at dinner last evening.' As she spoke Rosalind looked at me enquiringly.

'Yes, I would like to stay if this is agreeable to all,' I said, standing up and indicating for Rosalind to sit in the chair which I had vacated.

'Oh, that is splendid!' said Rosalind with glee, clapping her hands together and walking to the window. 'I have much to do for this evening we shall have a small party in your honour,' she enthused.

'And what of your father?' I asked, not wishing to put a damper on her high spirits, but the question had to be asked.

'Leave me to deal with Father. His bark is worse than his bite you know.' As she spoke the smile vanished from her face, but returned as quickly.

'Before you go, Rosalind, may I ask who the lady is in the portrait?' I queried.

'It is my mother,' she replied, looking at the young woman in the picture with a vacant expression on her lovely face.

'I take it she is no longer with us?' I asked tentatively.

'No, indeed not,' Rosalind replied quietly and not taking her eyes off the portrait. 'She died of a broken heart.'

After Rosalind departed I sat for some time in the armchair, mulling over what she had said and looking at the lady in the picture who had been Rosalind's mother. And Tobias', and Michael's and Violet's? I asked myself. I also asked why she had died of a broken heart.

Getting up from the chair and pulling my robe tightly around me I walked to the door. Opening it slowly I looked stealthily into the corridor. There was no-one around and I walked swiftly over to Amelia's room trying the door once more, but it wouldn't budge. I stamped my foot in frustration.

'Good morning, Miss.' Tilly's voice startled me and I whirled around, putting my hand to my chest to still my fast beating heart.

'Oh Tilly! Don't frighten me so again,' I admonished her.

'I'm sorry, Miss,' Tilly replied. 'Emily can get the key for that room, Miss, if you'd like her to, shall I ask?'

Quickly I snatched hold of Tilly's hand, for some reason afraid that Mrs Mallory might hear us. I dragged Tilly back to my room, but before opening the door I stopped in my tracks, a thought suddenly occurring to me.

'What's the matter now?' wailed Tilly. I suddenly realised that this was the end of the corridor, so where was the door to the north tower?

'I need to get dressed,' I told Tilly as I ushered her into my room.

'But Miss, you haven't had your breakfast,' replied Tilly.

Taking no heed of Tilly's protestations I swiftly dressed in a pale green day dress with a white cotton collar and cuffs. Leaving Tilly to tidy up, I made my way along the corridor to the main staircase, saying to Tilly as I was leaving the room that I wished her to remain until I returned so she could help me choose a suitable gown for the evening.

Reaching the hall I looked to the right and left and was pleased to see there was no-one around and thankfully the great front door was unlocked. Raising the huge door latch I stepped out onto the steps. The air was quite chilled, but it was, after all, early morning. The sky was blue promising another glorious day.

The ravens watched me with their bright eyes fully alert and as I stepped onto the gravel and took a couple of steps towards the north tower they flew towards it squawking noisily.

I uttered a silent oath for now all the inhabitants of Ravensmount would know that someone was out and about. As I neared the square tower I looked up to ascertain which was my room. As I looked at the long leaded

window next to the tower I could see it was indeed mine, as Tilly stood at the window and raised her hand.

As I looked I was surprised to see a white face pressed against the window pane looking down at me. The face was definitely that of a woman, but I could not say who it belonged to. As I went to shout the name Amelia, the face disappeared abruptly as though someone had pulled the person back from the window.

Frustration filled my whole being. Lifting up my skirts I ran around to the side of the building only to run headlong into Michael.

'Steady, Miss Osborne,' he said with amusement as he held my arms, 'have you the Devil behind you?' As he spoke he looked past my shoulder as if to ascertain whether this statement was true or not.

'No I haven't,' I said with exasperation, all the while wriggling free from his grasp. 'I saw a face at the window of the tower and wished to find a doorway to gain entry.'

'Well, well.' Michael studied me as he spoke. 'So you still have thoughts that Amelia is here. Well the door to the tower is beside you so we can take a look together.'

At his words I looked to my left and to be sure there was a low door set in the wall which could so easily be missed as the wood was light in colour, obviously weathered by the sea winds. Ivy grew around it almost as if to protect it from prying eyes. I looked back at Michael and he stepped toward the door lifting the latch but the door would not budge. Two doors locked against me was my thought.

'You knew it would be locked,' I berated him.

At these words Michael raised a dark eyebrow. 'My dear, Miss Osborne, no Sara,' he started to say.

'How dare you call me by my Christian name,' I interrupted him.

'All right, Miss Osborne, then,' he said, placing an arm around my shoulder, which I have to admit didn't feel unpleasant as he continued, 'I very much fear we have started off on the wrong footing on both occasions.'

'That is an understatement,' I replied softly savouring the touch of his strong hand on my shoulder. Had it really been only two days ago we had bumped into each other for the first time?

'Then let us start again, Miss Osborne.' As he spoke he turned me to face him. 'We have a very pleasant tea shop at Moll's Bay, please let me take

you there for some refreshment this afternoon. It will relax you in readiness for this evening.'

For some seconds I mulled over this invitation, thinking of Tobias and our outing yesterday. It would seem I was to be pursued by the two brothers, but which one did I feel more drawn to? And above all which one could I trust?

With this thought in mind I said with my usual strong steady voice, 'Yes, Mr Tremaine, I would be most pleased to accompany you, thank you.' For an outing with Michael would hopefully ascertain the answer to my questions.

'I will meet you at the front of the house with the pony trap at two o'clock.' With which words he took my hand and kissed it gently, sending my pulses racing. So much so that when he left me, heading for the garden, I suddenly felt lost and alone.

This won't do, I chided myself, as I headed back to my room for I had more important matters to deal with this morning and surprised Tilly as I flung open the door.

'If Emily can obtain the key to Amelia's room then please ask her for me,' I said, walking quickly to the window.

'Of course, Miss,' Tilly replied. 'Would you like me to fetch her, Miss?'

'That would be a good idea, Tilly, thank you, but first please help me select a gown for this evening,' I asked, suddenly feeling quite apprehensive about the forthcoming party in my honour, and I idly wondered if the master of Ravensmount would be there.

Tilly and I looked through my small array of dresses. I had not brought many with me, not being sure how long I would be staying here when I had left Bath. It seemed a long time ago since I bade farewell to Papa and Mama and yet it had only been four days. Thinking of the journey to Cornwall brought to mind our travelling companion's words, 'You will be drawn into a spider's web.'

I shuddered at the thought, for the words Tamsin had spoken were coming true. Tobias and Michael had attracted me into a web and I had not yet struggled to free myself.

'I think peach, Miss,' Tilly's voice cut across my thoughts and I could see she had removed my pale peach-coloured gown from the wardrobe. As she held it up for me to look at I thought of the only other time I had worn this

particular dress at Amelia's going-away party at our home in Bath last September.

'Yes Tilly, I think this is a wise choice, please hang it on the outside of the wardrobe so any creases can fall out by this evening.'

While I spoke I searched in the drawer of the dressing table for my cream lace fan which was decorated with peach-coloured roses. The whole ensemble, I fervently hoped, would look most becoming and admirably suit the occasion.

Tilly returned with Emily and breakfast some fifteen minutes later. While I sat on the armchair eating toast and a boiled egg I spoke to the shy Emily, 'I only want you to do this for me if it will not get you into trouble,' I told her, 'and be assured if there is any bother over it I shall be the one to take the blame.'

'Thank you, Miss Osborne,' Emily said timidly, and looking at her now I could hardly believe she would be brave enough to secretly obtain the key to Amelia's room. But I was to be proved wrong, for half-an-hour later Emily was back with Tilly, the key in her hand.

'Where is everyone?' I asked them both.

'Like who, Miss?' said Tilly in her usual never may care voice.

'Like Miss Rosalind and especially Mrs Mallory,' I replied, somewhat harshly for I was feeling nervous.

'They have both taken a trip to the village, Miss.' As Tilly spoke she was peering at the portrait above the mantel. 'Who is this?' she asked, practically falling off the fender she was precariously balanced on.

'I'm told this is the mother of Tobias, Michael, Rosalind and Violet. Now please get away from the grate,' I admonished her.

'She ain't Violet's mother, Miss Osborne,' said Emily, finding her voice at last.

I turned quickly to look at her. 'She isn't?' I said, quite dumbstruck by this piece of information. 'Then who is Violet's mother?' I asked with interest, thinking of Violet's eyes, so different to her siblings.

'I'm not quite sure, Miss, but the head maid said there was quite a do over it and that the nurse knows more about it than she'll ever let on.' Emily seemed quite proud to be able to reveal such things about the household.

'Really!' I exclaimed, 'we'll say no more about it then Emily, nor you, Tilly,' I told my maid who was listening all agog. 'Now, I'm going to

Amelia's room for ten minutes and I'd like both of you to stand down the corridor and let me know if anyone sets foot on the staircase.'

With the key in my hand and my heart pounding, I stood outside Amelia's door and quietly inserted the key in the lock. As I stepped into the room and gently pushed the door I couldn't make out anything much in the dimness, for the heavy gold brocade curtains had been pulled almost together. Just a narrow ray of sunlight slid across the cream rug in the centre of the floor.

I waited for a couple of minutes so my eyes could adjust to the lack of light. I dared not look out of the window in case anyone should see me. After a while I could see a large wardrobe loom up at me on one side of the window, and slowly I made my way across to it and opened one of the double doors which held a full mirror.

I almost screamed as I saw my reflection in the glass. The familiar scent of Amelia's favourite rose-scented perfume wafted gently across to me and I could see many different coloured gowns hung in a neat row from rose pinks to emerald green. I was tempted to take one out, but thought better of it, as it was better not to disturb anything.

I was just about to close the door when I spotted something which made my heart miss a beat. It was the royal blue cloak I had seen someone wearing only a couple of days since. I was sure it had been Amelia and this proved that I was right, I thought in triumph. My friend was somewhere here at Ravensmount.

With elation I almost sped back to the door. Feeling quite disorientated I bumped into a heavy piece of furniture which caused a few bars of the music Greensleeves to tinkle out faintly into the room. I stopped in my tracks, rubbing my thigh which hurt from where I had walked into what I could now see was a dressing table. I recognised the music as that which played when the key was turned in Amelia's beloved music box, which now I could see sat on the dressing table.

I could hear my friend's word to me, 'This, Sara, is my birthright.' Although I never quite understood what that had meant, it obviously had some significance to her mother and father.

Just as I went to pick up the pretty little box I heard Tilly's voice. 'Miss, Miss!' she said in a loud whisper, 'Mr Michael has just come in the front door.'

Swiftly I fled out of the door and fumbled with the key to lock it again. Tilly, Emily and I walked to the main staircase as calmly as we could. I

gave Emily the key.

'Thank you,' I whispered. The two girls carried on along the corridor and I made my way down the staircase, bumping once more into Michael who was about to ascend.

'How fortuitous, Miss Sara Osborne,' he said smiling at me, his dark eyes seeking mine, 'for I shall sadly have to cancel our outing this afternoon. We shall need to leave it until Monday, forgive me?' he asked, and how could I resist him.

'No matter, Mr Tremaine, I can wait,' I said sweetly. But could I? At his words, disappointment surged through me and as I walked towards the drawing room I idly wondered if he had another assignation.

'Sara, Sara,' called an excited voice and before turning around I realised it was Violet. 'Have you noticed the decorations? Do you like them? I think they are lovely.' As Violet spoke she clapped her little hands together and I looked to where she pointed.

'I must confess Violet, I had not seen them,' I said as I looked around at the green garlands which festooned the walls of the hall.

'And see,' said Violet excitedly, 'the mats have been removed from the floor.'

On looking down I could see they had. 'And this is where you'll dance,' she said, twirling round and round on the polished floor. Fed up with her little game Violet ran across to me and whispered conspiratorially, 'And who will dance with you, Sara? Will it be Tobias, Michael or Papa?' Here she clasped her hands together. 'Oh yes, please let it be Papa.'

And as she ran up the stairs I could hear her saying, 'Papa,' over and over again in her shrill childlike voice.

I stood there for some time sickened by the whole incident, half wishing I had left this house as I'd planned to, for I realised it was Violet who put a deep fear in my heart and as yet I couldn't explain why. I felt I needed to get out of the cloying atmosphere of the house for a while just as Rosalind and Mrs Mallory arrived.

'You look pale, Sara,' observed the beautiful Miss Tremaine. 'Please get some rest before this evening. I have invited a few people over for dinner and as you are to be the honoured guest it would be nice that you look your best.'

'I promise you I shall, Rosalind. Now what I really need is some fresh air. Is there a conveyance that could take me and Tilly to Moll's Bay?' I asked

her.

‘Why yes, I shall arrange for Seth to bring the small brougham to the front. Shall we say in half-in-hour?’ she agreed amiably.

‘Rosalind,’ I called as she walked towards the kitchen, ‘may I take Emily? She and Tilly get on so well together.’

‘Of course. I will tell Mrs Mallory that Emily has my permission,’ Rosalind called back and went on her way.

After seeking the two girls out and arranging to meet them at the front of the house I went to my room, washed my face, pinched my cheeks to give them some colour and donned my white lace bonnet, ready for I knew not what. Before leaving the room I glanced at the portrait and said out loud, ‘And what secrets did you take to the grave?’

The three of us, duly settled in the brougham made our way down the winding lanes I’d travelled with Tobias yesterday. The thought of him brought a smile to my face and then I thought of Michael and almost laughed out loud. I really was between the devil and the deep blue sea. But which one was the devil?

Tilly and Emily giggled and chatted, the sun shone down out of a cloudless blue sky and Seth whistled as we went along. My thoughts turned to Amelia. Had the face at the tower window this morning been hers? And what significance did the small music box have to her birthright?

Arriving at Moll’s Bay we stopped outside the teashop. A nice cup of tea would be most welcome was my thought as Seth helped the three of us to the ground.

‘What a nice village isn’t it, Miss Sara,’ said Tilly looking longingly around her. ‘I don’t ever want to go back to Bath now,’ she said linking her arm through Emily’s.

Another problem I thought, and imagined myself going back home without Tilly. My hand on the door-knob ready to turn it, the two girls close at my heels, I stopped frozen to the spot. Inside, sat at a table talking earnestly while drinking tea, were three people. Two of them I could understand being there, Michael and his nurse, Miss Sutton, but the third!

‘What’s the matter Miss?’ asked Tilly.

‘I’m sorry both of you, but we cannot go in there today, I suddenly feel unwell,’ I lied, my hand releasing the door handle. As I hustled them back to the waiting brougham, I wondered what on earth Michael and his nurse were doing taking tea with Tamsin our travelling companion! It was another

mystery to assail me, but in some ways the most curious mystery of them all!

6

I was pondering over this small mystery while preparing myself for the coming evening. What part did Tamsin play in the lives of the occupants of Ravensmount? And whatever role it was, did it have anything to do with that day at the inn when she had tried to prevent me from staying here? I turned it over and over in my mind and could as yet reach no conclusion.

'Shall I help you into your gown, Miss Sara?' Tilly's voice interrupted my thoughts. The pale peach gown slipped easily over my head, encasing my body with a luxurious feeling of softness and coolness. While Tilly fastened the hooks and eyes at the back of the bodice, I looked again at the portrait over the mantel.

A small ray of fading sunlight fell across the lovely face depicted so cleverly on the canvas, so much so that I sensed the eyes were watching me and I had a sudden desire to know the name of Abraham's wife.

'There Miss, all done. I've adjusted the frills and will now arrange your hair,' said Tilly, stepping around to the front of me and obscuring my view of the portrait.

'Thank you,' I said, walking across to the dressing table and sitting on the chair, my thoughts no longer with this afternoon's scene at the tea shop, but with Michael and Tobias.

Tilly piled my blonde curls on the top of my head, securing them with a gilt comb, leaving soft ringlets either side of my face and the nape of my neck.

'Now the necklace, please,' I said to her, reaching for a string of creamy pearls. Tilly secured the jewelled clasp with some difficulty.

'There Miss,' she said, her administrations complete. 'Come and look in the full length mirror for you look fit for the Queen's court,' she complimented me.

'My gloves first,' I reminded her. We both giggled as we struggled with the tight fitting gloves which practically met the edge of my short sleeves of my gown. Then, picking up my fan, I walked over to the mirror. The sun's ray had moved from the portrait and now shone off the wardrobe by my bed, bathing me in a golden glow with minute particles of silver dust surrounding my reflection.

‘What do you think?’ Tilly asked excitedly. ‘You’ll be loved by all who see you, Miss and that’s the honest truth.’

‘Thank you, Tilly. You’ve done a wonderful job, now you run along and do whatever pleases you this evening,’ I urged her.

‘Me and Emily are going to stand at the minstrels’ gallery later so we can see who you dance with,’ she informed me.

‘Then I hope you both enjoy the spectacle,’ I said hesitantly and with some annoyance.

With Tilly gone I gathered myself together. Moving out of the door I walked along the corridor, my sumptuous skirts swishing on the carpet beneath my feet. As I reached the top of the wide staircase I could hear snippets of conversation coming up to meet me and I could see Rosalind and a couple of strangers talking, a glass in each of their hands.

Taking a deep breath I started to descend the staircase, my skirts pulled up a trifle with one hand lest I fall, the other hand delicately fanning myself for I felt suddenly hot. As I reached the third step from the bottom all conversation ceased and I could see both Michael and Tobias watching my progress down the stairs.

Tobias, dark and mysterious and Michael at his side, dark and gentle. Then I blushed for I realised I had come to a halt on the stairs and I smiled to cover my confusion, stepping lightly onto the polished floor below.

‘Fetch Sara a glass of sherry,’ instructed Rosalind bustling over to me and kissing me enthusiastically on both cheeks. Over her shoulder I could see Tobias walking to the drinks trolley situated in the far corner by the window while Michael watched me, his eyes steady and intent as he sipped at his drink. I smiled at him and he slowly raised his glass in salutation and my heart started racing.

Rosalind, looking lovely in a beige-coloured gown decorated with small pink rosebuds, steered me towards the middle-aged couple she had been in conversation with. I turned sideways to look again at Michael who was still watching me just as Tobias thrust a glass of amber liquid in my hand. I immediately thought of potions and poisons, wondering ludicrously if Tobias was the poisoner, when my wicked idea was interrupted by Rosalind’s voice.

‘Sara, Sara,’ she repeated, ‘may I introduce you to Nicholas and Hester Northcliffe.’

‘Why, how do you do I’m sorry, but I was distracted. Please forgive me for being rude,’ I pleaded.

‘Not at all, young woman,’ Nicholas’ voice boomed out. He was a rotund man with a red face, while his wife was as thin as a scarecrow with bright red hair and a white unsmiling face.

‘I can see the object of your distraction,’ he said coarsely, nodding in Michael’s direction and winking at me.

I disliked the man immediately and was grateful to Tobias who steered me away to the drawing room, much to his brother’s obvious alarm.

‘You look very alluring this evening, Miss Osborne,’ Tobias observed, looking me up and down.

‘I second that,’ spoke a voice from the corner of the room. It was the master, Abraham, who we had not noticed. He walked towards us, the snuff box in his hand. I thought how distinguished he looked, dressed in a black jacket, his silver-grey hair shining in the evening light.

‘Tell me, Miss Osborne,’ the master continued, ‘whatever possessed you to travel from Bath to Cornwall on your birthday of all days?’ The question was a fair one, but unexpected and brought to mind Amelia.

‘I wished to travel to see my friend at the earliest possible moment,’ I answered him frankly.

‘Your loyalty to your friend does you justice, young woman,’ said Abraham, the first sign of friendliness towards me in his manner. ‘And do you believe Amelia is still here at Ravensmount?’

‘Yes I do,’ I said honestly without hesitation.

‘And why do you think this?’ he queried not unkindly.

‘I think I have seen my friend, Sir,’ I answered my voice strong. ‘Not only in these grounds here, but in the window of the tower.’

‘Interesting, Miss Osborne. Now let us join our guests in the hall.’ At his words I could hardly believe Mr Tremaine had dismissed the subject, but at the same time he had not argued with me.

For the first time I saw the large dining room at Ravensmount, whose steps led from the hall into the spacious room which boasted a huge stone fireplace, filled with brightly coloured daisies.

We seated ourselves around the table, the master at the head, the awful Nicholas Northcliffe opposite me who every now and then tried to touch my foot with his, so that I sat throughout the meal with my feet tucked under

the chair. Michael sitting further up the table watched me while I ate, causing me to wonder what exactly his thoughts were.

During the meal, Abraham Tremaine stood up raising his glass. ‘To our guest, the beautiful Miss Sara Osborne, her birthday and many more to come.’ He toasted me and I thought what a good start to the evening, but could things get better or worse? I was soon to find out.

As we stepped back into the hall afterwards I could see that chairs and small tables had been placed around, and after a nod from Rosalind to the minstrels’ gallery above, beautiful music floated down to us. To my dismay it was the master who approached me first.

‘Shall we dance, Miss Osborne?’ he asked, bowing over my hand which he had taken in his. His hand was strong and dependable and I idly wondered what had changed his manner towards me.

As we danced to the strains for a Viennese waltz and as Abraham whirled me expertly around the hall I could see Rosalind, Tobias and Michael watching us, also the other six guests which included the terrible Northcliffes.

‘This is one of Johann Strauss’ waltzes isn’t it?’ I observed as we glided across the floor.

‘Yes indeed, it is the Reunion Waltz.’ Abraham looked down at me for he was tall.

‘It is a beautiful piece of music,’ I said, listening intently to the violin.

‘Yes, how right you are, Miss Osborne. Chopin himself said that Strauss and his waltzes obscure everything else,’ my partner told me.

‘Is that so,’ I replied with great interest.

‘You seem very interested in him, Miss Osborne,’ he observed.

‘Yes indeed I am, Sir. Tell me more about Mr Strauss,’ I urged him.

‘I saw him with his orchestra some sixteen years ago in Austria, such fire and poignant rhythm,’ he paused then continued, ‘I was also fortunate enough to see him in London in 1838 on Michael’s birthday.’

‘Which is when?’ I asked with interest.

‘April the 17th.’ He paused and smiled down at me, a playful glint in his eye. ‘Mr Strauss has led a colourful life, Miss Osborne, for I believe he has thirteen children.’

At this piece of information we both laughed and I now saw a different side to the master of Ravensmount. He could on the one hand be

manipulative and harsh, and on the other he had a sense of humour and was knowledgeable about the arts.

‘Why has your manner towards me changed?’ I asked my dancing partner on a more serious note.

‘Because you are honest, my dear, and I have much respect for honesty,’ he replied looking down at me. ‘Others have not been so forthright.’ His words obviously had some meaning, but for the present the meaning eluded me. We were joined on the floor by Tobias and Rosalind and as I glanced up at the minstrels’ gallery I caught a glimpse of Violet looking through the railings at the scene below, and I mused as to why she had not joined us for dinner, but to be truthful I was thankful that she had not. Refreshing drinks were served as eleven of us sat talking or dancing and then Tobias loomed over me and my heart pounded.

‘May I request the pleasure of this dance with you?’ he asked seriously, no glint of humour in his eyes or voice.

‘You may,’ I said, rising to my feet. Tobias took my hand and led me onto the floor and so we danced and talked.

‘You are beautiful,’ were Tobias’ first words.

‘And so was Amelia,’ I said without thinking.

‘But your friend does not possess the fragile beauty you do, Miss Osborne.’

As he spoke I latched on to the word ‘does’ for Tobias spoke it with clarity.

‘So you believe Amelia is alive then?’ I asked him.

‘What causes you to say that?’ he answered sharply, stopping momentarily in mid step.

‘Because, you spoke the word “does”.’

At my words he laughed. ‘You read too much into things my dear, in fact, if you have a fault that is it.’

‘Is it indeed. Well let me tell you Mr Tobias Tremaine, that I am curious by nature and you ... you,’ I searched for the right words, ‘you are far too serious and pick holes in people as you did with my friend, Amelia.’

‘Please calm yourself, Miss Osborne,’ he soothed. ‘I told you Amelia fell for my brother.’

‘No you didn’t!’ I shouted back at him. ‘Michael himself told me that Amelia fell in love with him, and if this is true I can see why.’ I stamped my foot and fled from the dance floor, the strains of the violin in my ears.

Everyone was looking at me as I ran through the dining room, past the long table scattered with unwashed glasses and dishes.

I heard Nicholas Northcliffe's voice, 'How I like a girl with spirit,' he guffawed.

Pulling back the heavy pale orange tapestry curtains which were now drawn against the darkness, I fumbled with the latch of the French windows which I had noticed earlier led out onto the garden.

A strong hand fell gently over mine. 'Allow me,' a voice said softly.

Before I turned around I knew it was Michael. Over his shoulder I could see Abraham Tremaine standing in the doorway with a glass in his hand. As I caught his eye he raised the glass and smiled at me and then turned back to the hall.

'Thank you,' I muttered to Michael, allowing him to open the door which led out into the garden. Hot tears sprang to my eyes threatening to fall down my cheeks. We stepped into the beautiful garden, the moon shone brightly down casting everything with a silver glow, the air was warm and the glorious scent of flowers wafted around us.

It was a perfect evening for romantic thoughts and as Michael steered me gently toward the stone seat, I knew the answer to my question and that in my heart this was the one for me.

'You are trembling, dear heart,' Michael said with concern in his voice. 'Take my handkerchief and dry your eyes,' he commanded.

I did as he bid and looked at him.

'Oh Michael, I have made such a fool of myself this evening and spoiled everyone's enjoyment,' I said, almost sobbing into his white handkerchief.

'And deprived me of the last dance,' he said, a smile on his lips.

'Trust you to make light of the situation.' My words were true and how I loved him for it.

'Far better to be happy than sad, Miss Osborne,' he said quietly.

'You are so right,' I said, my mood lightening. 'Please call me Sara,' were my next words, and for some moments he looked into my eyes before answering.

'It would be an honour, now let us have that dance.' As he spoke he took hold of my hand pulling me to my feet, his arm encircled my waist as he gathered me closely to him. We could still faintly hear the music from the hall. The moon shone down on us as we danced together around the garden in companionable silence. How could I ever have thought my outing to

Lizard with Tobias could outweigh my time in the garden with Michael. What foolish creatures we can be, I admonished myself.

'You did well tonight, Sara,' Michael said suddenly.

'In what way?' I laughed, 'I assume you refer to my dancing.'

'You dance beautifully,' he complimented me, 'but I was talking of the way you stood up to Tobias.'

'What did happen with Amelia, Tobias and yourself?' I asked, taking my head from his shoulder and stopping.

'I told you the first day I met you, please believe me. Amelia fell for me, but I distanced her from me for she was not my type.'

I believed the words he spoke. 'Do you think this is why my friend has disappeared?' I asked of him.

'Not necessarily. As you know she was here for some time, I really have no idea what has happened to her, but I do believe you when you say you have seen Amelia here. I'm sure you are not prone to flights of fancy, so tomorrow after church I will secure the key to the north tower and we will investigate together. How does that sound?'

In truth his words were joy to my ears for I felt I had an ally in my search for Amelia at last. 'Thank you, thank you so much,' I enthused.

'Afterwards we could walk on the cliff together.' This was an invitation I knew.

'I would be delighted to walk with you, Michael.' As I said the words I wondered if I could ask him about his meeting in the tea shop this very day with Tamsin, but tomorrow would do.

'Nothing can spoil this can it, please tell me nothing will.' The words escaped my lips and I knew that Michael was going to kiss me for he cupped my face in his hands and bent his head, but we were rudely interrupted by Violet.

'Stop it! Stop it!' she screamed, 'Look at what I have here.' Both startled we looked at the piece of paper she waved around in front of us.

'Let us see.' Michael spoke quietly. The moon shone down on the picture Violet had drawn. She was a good artist for I could see it was me dancing in the arms of her father. My heart sank as realisation dawned on me, she thought of me and Abraham as a couple.

7

Next morning I awoke after another restless night thinking of Violet and her picture. Michael had tried to reassure me that there was no significance in the drawing, but I had my doubts.

'Oh Miss, look at the way you've crumpled your beautiful gown and practically thrown it on the armchair, I'll be bound,' Tilly scolded me. She was correct, I had taken it off with difficulty and placed it in a heap on the chair, wishing never to see it again.

'You can have it, Tilly.' At these words my maid's eyes lit up as she held the dress in her hands.

'And where would I wear such a gown, Miss?' she said with a grimace.

'Your wedding day maybe,' I offered.

'Fat chance of that, Miss, seeing I ain't got a beau,' replied Tilly quite disgruntled.

'Well keep it anyway in abeyance for whatever occasion. I would prefer not to see it again. Now I have to get myself ready for church,' I said, dismissing the subject of the gown.

We were to walk to church I had been told, so I would wear my black leather ankle boots and a suitable day dress.

As I suspected the day would be warm, Tilly and I chose a royal blue cotton dress with a full skirt falling over the bustle and a bodice buttoned to the neck with a delicate cream lace collar.

'You look as lovely as you did for the party,' Tilly told me when I was ready, 'but your face has a sombre expression today.'

'That's as maybe,' I answered her, 'but today I have much on my mind.' For indeed I did. There were many questions to be answered. Where was Amelia? Would Michael and I find the answer today when we went to the north tower? Why had Violet drawn me and her father together? And why had Tamsin been in the tea shop with Michael and his nurse?

As I descended the staircase I noticed the garlands had been removed and the scatter rugs placed back down on the floor.

They were all assembled, Abraham and his two sons, all looking handsome in black frock coats and white shirts. Rosalind looked as serene as ever in a pale green day dress with a bonnet to match her glossy black hair. Violet as usual wore the colour violet. She watched me as I stepped

into the hall, her eyes so bright they glistened and she had an unfathomable expression on her face. All was silent until I spoke.

'Forgive me for last evening's display of pique on my part, you must think me extremely rude after your hospitality and the wonderful party you arranged for me, for which I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I especially apologise to you, Mr Tobias Tremaine,' I said looking across at him, 'but I cannot retract the words I spoke for I feel they are true. Please accept my apology nonetheless.'

It was the master who walked over to me, taking my arm, at which Violet clapped her hands together and with relish shouted the word, 'See!'

I wished with all my heart that Abraham had not made the gesture, but it was too late. I could see that Michael looked shocked at his sister's one simple word which implied so much and proved me right.

'There is nothing to forgive, Miss Osborne,' Abraham began, 'for the evening was enjoyed by one and all. Isn't that so?' He included everyone in the question, extending one arm as he did so.

'Why of course,' said Rosalind sweetly, although I detected a slight misgiving in the way she said it.

'Now let us walk to church. Take my arm, Miss Osborne and we'll speak no more of it. Is that understood?' he asked them all.

'Yes Father,' came the reply in unison.

We walked down the drive through the gates heading for a lane opposite which I had not noticed before. The sun was shining down and my eyes were on Michael who walked with Rosalind. I so longed to speak to him and prayed that a chance would show itself soon. As we reached the brow of the hill I could see the church. It loomed up on us quite suddenly. The small grey stone building with a Norman doorway and no tower lay almost hidden among grass and bracken. I'd never seen a church so tiny.

'There's no graveyard,' I said to Abraham.

'No, these churches were built for worshippers in remoter parts of the countryside. The mother church of St Winwalloe on the Lizard had the rite of burial, but there is a font for baptism here,' he told me.

The older Mr Tremaine was certainly a very interesting man to talk to and I started to wonder what tragedy had befallen his beautiful wife and Violet's mother.

After the service in the dimness of the quaint little church I was thankful to step out into the sunlight.

‘Take Michael’s arm,’ Abraham instructed me with a wink. I smiled for I could see for sure that the Master of Ravensmount acknowledged that a relationship was forming between his younger son and their guest.

Michael must have heard for he offered the crook of his arm which I took with much happiness and willingness. All the way back Violet danced around us, preventing us from any lucid conversation.

As we neared the gates to the drive Abraham spoke sharply to her. ‘By my side at once, young woman!’ His words and the way he spoke them broached no argument. Violet did as she was bid with a torrent of tears and protestations. She was definitely unstable I mused, and wondered if she had always been like it.

‘I have the key,’ Michael practically whispered to me. ‘We will head straight for the north tower.’

We quickened our steps, and on reaching the tower door Michael produced the key from his pocket and inserted it into the lock which turned very easily, and lifting the latch the door swung quietly back on its hinges. There was a flight of narrow winding stone steps which we ascended in single file, Michael going in front of me.

It was necessary to lift my skirts up at the front and with no handrail my heart thudded, fearing I may fall. Eventually we stood on a cold stone landing two doors facing us. Michael opened the first one on our left which was but a dark cubby hole festooned with cobwebs and caused me to think of the spider’s web.

From here the sound of the ravens was very close, we could hear them crying harshly and flapping their wings.

‘Nothing of note in here,’ observed Michael after he had peered into the darkness. ‘It’s a long while since I’ve been up here. Now let us try the other door which I believe should open with the same key as the door below.’

As he spoke he turned the key in the lock, and sure enough the heavy oak door swung back with ease. By now my heart was pounding. Michael caught hold of my hand and with him by my side I tentatively stepped into what was a large room with three windows, one to the front and one each side, but disappointingly the room was empty. My heart sank, so this theory of mine was vanquished also.

Dust lay on the wooden floor, but here and there it had been disturbed, perhaps by a footstep? I asked myself.

‘I know you are disappointed, Sara,’ my companion began, ‘but all is not lost, for I can see that a path leads to the main window. Someone has been here quite recently, look,’ he urged me. I could see what he meant and we followed the vague footsteps to the window.

‘Oh my goodness,’ I said, ‘what an absolutely magnificent view.’

‘Yes, it is rather beautiful isn’t it,’ Michael replied. From here, for as far as the eye could see, was a view out over the sea and cliffs. ‘And if you come to the window on the right,’ he continued taking hold of my hand, ‘you will see the chapel we were at this morning.’

As I looked I could see he was right, the building was like a dot on the landscape sheltered by the surrounding green fields. It was then we spotted Violet walking across in our direction. As we saw her she looked up and no doubt would have seen us just as I’d seen the face at the window the other day.

‘Oh no,’ groaned Michael, ‘she’s heading this way and I have left the door below unlocked. No matter, we will bluff our way out of it.’

The next thing we knew we could hear the door open and shut below and the ravens squawking on the tower once more. I suddenly felt very afraid and caught hold of Michael’s arm. It seemed like only seconds before Violet appeared in the doorway. She flung back her head and laughed. Her stance reminded me of something, but I had no chance to think as to what it was.

‘What did you hope to find? A ghost?’ she almost screamed, thrusting her face close to mine.

‘We just came up here to see the view, Violet,’ said Michael to his sister in a soothing voice, at the same time pulling me gently back from her.

‘A likely story. You are deceiving my father, just as she did.’ The word ‘she’ was emphasised and Violet almost spat the words at us.

‘There is no reason to deceive. Now we’ll all go back down the steps slowly and quietly and lock the tower up once more,’ Michael coaxed.

Violet had calmed herself somewhat, but I could see her mind was still working overtime as we descended the stone steps. Michael in front and me bringing up the rear. I kept thinking inanely that Violet would push her brother, but she didn’t and we stepped safely outside once more. Michael relocked the door and placed the key in his pocket.

‘Now you run along for lunch,’ he instructed Violet. ‘Sara and I are going to return the key.’

‘I shall tell Papa,’ she shouted as she ran around the corner to the front of the house, her footsteps harsh on the ground causing the ravens to perform once more. I put my hands over my ears feeling quite distressed at the whole incident and was immensely disappointed that we had not discovered Amelia’s prison, for prison I was sure it was. My friend would not go into hiding of her own free will, she loved life too much.

‘Come,’ said Michael taking my arm, ‘we will head for the tranquillity of the sea and cliffs.’

A narrow path led from the tower to the cliffs, and as we walked along together I could hear the sea lapping on the beach below. The sun was moving around and I savoured the warmth of it on my back as I had felt quite cold in the tower. Looking up I could see small, white, fluffy, translucent clouds hung like cotton wool against the backdrop of the blue sky.

To my delight wild flowers grew in abundance on the cliffs made up of small clusters of red common hounds’ tongue and large patches of white fragrant bluebells. This was like heaven compared to the gloom of that empty room in the tower.

‘Here we are.’ Michael’s voice drifted across to me and looking down at my feet I could see a blanket had been laid on a grassy clearing with a picnic basket standing in the shade of a small green bush.

‘Why Michael, how ...’ I started to question.

‘Never mind now,’ he said placing a finger on my lips to silence me. ‘Sit down on the rug and let us see what delights Cook has prepared for us in the basket.’

As Michael lifted the picnic basket onto the rug he presented me with a pretty green parasol which had been lying under the bush also.

‘You thought of everything,’ I praised him as he sat beside me. I touched his cheek, ‘But I have to tell you green does not go with blue,’ I teased him looking down at my dress. We both laughed and he caught hold of the hand which touched his cheek.

‘But I can be forgiven as I had no notion of what you’d wear today,’ he said, kissing the palm of my hand.

The basket contained small sandwiches, cold chicken, fruit cake and cool lemonade with two glasses to drink it from. I arranged the parasol so it would shield my face from the hot rays of the sun. Michael and I sat tucking into the delicious fare and then sipped at our lemonade.

Suddenly he clinked his glass against mine. ‘To us,’ he said seriously.

‘To us,’ I repeated. ‘And thank you, Michael. Is it all right if I ask you a personal question?’

‘I’ve never been married,’ he mocked, ‘or in love before, so go ahead, I’m all ears.’

‘It’s very difficult,’ I began toying with blades of grass while I spoke. ‘So I’ll ask you directly. What happened to your mother?’

He turned away from me at my question and threw a stray pebble over the cliff, and for some moments I was afraid the question had upset him and spoilt his opinion of me, but he turned back to look at me.

‘Why do you ask?’ he asked quietly.

‘Because Rosalind said she died of a broken heart,’ I replied honestly.

‘She did,’ he murmured. ‘She walked into the sea at Moll’s Bay, intent on drowning herself because of my father’s betrayal.’ Here he stopped.

‘And did she ...?’ I commenced.

‘Yes, she did die. Her body turned up at Lizard Point a few days later.’

I could see it pained him to talk of it, but I had to know. ‘What exactly did your father do to warrant your mother taking her own life?’ As I asked the question I could more or less guess the answer.

‘He fell in love with a gypsy and she had his child,’ he told me. I touched his shoulder.

‘And that child is ...?’ I began.

‘Violet.’ Michael finished the sentence for me.

‘And what of Violet’s mother?’ I asked him, for I felt that I needed to know.

‘Let us talk no more of it,’ he said, playfully pushing me back on the rug, his laughter returning. I felt quite vulnerable lying on the cliff as Michael tickled my face and throat with a blade of grass, but I trusted him implicitly and when he bent over to kiss me I closed my eyes, a delicious feeling of fire running through my body as his lips met mine for the first time.

The kiss was gentle and I responded with the gentleness that was given, and I realised that my thoughts when I walked down the staircase last evening of Michael being dark and gentle was uncannily true. He kissed my cheek, my neck and stroked my face and suddenly I sat up a thought coming to me.

‘What’s the matter, dear heart?’ he enquired with concern and I laughed.

‘I was wondering what my father and mother would think of this,’ I told him, looking him in the eye. ‘Their only daughter in the middle of nowhere, sharing a picnic and an intimate moment with a man who is almost a stranger.’

‘Is that how you view me?’ Michael asked seriously. ‘A stranger? For I feel I have known you for a lifetime.’

‘And I you, believe me,’ I soothed. ‘But living here it is so easy to forget that other people exist.’

‘And you could live here for always?’ he asked taking hold of my hand.

‘Yes I think I could.’

‘Then marry me?’ he asked suddenly, so suddenly that I was taken totally by surprise.

‘Do you ask me because you are caught up on the moment?’ I asked him anxiously.

‘No indeed not, I would have asked you that first night in the garden,’ he strove to reassure me.

‘Ask me again after I have found Amelia.’ I said the words without thinking and knew that this tiny sentence had spoiled our time together, and wished with all my heart that my answer had been yes, but pride would not let me alter it and the precious moment was gone.

We packed up the picnic basket and stood up, me smoothing my skirt and brushing grass from the hem.

‘Sara,’ he said suddenly pulling me to him, ‘do love me? Or indeed, think you could love me?’

‘Yes I do,’ I told him sincerely.

‘Then we will leave this in abeyance until Amelia is found,’ he told me giving me a glimmer of hope and lightening my mood again.

‘Very well, so be it,’ I agreed. ‘What will happen with the basket and the rug?’

‘Simkins will fetch it,’ he told me.

‘Who the devil is Simkins?’ I said, laughing.

‘He is the cook’s husband, a fine fellow and very discreet. None of this will go any further I assure you.’

We walked back to house, my arm through his, like a married couple on a Sunday afternoon outing. Maybe this is how it would be in future years and I knew that not only in heart, but mind I wished this to be so.

Reaching my room, which was in truth Abraham's wife's room, I sat in the armchair, looking up at her portrait once more. How sad I thought, that she had taken her life and I suddenly disliked the master as I had on our first meeting. And what of Violet, who was her mother?

The day had seemed a long one and it was only five o'clock. Tilly brought me a tray laden with tea and crumpets.

'I hear you've been walking, Miss, with Mr Michael,' she said depositing the tray on the table at my side.

'Who told you this?' I asked, somewhat surprised in view of Michael's words only an hour since.

'Miss Violet told me and Emily and anyone else she came across, Miss,' Tilly informed me.

'And how pray did she know this,' I asked with some indignation, for Violet was becoming a thorn in my side.

'She followed you both, or so she says,' said Tilly with all innocence.

'Followed us? I never so much as caught sight of her,' I said, rising from the chair and feeling very angry now. 'Do you know which room is Violet's?'

'But your tea, Miss. I don't think it's wise to go to Miss Violet's room.' As she spoke there was a tap on the door. It was too late, for the door burst open to reveal Violet, her dark hair loose and falling around her shoulders to her waist, the beautiful violet eyes angry and flashing.

'You'll never find her,' she screamed at me and laughed a mocking childlike laugh which burned through my whole being and I suddenly realised what she had reminded me of in the tower and again now. She was like a beautiful gypsy and as she left I asked myself what she knew of Amelia's whereabouts.

8

Monday morning arrived and after breakfast I set off in search of Rosalind. Crossing the hall I encountered Tobias. He promptly gave me a look of disdain which upset me somewhat.

‘So Miss Osborne, you favour my brother, Michael, over me,’ were his words of greeting.

‘It is not a question of favouring anyone,’ I replied. ‘Not any one of us can help being attracted to one person more than another.’

‘You gave me hope that day at the Lizard.’ His words brought to mind our outing. Had I really caused him to think this?

‘I’m sorry if I gave you any such impression, Mr Tremaine, but truly I had not meant to,’ I said with truth.

‘First Amelia and now you. Could you please tell me what is wrong with me that I am treated with such indifference,’ he asked me.

‘I feel sure there is someone right for you as indeed there is for all of us,’ was the only reply I could think of.

‘Ah, Miss Osborne.’ The master’s voice interrupted us from the direction of the drawing room for which I was thankful, as I wished to end my conversation with Tobias and did not wish to appear rude.

‘Would you be kind enough to accompany me to my study, I wish to discuss something with you,’ said Abraham coming across to me.

‘Very well. Please excuse us, Mr Tremaine,’ I said to Tobias, who turned and made his way to the front door.

I was quite taken aback when Abraham indicated that I should return up the staircase.

‘Don’t be alarmed, Miss Osborne, my study is upstairs next to my room and has been since an accident some time ago prevented me from coming downstairs for a while,’ he explained.

Duly I followed the tall upright figure of Abraham Tremaine up the staircase. My mission to seek out Rosalind was forgotten as I was curious as to what the Master of Ravensmount would want with me.

After yesterday’s revelation, my intention was to be cool towards him and to keep my distance. Violet stepped out of a room along the corridor which I took note of as the room could be hers. Seeing Abraham and I together she clapped her hands. Today she looked her old self again and I had the

thought that may have imagined her animosity yesterday, but I knew it had not been a dream, her spiteful words had been meant.

She followed us to a door nearly at the end of the corridor not far from the steps leading to her studio and I shuddered.

'Sara, please come up to my studio when you have finished with Papa,' she pleaded.

'I'm sorry, Violet, but I shall have no time and I have little desire if any to step in that room again,' I told her as kindly as I could.

'Oh Papa,' the young woman cried, 'please tell Sara she has to come.'

'Violet run along. We had enough and more of your tantrums yesterday. I wish to speak to Sara alone,' he explained.

'Are you going to ask her to marry you?' she asked in a coy fashion and giggled, running off before Abraham had chance to reply.

We stepped into his study.

'What a beautiful room!' I exclaimed, for indeed it was. A large oak desk, the top covered in red leather stood in the alcove of the window. A large matching chair stood behind it with the back covered to match the top of the desk. Instead of curtains white shutters framed the window and books in all different hues and sizes lined the three remaining walls.

'I'm so pleased you like it, Sara. May I call you that?' he asked politely.

'If you wish.' I replied abruptly, trying to imagine this intelligent man with a gypsy.

'You are cool towards me today, Sara,' he said quietly, taking the little snuff box from his pocket. 'Has Michael been talking to you?' The question came unexpectedly and this man had already admitted admiring my honesty.

'Yes he has,' I said truthfully, all the while meeting Abraham's brown eyes.

'You are an intelligent young woman, Sara, so I intend to tell you the truth,' he said, taking a pinch of snuff and returning the exquisite box to his pocket. 'Please sit down and I will enlighten you.'

As he spoke he indicated a chair by his desk which I sat upon, curious as to what Abraham would say.

'My wife was called Sara,' he began and I gasped at the coincidence. 'She was beautiful and as dark as you are fair. I loved her with a love much more than any man could feel for a woman. I would have given her the earth and still given her more besides. We had three wonderful children, close in age,

two years between them, they were born in this house, in the bedroom you sleep in now, Sara.'

He stopped for a second or two and went to the window, then turned back to me and continued. 'Twenty years ago, a gypsy encampment set up in the field opposite the gates of Ravensmount. I had no cause to be concerned about this one way or another. Four months went by and Sara came to me one day to tell me she was expecting a child. I knew it wasn't mine for we had not been man and wife in the true sense of the word for four years. I hope this subject is not too delicate for you?' he asked me.

'No,' I managed to utter, quite in awe as to what he was relating to me a stranger.

'Then I shall continue. Sara told me quite candidly that a gypsy at the encampment was the father of her child and that she was in love with him. I knew she'd never loved me, but I adored her nonetheless and she had borne me three children. This news devastated me, but I agreed to bring the child up as my own when he or she was born. Sara kept to her room, no-one but Millie Sutton, our nurse, knew of her condition. Violet was born in the room you sleep in, Sara.

'The long travail turned my Sara's mind and one night she walked into the sea at Moll's Bay and never came back. I would have stopped her if I had known, for she left me a note, but by the time I had read it it was too late.'

He retrieved a small key from his pocket and reaching into a desk drawer which he opened he handed me a yellowing piece of paper. 'Read it.'

'I can't, for it is nothing to do with me,' I said.

'I wish you to read it, Sara, for I have no desire for you to think ill of me, and after all you will be my daughter-in-law one day.' He smiled encouragingly at me and so I opened the faded piece of paper and read Sara's words.

Dear Ab,

I cannot live with my betrayal of your love for me. You have been a good husband and father. My mind is in turmoil. I implore you to look after Violet, I fear for her.

Today I heard the legend of Moll's Bay from Millie, she was trying to amuse me, but it gave me an idea. That is where I shall go now to find some peace. Instead of going because I am forsaken, I shall go because I forsook you.

Forgive me.

Your Wife, Sara.

Silently I handed Abraham the letter and in return he gave me his handkerchief, for tears rolled down my cheeks and I could taste the salt in my mouth. Never had I heard such a sad story. My disdain for this man turned to compassion and admiration.

'So why,' I began, 'why does Michael think you are Violet's father?'

'I loved my wife, I love my offspring. How could I tell them their mother betrayed me? It would break their hearts. Whereas I, their father, have strong shoulders and can bear the brunt of their anger. I wish them to have good memories of their mother. Do you understand?'

'I more than understand, I admire you so much. I first thought you were harsh and manipulative, but indeed you are kind and honest,' I told him.

'Where my children are concerned I am manipulative, I wish them to marry for love and see that love returned. Amelia didn't love Tobias, she toyed with his feelings and as for Michael, she had no love for him either. She was fickle and that is not a good basis for marriage. But Tobias is fickle, maybe they deserved one another. In some ways I was pleased when your friend disappeared, but now I feel concerned as to her whereabouts,' he admitted.

'I feel sure she is somewhere here at Ravensmount for I fancy I saw her on a couple of occasions and then I saw a face at the window of the north tower, but Michael and I looked in there yesterday and the room was empty,' I told him.

'Your friend will be found, I assure you,' Abraham said and then changed the subject. 'I would like you to meet our nurse, Millie Sutton, a wonderful loyal servant.' As he spoke he pulled a cord in the corner not far from his desk. 'So this is our secret, Sara?' he asked.

'Yes, I promise, until such a time as you may wish to alter it,' I assured him.

'In some ways it is dishonest, but my loyalty to my Sara will not let me tell my children otherwise. If nothing else Sara was honest with me, she could so easily have run away with her gypsy.' His words were true.

'And what of Violet? Forgive me for saying so, but at times she seems a little strange and childlike.' As we were talking frankly to one another I had to mention it.

'You are right. Violet is childlike and temperamental, some traits she has in her blood, handed down no doubt from her father. But we humour her, it

is the only course to take. The only thing which disturbs me is her desire to see me married to whoever comes along, but I have no wish to marry anyone.'

Here he laughed reminding me of Michael. We were interrupted by the door opening to reveal Mrs Mallory.

'You rang, Sir,' she said curtly.

'Could you please locate Michael and ask him to join us, and a tray of coffee and biscuits would be appreciated,' Abraham instructed.

'Our housekeeper is an unfriendly soul, Sara, but she is a staunch friend to Violet and she in turn adores the woman,' explained the master, as he saw me watch Mrs Mallory's departure with some interest.

'To tell me about your wife. Is that the reason you brought me here this morning, Mr Tremaine?' I asked him while smoothing the skirts of my dove grey morning dress.

'Indeed not, Sara. I wish to talk to you about turning the small dining room into a library, for we sadly do not have one at Ravensmount. Me being the only person interested in reading and the arts, what do you think?' he asked of me.

'I think it a splendid idea, but without being rude, why ask me, a mere guest?'

The words were true, but I anticipated his reply. 'Because Sara, I know in my heart you will be residing here as Michael's wife and after our discussion on the dance floor about Johann Strauss I knew instinctively that you enjoyed learning and would no doubt love books,' he explained.

'Indeed this is true, but how can you be so sure about Michael and I?' I pressed him.

'Young woman, I see the love in your eyes at the mention of his name and my son wears his heart on his sleeve and no doubt adores you.'

At his words I thought to tell him of Michael's proposal of marriage, but decided not to yet.

'Can two people fall in love in such a short space of time? For in some ways all this feels unreal and yet I feel I've lived at Ravensmount for always,' I said passionately.

'You belong here, child and time is immaterial. What matter if it be a year, a month or a day to fall in love.'

The door burst open and Michael stood there, dark and gentle, and I realised that Abraham was right, he is a wise man. A tray of coffee was

brought soon after and placed on the desk. I felt a warm glow all around me as I sat there with my beloved and his father.

Abraham told Michael he wished him to take me to meet Millie Sutton that afternoon and Michael agreed. We arranged to meet at the front of the house at two o'clock. The thought of visiting Moll's Bay brought to mind many things. The first, Sara, then my outing with Tobias, and not least Tamsin. Where did she fit into this mosaic?

In the meantime I needed to seek out Rosalind and ask to borrow the key of Amelia's room for I felt it unfair to involve Emily again and to sneak around, far better to be in the open about it.

Walking back along the corridor, Abraham's story of Sara went round and round in my brain. How I admired him for his loyalty to his wife. It was curious that he never mentioned more of Violet's true father, but maybe he didn't wish to know.

I found Rosalind in the small dining room laying the table for lunch. Did she know of her father's plans to turn this room into a library? I guessed not and certainly wouldn't be the one to tell her.

'Shall I lay a place for you, Sara? You are most welcome to join us,' Rosalind invited, her manner friendly once more.

'That is most kind of you, I would be pleased to join you, thank you,' I agreed then continued, 'Rosalind, I must apologise for what must have seemed most rude and ungrateful behaviour on Saturday evening. I had no right to berate Tobias on the dance floor and leave the hall in such a manner.'

'You are forgiven, Sara,' she told me gently while she laid cutlery by the six placemats. 'Tobias can be a trial at times. It is my belief he is desperate to marry and he is in a fit of pique over your friend, Amelia.'

'Is this so?' I asked, having never thought that Tobias might actually be still upset over my friend.

'He talks to me often, we are quite close, our ages only being two years apart. I don't believe that Tobias is yet capable of passionate love, but I do believe he has strong feelings for Amelia and truly wished to marry her,' Rosalind told me and I recalled Abraham's words, 'Maybe Tobias and your friend deserve one another.' Could this be the case, and would Tobias be happier if Amelia was to be located? Which brought me to the reason I had sought Rosalind out.

‘Rosalind, I hope you won’t mind me asking you this, but could I please borrow the key to Amelia’s room? For I wish to have a look around to see if I can obtain any clue to her whereabouts,’ I explained, wondering all the while what her answer would be.

‘But of course Sara, you have every right to see your friend’s room. I have finished here so come with me and we will fetch the key from the kitchen quarters.’ She agreed, far more amicably than I anticipated, for which I was thankful.

I followed Rosalind across the hall and into a part of the house I had not seen before. We entered the kitchen, a huge room with white walls and an immense black range on which steaming saucepans and a huge black kettle sat. The cook and her two helpers were obviously preparing lunch.

This must be Simkins’ wife, I assumed, looking at the slender woman in a blue striped dress with a white apron over the top and a mob cap to match on her dark hair. I smiled at Mrs Simkins and she nodded her head in return. As Rosalind walked into a large cupboard cook took the chance to speak.

‘Enjoy your picnic, Miss?’ she asked in a strong Cornish brogue.

‘I did indeed, thank you,’ I replied, smiling back at her.

‘That’s all right then, Mr Michael be my favourite of the young people and I hope all works out for you both. Enough said.’ And Mrs Simkins put a finger to her pursed lips. I followed her gaze and saw Rosalind leaving the walk-in larder, closing the door behind her.

‘Everything all right, Miss Rosalind?’ Cook asked, sprinkling sugar on the top of a pie which sat on a huge table amid flour and blotches of fruit.

‘No, Mrs Simkins. I can’t find the key to the gold bedroom. Have you seen anyone here this morning?’ Miss Tremaine asked the cook.

‘That’ll probably be Miss Violet, young scallywag that she is. She was here not an hour since, told me she fancied one of my pickled eggs,’ offered the red faced woman.

‘Very well then, but please keep an eye on her in future, I don’t want her taking keys on a whim. In fact I’d prefer she didn’t come in here at all,’ admonished Rosalind and I felt quite sorry for the nice Mrs Simkins.

Rosalind and I made our way back across the hall and up the staircase. ‘Honestly, I don’t know what’s happened to Violet of late, she’s very disobedient,’ grumbled the beautiful Miss Tremaine. ‘In fact she’s not been the same since your friend, Amelia, arrived here last September. I can’t begin to imagine what is wrong with her.’

We reached the door of Amelia's room and Rosalind opened it, the key still in the lock. It was so dark neither of us could see anything let alone anyone. Without preamble Rosalind walked carefully to the window and swished back the heavy drapes, light flooded into the room and we could see a startled Violet by the wardrobe dressed in one of Amelia's cream silk gowns.

It really suited Violet with her dark hair as it had suited my friend, but Rosalind's thoughts weren't the same as mine. 'Take that off this minute,' she ordered her sister.

'Won't, won't,' Violet repeated, trying to dodge her elder sister and escape around the huge four-poster bed which I could see was draped with curtains to match the gold ones at the window.

Rosalind wasn't quick enough, just as she went to catch hold of the girl's arm, Violet scrambled across the bed and made for the door. She was out and running along the corridor before Rosalind and I got to the door. We could see her, the cream silk trail of the dress and her black wavy hair trailing behind her in the distance.

'I'm sorry about that,' Rosalind said sighing with resignation, at the same time gathering Violet's dress up and laying it across her arm.

'No matter,' I assured her, going over and placing my arm around her shoulder. 'We can probably put it down to high spirits.'

But as I spoke the words I silently wondered how many times Violet had been in this room and if it was her who had taken the royal blue cloak.

'I don't know what is to become of me, Sara,' sighed Rosalind. 'What sort of life is this for me? I shall never meet anyone stuck here day in and day out.' It seemed I was to be a confidante for Rosalind as well as her father today.

'When I go back home to Bath, which I must do soon, come with me,' I said trying to cheer her. 'We can go on outings and to balls together. It will be a change for you and take you out of yourself. Who knows who you may meet. Please say you'll come with me,' I urged her.

'Yes, I will.' The smile on Rosalind's face as she spoke lit up her whole being and I felt that at last some goal had been achieved by me coming here. I now had to locate Amelia.

Rosalind left me, her step quicker and her pink skirts swishing down the corridor as I watched her go. Would I feel like her also if I married and lived here? But I would have Michael, I thought, and would entertain and

make friends which would benefit all who lived in this house, for it was gaiety which was lacking here.

Walking back in the room and over to the window I could see that Amelia had a view over the beautiful garden, and thoughts of my love for Michael were brought to mind. I fervently prayed that he would ask me to marry him when all this mystery of Amelia was resolved, which brought to mind my reason for being here.

I turned from the window, my eyes coming to rest on my friend's music box. Swiftly I walked over to it and picked it up. Although small it was quite heavy probably because the casement was silver. I ran my hand across the enamelled lid which was beautifully decorated with rich colours in the theme of a landscape with flowers surrounding it.

Lifting the lid I could see the red velvet interior held the small key, I picked it up and located the hole for it in the bottom. I turned the key and set it back on the dressing table, opening the lid.

The haunting sound of Greensleeves filled the room and I danced around, singing to myself along with the notes. 'Alas my love you did me wrong' and a tear filled my eye as I thought of Abraham and his Sara. The music slowed and came to a halt and the room suddenly seemed very quiet and still.

I picked the box up again to wind it with the key and I stopped in my tracks for I could see a name written in tiny scroll letters. I took the box to the light of the window to ascertain what I'd read and to my astonishment I was right.

The word was Tamsin!

9

Clutching the small music box in my hand I left the gold room, turned the key and locked the door behind me, taking the key with me so I could return it to Rosalind. As I stepped into my room I could see Tilly was there, sorting out my clothes.

'You startled me, Miss,' she said, turning around as I shut the door. 'What you got there, Miss Sara?' she asked, spotting the music box in my hand.

It's Amelia's,' I told her, placing the little box on the top of the dressing table then searching through the drawer for a suitable reticule to put it in.

'You surely ain't stolen it!' said Tilly, wide-eyed.

'No, I haven't, young lady, I've borrowed it for I wish to show it to someone,' I told her sharply. 'And tell no-one, do you understand me? No-one, not even Emily.'

'I promise,' said Tilly, hovering by the dressing table, trying to look more closely at the object in question.

'Lift the lid,' I instructed her. Doing as she was bid a few faint bars of Greensleeves rang out. Tilly clapped her hand to her mouth.

'Well Miss, I ain't never seen anything like it,' she said with awe. 'Quite beautiful it is.'

'This will, I think, suffice,' I said, more to myself than to my maid. I'd found a black reticule which I was sure the box would fit in. Picking it up I placed it inside the bag. It fitted snugly and I breathed a sigh of relief.

My intention was to take it to Millie Sutton this afternoon for I had a very strong feeling that the nurse had the answers to my questions. She very obviously knew who Tamsin was, having shared tea with her, and did Michael know also?

The only mystery Millie Sutton wouldn't be able to solve was the whereabouts of Amelia, and thinking of Amelia I wondered for the second time in half-an-hour what link she could possibly have with Tamsin. That is, if the name of the music box and our travelling companion were one and the same.

I could hardly wait to see Miss Sutton, but knew I needed to remain calm and not give anything away to Michael or indeed any of the Tremaine family. To change clothes during the day was not normally an appropriate

course to take, but I wished to look my best so I decided to don another outfit.

'I think the pale green with the white collar and cuffs which you wore the other day, Miss. It matches your eyes perfectly,' Tilly advised me and I tended to agree with her.

Taking my seat once more at the table in the small dining room which I knew was soon to be a library, I kept thinking of Sara Tremaine and how she would have sat here all those years ago, but Tobias, Rosalind and Michael would only have been children then. Abraham smiled at me and I thought of the tale he had recounted to me only this morning.

As I looked at his offspring who sat quietly eating their lunch, I thought that one day they would need to know the truth. Little did I know at that moment in time that the truth would come out far sooner than I had expected. It was as if I, Sara, by coming to Ravensmount had set off a chain of events which would spiral out of control.

'You aren't eating much, Sarah,' observed Michael.

'In truth I don't feel very hungry,' I answered.

As we left the dining room, Abraham caught hold of my arm. 'I trust you will enjoy your meeting with Millie, I have every faith that she will like you,' he said kindly.

'Where's Sara going?' chanted Violet, obviously having overheard snippets of the master's words.

'It's none of your business, young woman,' Abraham told her firmly. 'Come with me and we shall take a walk in the garden.' As Abraham caught hold of Violet's arm and steered her towards the front door, he turned back, giving me an encouraging smile. And as I watched the pair of them depart out of the front door it was hard to imagine they were not truly father and daughter, for Abraham treated Violet as one of his own.

Swiftly I went up the staircase to my room. Tilly was still here, guarding the reticule containing the music box. I was surprised she had remained as on occasions she could be disobedient.

'Where ever you are going with that trinket box, Miss, I hope all goes well,' said Tilly unexpectedly as she handed me my white lace bonnet. I went over to the mirror of the dressing table to tidy my curls. Tying the ribbons under my chin I caught sight of my namesake still looking wistfully down from the portrait. Your secret is out in the open, Sara Tremaine, but what am I to find out now? I said to myself.

As I stepped out the large front door and down the steps, my reticule clasped firmly in my hand, Michael was true to his word, for he was standing waiting by the pony trap, the brown pony waiting patiently to move onward.

‘You look beautiful and too good to be true,’ murmured Michael as he helped me into my seat.

‘Thank you kind, Sir,’ I replied sweetly sending him one of my most disarming smiles to which he responded with a similar smile. We were bowling along the lane before I spoke again.

‘What do you know of Tamsin?’ I asked him: a question which came quite out of the blue and escaped my lips before I had a chance to think about it.

‘Why do you ask?’ he said, looking at me with a stunned expression on his face and pulling the pony to a halt.

‘Because,’ I began, ‘she was our travelling companion in the coach from Exeter and I saw her in the tea shop at Moll’s Bay with you and Millie Sutton the other afternoon.’

‘My dear Sara, it was quite innocent I assure you. My nurse sent a message that morning for me to join her for tea. That is why I reluctantly cancelled our afternoon out, for Millie means a great deal to me,’ he explained, obviously quite disgruntled that I should infer otherwise.

‘No matter,’ I reassured him patting his arm. ‘It is plainly a mere coincidence.’ But as we set off again for Moll’s Bay I looked at Michael seriously wondering if he was telling me the truth.

Arriving opposite the nurse’s cottage, Michael helped me down from pony trap, his hands lingering on my waist.

‘You surely don’t mistrust me?’ he asked with a wounded expression on his face.

‘Indeed not,’ I said, touching his lips with my gloved hand. ‘I love you remember.’ At these words he smiled and I took his arm as we walked across to the cottage.

The door opened before we reached it to reveal Miss Sutton standing in the doorway ready to greet us. She reached up to Michael, her hands on his face and he bent forward to allow his nurse to kiss him on the brow.

‘And this Millie, is Sara Osborne,’ Michael introduced me, quite proudly I thought, drawing me forward to be kissed on the cheek by this sprightly

old lady who had bright, inquisitive, piercing blue eyes. She was very upright for her age and I guessed her to be in her early seventies.

'Come in, my children,' she said kindly, with her almost white hair shining like a halo in the sunlight. We stepped into an abode that was as bright and clean as a new pin. A staircase ran upwards with a room on each side of the small hallway. The walls everywhere were white giving a feeling of light and spaciousness, although the room on the left which we stepped into was in reality quite small.

'Please, be seated, Sara. May I call you that?' she asked, her voice strong, totally belying her age.

'Of course, Miss Sutton,' I agreed, sitting on the low blue floral armchair she had indicated.

'Well Sara,' she said, sitting on a similar chair opposite me, 'tell me all about yourself for all I know from Michael is that you are a beautiful young woman who he very much admires.'

'There is not much to tell,' I replied, blushing at Millie Sutton's words and looking at Michael who gave me an encouraging smile. 'I've lived in Bath all my life with my father and mother. I'm an only child and chanced to come to Cornwall because of my friend, Amelia.'

At the mention of her name Millie Sutton's face changed from a smiling one to one of concern.

'Had you known Amelia long?' she asked, expectation on her face awaiting my answer.

'Just three years, but in that short space of time we became good friends. I believe she is younger than me although she appears older. In truth I don't believe she even knew for sure when her birthday was, having been brought up by an uncle and aunt,' I told the nurse.

'And what of Amelia's parents?' I thought this a strange question from Michael.

'I don't quite know what you are trying to gain from these questions. In truth I know no more about my friend than I have just told you for she said little about herself, but we got on so well that was all that mattered to me,' I told the two of them, feeling somewhat perplexed.

'Do not worry we will question you no further,' Michael's nurse assured me.

'But I would like to ask you a question,' I said as bravely as I could.

'You do just that, child,' said Millie, reaching across and patting my hand.

‘Who is Tamsin and where does she fit in to the picture of Amelia and the Tremaine family at Ravensmount?’ I asked without preamble.

At these words Michael and his nurse looked at one another. ‘You must tell her,’ said Michael, ‘for I know that Tamsin is here, beyond that I am as much in the dark as you dear heart.’

‘We’ll do better than tell her, my child. Fetch Tamsin down, she is upstairs.’

At the nurse’s words my heart started pounding. So I was to come face to face with my travelling companion once more. The woman who had told me not to spend a night at Ravensmount. While Michael went to fetch the elusive Tamsin, Millie Sutton busied herself in what I assumed to be her scullery.

I could hear water being tipped into a receptacle and china clinking. ‘I’m making some tea,’ she said returning to her front room, ‘for I think we are all going to need it.’

Hearing a rustle of skirts in the doorway which led to the hall I turned my head to see Tamsin standing there. She looked no tidier or cleaner than when I had last seen her, in fact she wore the same royal blue serge dress she had worn that day we travelled together. I did concede that her hair looked cleaner and tidier, but it was very obviously dyed and was almost yellow in colour. I was sure the immaculate Millie did not entertain her by choice.

‘So we meet again, Miss Osborne.’ Tamsin spoke in the same cultured voice which so belied the way she dressed. I really did dislike the woman although in fairness to her I hardly knew her.

She walked into the room and pulled a chair from under the table to sit upon as she continued. ‘So you didn’t heed my words and stay clear of Ravensmount,’ she said.

‘No, indeed not,’ I replied, trying hard to keep the tremor from my voice. ‘In truth I am glad I stayed and I shall not leave until I have found my friend, Amelia. Tell me, what do you know of her?’

‘Very little,’ replied Tamsin somewhat cagily.

‘I have reason to believe you don’t speak the truth,’ I challenged her, reaching for my black reticule which I had placed on the floor by my chair.

‘And what makes you say that?’ Tamsin asked nervously.

‘Because of this,’ I replied, taking the music box from my reticule and walking over to place it in front of Tamsin on the table. ‘Is this yours?’

As I asked the question Tamsin gazed at the exquisite box as if mesmerised by it, then with one hand she touched the bright coloured enamel, tracing a finger over each beautiful colour.

'I had thought I would never see this again,' she said, taking her eyes at last from the box and looking at me. A pang of sympathy touched my heart for her. 'Where did you get it?' she said.

'It was in Amelia's room at Ravensmount,' I said quietly, feeling all the while that nothing was real and that I was in a dream.

'So we have the proof,' said Tamsin quietly looking at Millie Sutton who had been watching the scene with interest.

'Proof of what?' Michael interposed and in that moment I knew that he had no idea, no more than I what Tamsin was talking about.

'In which case,' said Millie Sutton standing up and taking control of the situation, 'we need to speak to the Master of Ravensmount.'

'But why?' Michael questioned. 'What has this if anything got to do with my father?'

'You will see, child,' said his nurse, putting her arm around him and for a second I thought how handsome he looked in his innocence and so vulnerable. 'I want you to go back to Ravensmount and fetch your father. Far better that he come here I think.'

'No!' said Michael. 'I suggest we all go back to my home and sort this out, whatever it may be.' His voice was authoritative and I so admired him for it.

'If that's what you wish, Master Michael, I have the governess's cart which Tamsin and I can travel in. Just let me take the kettle off the range,' said Millie, seeming unperturbed by this chain of events, but I suspect that underneath she was a cauldron of emotions, knowing that the time was near for all secrets to be revealed.

We all set off, Tamsin insisting that she carry her music box, reluctantly agreeing I lend her my black reticule to put it in.

As we made our way back to Ravensmount, I said to Michael, 'I feel sorry that your father has no warning of our coming.'

'But surely he has nothing to hide,' was his reply. Unfortunately I knew that there was something Abraham had to hide and I felt that the time of reckoning was nigh, wondering at the same time what Tamsin had to reveal. I had no doubt the music box was hers, so what connection did she have to my friend, Amelia?

These things were still burning through my mind when Michael pulled the pony up by the steps with a flourish. My darling man was obviously keen to bring whatever it was to a conclusion. As he helped me down to the ground the governess's cart pulled sharply up behind us.

The ravens flapped and cursed overhead and as we made our way to the great door I saw Mrs Mallory drop the curtain back in place at the window.

The housekeeper greeted us, if something cautiously at the door. 'What a pandemonium!' she exclaimed. 'The ravens are going berserk.'

She was right about that for we could still hear them screeching outside. The sun streamed into the hall and everything seemed normal and yet it was anything but. Mrs Mallory looked Tamsin up and down as if she had a bad smell under her nose just as Violet turned up to add further chaos to the proceedings.

'And who are you?' she asked sweetly going over to Tamsin and catching hold of her hand. Oh, no! I thought.

'Are you Violet?' Tamsin asked softly.

'Yes I am, would you like to see my studio?' asked Violet. 'And who are you? I've never seen you before.'

'I'm your grandmother,' said Tamsin. At her words everything went deathly quiet, we could have heard a pin drop on the floor, even the ravens stopped their incessant squawking.

My heart thudded, no-one spoke until a voice from the direction of the drawing room caused us to turn and look in that direction.

'Are you indeed? I think you'd all better come in here,' said Abraham and my heart went out to him. We all walked in silence towards him, Violet skipping along by Tamsin. 'Not you, Violet. Go up to your room,' he said.

'But Papa, this is my grandmother and I've never had a grandmother before,' she wailed.

'Do as you are told for now at least,' the master said firmly. 'And Mrs Mallory, please fetch Mr Tobias and Miss Rosalind.'

Mrs Mallory did as she was bid. The poor woman looked as if she needed some smelling salts. They all trooped into the drawing room. Millie Sutton, her back straight, Tamsin, her eyes everywhere. Michael and I lingered behind speaking to Abraham in the doorway.

'Would you like me to go to my room?' I offered.

'No Sara, I want you here. You will be my support, you and Millie Sutton for I fear the time has come.'

He squeezed my hand, me squeezing his back.

We all sat in the lovely drawing room, Tamsin still holding the black reticule and me recalling the day that I had first arrived at Ravensmount. The door burst open to reveal Tobias with Rosalind closely behind him.

'Whatever is afoot?' she asked, surveying us all, her eyes resting on Tamsin. 'And who is this?' she asked, seemingly most bewildered by the whole thing, with good cause, I mused.

'Please sit down, both of you,' instructed Abraham in a kindly voice. 'There is much to be said and I fear what I have to say will come as a shock to you.'

Tobias and Rosalind both sat down, Rosalind by Millie Sutton on the settle and Tobias by Michael opposite them. Tamsin sat on a high chair by a small table, me next to her and Abraham caught in a ray of sunlight with his back to the fireplace. All eyes were on him as he started to speak.

'My children, I have something to tell you. I have been dishonest in the nicest possible way,' he began. 'All these years you have been led to believe that I am Violet's father, but in truth Violet is your mother's daughter, but I am not her father.' Here he stopped. It seemed so simple by the few words he spoke.

'So who then is Violet's father?' spoke Tobias, asking the question which hovered on all three of the siblings' lips.

'My son, Eli, is,' said Tamsin standing up.

'And you are?' began Rosalind.

'A gypsy, Miss,' Tamsin replied. For some while there was a hushed silence.

'So our mother had a child by a gypsy and you knew, Father?' said Michael finding his voice. 'And all these years we thought that Violet's mother was a gypsy and that you were to blame. Oh my God!' said Michael, holding his head in his hands.

'I could not besmirch your mother's memory. I wanted you to think well of her,' pleaded Abraham.

'And ill of you?' Rosalind interrupted.

'Can you forgive me?' asked Abraham, his face full of pain and anguish and I wanted to hug him.

'It would seem, Father, there is nothing to forgive,' Tobias said quietly, getting up and putting his arm around his father, Michael and Rosalind

doing likewise. The scene was quite touching and I was so relieved the three of them had taken it so well.

‘But that is not the whole story. I would like you to sit down, Mr Tremaine, for I have something to tell you which I should have told you years ago,’ Millie Sutton spoke for the first time, vacating her seat so Abraham could sit down. ‘I was the one who delivered Violet into this world twenty years ago, but there were two babies born that night, both girls. Forgive me, Mr Tremaine, but I knew you would accept one, but hardly two, so I gave the one child away to a cousin of mine in Somerset with Tam-sin’s consent.’

Here the nurse broke down, she’d kept this secret for twenty years and could not contain her emotions any longer. I walked across and put a gentle arm around her shoulder.

‘So who is this child?’ asked Abraham as if in a trance.

‘It would seem Sir, it is Amelia,’ said Millie Sutton amongst her tears. We all looked at her and the mosaic was very nearly complete. This was why Amelia had Tamsin’s music box and if the nurse’s words were true then Amelia was Violet’s twin sister.

10

Each and every one of us was silent for a few minutes as I gently led Millie Sutton to the chair I had vacated. My thoughts were that it was all such a strange coincidence that Amelia should come here of all places where her life had begun.

This revelation had a sinister implication for Tobias above all others. I looked at them all. The Master sat with his head in his hands, Tobias and Michael both leant back against the settle. Rosalind got up and walked over to the window then walked back to Millie Sutton and I.

'Would you like a brandy?' Rosalind asked her nurse. 'This is none of your fault you know,' she said kindly.

'How I wish I had told the master the truth at the time,' said Millie, quite calm now.

'I think,' said the master suddenly, 'we all need a cup of tea. Please pull the cord to summon Mrs Mallory, Rosalind.'

At her father's words, Rosalind pulled a cord by the fireplace.

'So I fell in love with my half-sister,' began Tobias, 'but then I never truly loved her.'

'We all have our different thoughts, Tobias,' said his father, 'but whatever they are, all that matters now is that we locate Amelia's whereabouts. Let us put the matter of her birth to rest and I assure you, Millie that we lay no blame at your door, you only did what you thought was best.'

'Thank you so much, Mr Tremaine,' Millie spoke, a tremor in her voice. 'I knew all would be revealed one day, but had hoped it would only be to you, Sir.'

'All I hope,' Tamsin spoke for the first time, 'is that you can find my granddaughter.'

'I can assure you all will be done to locate Amelia.' At these words the master's eyes rested on me just as Mrs Mallory opened the door.

'You rang,' she said and I could tell she had been crying. Her usual bold manner had left her and I wondered momentarily if the housekeeper was afraid of something.

'Would you please fetch us some tea?' Abraham asked her, 'and also send Violet to me.' At his words Mrs Mallory retreated silently and Abraham continued, 'I have a strong feeling that Violet knows more about this than

she has said. Some instinct I have tells me so and I intend to get to the bottom of this today,' he said firmly.

The tea arrived, brought in by Emily and Mrs Mallory on two large trays which they deposited on the low table between the settles. The silver teapot gleamed and I stepped across to help Rosalind pour the tea into delicate white bone china cups.

As we handed the cups and saucers around Violet burst through the door and we all turned to look at her. She stood there, a defiant look on her beautiful face, her violet coloured dress adorning her perfect figure with her black hair flowing luxuriously in waves down her back.

'You sent for me?' she said in her shrill voice looking all the while at the master who sipped at his tea.

'Do you know where Amelia is?' he asked in a slow precise voice, coming straight to the issue in question.

'Of course I do,' answered Violet in her childlike voice. The atmosphere in the room was full of expectation, but alas for me it wasn't going to be as easy as it seemed.

'And why,' continued Abraham, 'have you not said so before, young woman?'

'Because, no-one has ever asked me,' replied Violet innocently her violet eyes flashing with defiance.

'Will you take me to her now?' Mr Tremaine asked softly.

'No,' came Violet's reply. 'I will take Sara.'

'Not without me,' said Michael, standing up and coming across to my side.

'Very well brother, you may come also,' his half-sister agreed and without any further warning she turned from the room and went out of the door.

Michael and I looked at each other briefly before following her.

As we stepped into the hall we could see Violet was half way up the staircase and I asked myself silently where she was heading. Picking up my skirts, Michael beside me, we walked swiftly up the staircase following the retreating figure of Violet along the corridor in the direction of the south tower.

'Her studio I'll be bound,' murmured Michael.

'But she took me there and the room is crammed full of her bizarre drawings,' I replied.

‘There is another room behind it,’ Michael informed me. ‘Why the devil didn’t I think of it before?’

At his words we ran after Violet to the end of the corridor and up the stone steps to the door of the south tower where Violet was already fumbling for the key in her pocket. Was I really going to see my friend, Amelia, at last? I had my doubts as Violet was not always to be believed.

As we stepped from the studio I tried to avert my eyes from the drawings of the ravens, lest I feel nauseous as on that first occasion.

‘Look at this!’ said Violet gaily, obviously not realising the seriousness of the situation at all. She had picked up a small painting, holding it up for us to see. I could see straight away it was Amelia standing next to Abraham, her arm linked through his. What twisted thoughts had Violet got of her father with young women? And in some ways I felt sympathy for her as she evidently wished to see Abraham married again.

‘That’s very nice, Violet,’ soothed Michael, ‘now please show us where Amelia is, there’s a good girl.’

At Michael’s words his sister placed the picture back on the floor and went to the right hand corner of the room where I could now see there was a small door. Inserting the key in the lock and turning it light flooded into the dark studio. Michael and I followed Violet into the room beyond, thankfully the room was light and airy and lying on a truckle bed beneath the window was Amelia.

‘Thank the Lord,’ uttered Michael quietly.

‘Amelia,’ I said quietly going over to the bed not wishing to alarm her. My friend’s face was pale and she was very sleepy, but other than that she looked better than I had expected to find her. I glanced out of the window above the bed and could see the gates of Ravensmount. To think I’d looked up at this window on my arrival and Amelia had been here all the time.

‘Oh Sara, you’ve come at last!’ were Amelia’s first words to me and I gathered her in my arms.

‘Why is she so sleepy?’ I asked Violet sharply.

‘Because Mrs Mallory puts one drop of laudanum in her tea each morning,’ Violet told me, quite unperturbed by the implication. ‘And has done so for quite a few weeks.’

‘And why does she do this?’ I questioned, smoothing Amelia’s hair back from her cool forehead.

‘I asked her to,’ came the reply, ‘I thought if she had it the potion would cause her to love Papa, but she fell for Michael instead.’ Her voice rose as she spoke and I sensed that she was going to become hysterical once more so I changed the subject.

‘Was it Amelia I saw walking in the grounds?’ I asked her.

‘Oh no, that was me,’ said Violet laughing. She obviously thought of this as a game. ‘I borrowed Amelia’s cloak and Mrs Mallory walked with me hoping to frighten you, Sara.’

I could be forgiven for my mistake, seeing Amelia and Violet together they did look remarkably alike.

‘We must get Amelia to her room, Sara,’ Michael’s voice cut across my thoughts. ‘She needs a rest in familiar surroundings and some refreshment.’

‘Oh, she’s been fed,’ said Violet skipping over to the door, ‘Mrs Mallory comes morning and night.’

I could see there was indeed an empty tray on the small table by the bed. Michael and I helped Amelia to her feet, she was a little unsteady, more from the effects of the laudanum I suspected than anything else, working out that my friend had been held captive for three weeks. She was in remarkable condition and I conceded that she had been well looked after which was in Violet and Mrs Mallory’s favour. Before leaving Violet in her studio I asked her one more question.

‘Was it your face I saw that day at the window of the north tower?’

‘Oh yes, I watched you from there quite often,’ Violet informed me, more intent on her paintings than Amelia, Michael or I as we helped Amelia down the steps and to her room.

Rosalind and I tended Amelia for two weeks in the gold room. Each day she grew stronger and eventually she was back to her normal self. When she was feeling better Tamsin was brought to her room.

Abraham thought it was best that Amelia’s grandmother told her the circumstances of her birth, and when Tamsin had left I noticed that the music box once again stood on the top of Amelia’s dressing table.

That day I went for a well deserved walk in the garden for some fresh air. I made my way past the wine cellar door and thought of the day I had first met the Master of Ravensmount. He now was very dear to me, in fact Ravensmount itself was very dear to my heart too.

Abraham had decided, with the family’s consent, not to tell Violet the circumstances of her birth for she no doubt would not understand it and it

may tip her already precarious state of mind over the edge.

One day when Violet was in a quiet frame of mind I asked her why she'd held my friend captive. She told me she'd done it because Amelia had betrayed her Papa with Michael just as I had done. There was no reasoning with her so I accepted this with reservation. As for Mrs Mallory she was reprimanded severely over Amelia's captivity and the giving of the laudanum, but she was not dismissed for Violet's sake. The housekeeper very obviously had a strong sense of loyalty to the young woman.

As I stepped into the garden my heart skipped a beat when I saw Michael sitting on the stone seat amongst a riot of colour, the sun shining down on his black hair. He rose to his feet when he saw me and came towards me taking both my hands in his.

'Amelia is now safe,' he whispered, 'so I ask you again, will you marry me? If only because I love you.'

'Yes,' I whispered back, 'Oh yes.' And my beloved bent his face to mine and gently touched my lips with his own.

*

Four weeks after finding Amelia, my friend, Rosalind, Michael and myself stood at the gates of Ravensmount, our luggage around our feet waiting for the coach to convey us to Bath.

Michael was to ask my parents for my hand in marriage, Rosalind was to have a break from her routine as I had promised her, and Amelia needed some time to come to terms with the story of her birth. Tilly would remain here until my return for she didn't wish to leave.

'Please return soon for I shall miss you,' said Abraham as he kissed my cheek in farewell. Waiting at the gates I turned to look at Ravensmount, the house looked still and quiet in the morning light.

How I loved it here and how I loved the man at my side who was soon to be my husband.

Tilly waved and I waved in return thinking I had well and truly been caught in a spider's web and had no desire to ever escape it.

THE END

BOOK 2:
DARKWOOD

Dedicated with love to the memory of my friend Beryl Lord of East Budleigh who appreciated the written word, and was a wonderful conversationalist.
You are greatly missed.

With thanks to Shelley Tobin, Curator of Costumes at the Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, for showing me Mary Tucker's wedding dress (c.1864), and for her valued advice on weddings in Victorian times.

1

The house was quiet on April 23rd 1851, as Lizzie Hunter made her way quietly down the staircase at Darkwood, she stopped at the bottom, although trying to be as quiet as she could, her breathing seemed laboured in the stillness of the hall. She pulled the fur-trimmed green cloak and hood she wore tighter with one hand, clasping the bag she carried with the other.

Before stepping out of the heavy oak door, she looked almost furtively around her, and stopped for some seconds before closing the door as quietly as she could behind her, praying no-one would be walking outside at three o'clock in the afternoon. She knew Samuel would be resting, and Gareth and Jared would be with their governess, Miss Pinkerton, at this time of day. It had all been a question of timing so no-one would see her slip out of the house.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, and keeping as close to the house as possible, she made her way across the path toward the small bridge which led to Darklady's Wood. She stood on the bridge, looking for a couple of minutes at the River Dart gurgling merrily on its way across the moor. The sound of it caused her to have a fleeting doubt as to what she was about to do, for she loved the river and the moor. It was the house she loathed, and Samuel. This thought strengthened her resolve and she crossed the bridge with willing feet, stepping out into the wood beyond.

Walking on through a carpet of blue, for the bluebells abounded here this year, she lifted her skirts and took one last look at the house behind her. She'd escaped and breathed a sigh of relief, her life at Darkwood was finally over.

* * *

An icy March wind blew across the moor penetrating through the iron railings which surrounded the small graveyard. I drew my blue cloak tighter around my shivering body surveying the tombstones of my ancestors. The only relief, a small clump of snowdrops which had pushed their way defiantly through the dank earth.

'Silvia!' my mother's strident voice carried across to me from the waiting carriage. She was petulant at having to leave her comfortable home in Exeter to chaperone me to what she called, 'This godforsaken place', known as Dartmoor and Darkwood, her family home. I looked down at the

grey tomb, the words jumping up at me. *Here lies Samuel William Hunter, Master of Darkwood 1795-1864. Rest in Peace*.

A year had passed since I stood on this very spot at my grandfather's burial. I idly wondered, as I had twelve months ago, where my grandmother, Lizzie Hunter, was buried. I'd walked in and out of the small collection of tombs and gravestones and could find no evidence of her final resting place. To me, Lizzie was a beautiful memory.

As a small child I could snuggle up to her fragrant bosom while she read stories to me, her cream-coloured skin and black hair gleaming in the firelight. She had a voice which was soft and coaxing and I loved her, a love that had stayed with me all my twenty-one years, but one day Lizzie had vanished out of my life and visits to Darkwood were never the same again. In fact, after her disappearance, when I was about eight years old, we rarely visited again.

Pulling my cloak ever tighter around me, I recalled again the day of Grandfather's funeral and the reading of his Will in the cold study at Darkwood. No mention was made of my grandmother, the only words imprinted in my memory read out by Mr Simms, the family solicitor, '...and to gain their inheritance of Darkwood, my granddaughter, Silvia Harvey, and my grandson, Gareth Samuel, do marry when Silvia has attained the age of twenty-one years.'

I could still hear the gasps of surprise from my Aunt Rachel and her sister, Hannah. I could see the fleeting look of surprise on my cousin Gareth's face and hear cousin Jared's devil-may-care remark, 'It could be worse brother, at least our cousin Silvia has a pretty face.'

For some reason, Jared had been left nothing except for a home at Darkwood for as long as he wished, why I could not imagine. It seemed my grandfather had reached out to us all from the grave to dominate our lives forever.

'Miss Silvia!' our maid, Pru, brought me back to the present as she puffed her way up to the iron gate holding on to her bonnet, which the wind was determined to dislodge from her mop of ginger hair.

'Miss Silvia, the Mistress is getting quite restless. She will wait no longer and you must be freezing in this chill wind.' Taking a backward glance at the tomb, I followed Pru to the waiting carriage, vowing to come back here on a fine day and continue the search for my grandmother's grave.

As we neared the carriage I stopped to look at the small imposing granite church with its squat tower which was built on a small hill. I could see the narrow path winding its way to the door. It was here at Culmoor Church where in a month's time I would marry Gareth, a man I hardly knew let alone loved. I silently prayed the day would be as miserable as I felt.

'Do get in Silvia, please!' My mother was irritable with the delay. I seated myself opposite her in the carriage. 'What you had to stop here for in this weather I can't imagine.'

'I'm looking for my grandmother's, your mother's, grave,' I replied just as irritably, 'and if no-one, including you, will tell me where she is, I have every intention of finding out.'

'For goodness sake child, I've told you before that's all in the past. What you don't know you can't grieve about.

'Pru, pass me that blanket please before I perish, we'll all end up with a chill.'

As Pru tucked the blanket securely around my mother's legs I looked at her and thought how she had changed since my father had died two years ago.

Gone was any trace of the pretty woman she had been, her dark hair was greying and she had gained weight, her only love being food and sitting by the fire sewing. 'And please smile now and then child, and speak to me. You've hardly said a word since we left Exeter, has she Pru?'

'No Mistress, she hasn't,' confirmed Pru winking in my direction. We'd all learned long ago it was best to agree with Hannah Harvey. My mother knocked twice and the carriage moved swiftly along the track which was already hardened by the March winds. We rocked from side to side and I felt physically sick.

Moving to the edge of my seat I could see the moorland stretching away either side of the swaying carriage with bursts of yellow colour from the gorse, and although we travelled some distance I could still see Culmoor Church perched on top of the small hillock with the small village of Culmoor tucked behind it.

'What are you thinking, Silvia? Of your wedding day perhaps?' Mother had asked and answered the question for me.

'Yes Mother I am, but not as the happy event you envisage.' I moved back in my seat and leant my head on the brown leather behind me.

‘You ought to be thankful, child, that Gareth wishes to marry you,’ was my mother’s reply.

‘Wishes to!’ I repeated my mother’s words with some disdain. ‘He probably hates the idea as much as I do.’

‘As I said to you before, he hasn’t said he won’t marry you.’ Mama’s reply was in part true.

‘To be honest Mother, I would rather marry cousin Jared, he’s amusing. Cousin Gareth is aloof and oh so serious, I’ve never seen him smile, not even as a child.’ Out of the window I could see a Tor looming up before us, we were nearing Darkwood.

‘At least Gareth is a gentleman,’ I heard my mother say, ‘and so was your father. Your grandfather chose husbands for your Aunt Rachel and myself and we’ve been happy.’

‘So it’s a tradition,’ I exclaimed, ‘for the Harvey women to have chosen husbands?’

‘Silvia, I will not have you speak to me like that. We are here, mind your manners.’ She spoke to me as if I was still her little girl.

The house appeared suddenly close at hand. No railings or gates, but two sweeping cultivated lawns, so in contrast to the stark wildness of the moor. The building itself was long and low, built of granite with a slate roof, ivy covered the right front of the building which relieved the greyness. Already the light from oil lamps and candles were flickering in some of the small leaded windows.

As I looked at the house, which was in some ways so familiar to me, it now seemed different and not so appealing. Did I really wish to marry Gareth for Darkwood? I could hear the River Dart on my left gurgling over the rocks, and could see the small wooden bridge which spanned it and led to Darklady’s Wood from which the house had got its name. We had been forbidden as children to go near or enter the wood.

Although I never went near for fear of my grandfather’s admonishment, I was sure my cousins, Gareth and Jared, had disobeyed. I recalled them urging me to join them, and when I declined Jared called me, ‘goody two shoes.’ Sometime later they had returned with tales of ghosts and goblins which only served to make me more afraid. All these thoughts were running through my head as Pru and I assisted my mother from the carriage.

‘Do be careful, Silvia!’ my mother said sharply as I accidentally trod on her foot. ‘Ah, here’s Rachel.’ As Mother spoke I turned to see my aunt

walking towards us, a friendly light spilling from the half-open door behind her which dispersed some of the gloom of the impending evening.

There was no ceremony with Aunt Rachel. Mrs Trigg, the housekeeper, and her underlings would be safely ensconced in the kitchen quarters. As my Aunt Rachel embraced my mother I thought how beautiful she still was, her trim figure encased in a pretty mauve gown with lace at her throat, her jet black hair drawn gently back into a bun with soft ringlets framing her still lovely face. Like us she must be thankful the period of mourning was over and that we could dispense with our black dresses in favour of gayer colours.

'Silvia!' Aunt Rachel quickly embraced me also, let us get inside out of this cold wind, you must all be famished after your journey.' As she spoke we all made our way to the welcoming hall. I glanced at the flowerbeds in front of the house and could see coloured crocuses closed up for the night with forget-me-nots dancing around them.

As we stepped into the hall it was good to feel the warmth and I realised how cold I had become since standing in the graveyard. A fire was already burning in the huge hearth.

I noticed nothing had changed. A long highly-polished table stood at the end of the hall and drawn around the fire were brightly-coloured armchairs. I looked up at the ceiling with its oak beams and recalled all the rooms in this old house being the same. A wide uneven staircase covered in green floral carpet beckoned towards the upper floor and I suddenly felt a thrill at being here and knowing that very soon this legacy would be mine.

'Welcome Aunt Hannah and cousin Silvia.' I turned to see Jared walking towards me across the highly-polished floor. He embraced my mother and then taking my hand he raised it to his lips, all the while locking my eyes with his in an unfathomable gaze. There was mockery in that look and also some emotion I couldn't define. Jealousy perhaps that I, a mere female, had inherited Darkwood instead of him.

He was attractive and yet not handsome. His hair neither dark nor fair, he had insipid pale blue eyes that this smile never reached. He was short of stature, being just a little taller than myself but the one thing which stood out about him above all else, he was immaculately dressed and not a hair on his head out of place. I felt a pity for him, why I couldn't say, but quickly removed my icy hand from his grasp.

‘You notice, fair lady, that your betrothed is not here to greet you?’ I detected a hint of sarcasm in his voice and guessed things were none too friendly between Jared and his brother.

‘Please Jared, not now,’ my aunt intervened. ‘Gareth sends his apologies Silvia, but he has ridden to an outlying farm and will see you at dinner. Now come, Silvia, and I will show you your room. Your mother is in her old room and I have prepared your grand-mother’s room for you.’ So saying my mother heaved herself out of the chair she had sunk into.

Whilst Mother made her way to her old room, I followed Aunt Rachel along the dark corridor, full of excitement at seeing Lizzie’s room again. As we stepped in it was just as I had remembered only it seemed smaller. The huge mahogany four-poster bed draped with pink damask curtains took up a good part of the room. A large wardrobe stood in the corner adjacent to the fireplace from which the warmth of the fire already burned.

Under the small window was Grandmother’s petite writing desk and a small dressing table and washstand stood by the door. I recognised the china bowl and water jug decorated with pink roses and thought lovingly of my grandmother, while I looked with some longing at the armchair drawn up next to the fire where I had spent many happy hours in her company.

‘I can see you are pleased,’ Aunt Rachel’s voice cut across my thoughts, I’d almost forgotten she was there.

‘Why thank you, Aunt Rachel, for giving me this room.’

‘I know how much she meant to you, now I must go and see that all is going well with dinner and confirm that Pru is settled. I will see you at dinner at about seven and will have some water and refreshments sent up.’

I went straight across to the writing desk and pulled at the front, but it wouldn’t budge. Looking out of the small window above it I observed it was too dark to see anything and would have to wait until morning. Pulling together the pink curtains I looked around again at the room. It had a warm feel like Grandmother and I felt really at home.

I made my way across to the sampler in the wall by the bed. As a child I’d always been fascinated by the picture worked by my grandmother in cross-stitch of a house with four windows and a red front door. As I looked at it now I suddenly felt really close to her and ran my hand gently across the name of the eight-year-old Lizzie Kellaway who had painstakingly stitched it in January 1802.

I looked around at the armchair and wished so much Grandmother was sat there, the longing was almost painful. Opening the wardrobe doors I almost expected to see her clothes still hanging there, clothes of gay colours, but the inside was dark and empty and smelled of mothballs. I ran my hand along the bottom and touched on something which had long been forgotten.

On bringing it out into the light of the oil lamp I could see it was a small lace bag decorated with pink and yellow roses. I pressed it to me and quickly placed it in the dressing table drawer lest someone take it from me, the drawer too was empty, but one thing which remained on top was a small pink perfume bottle. I eagerly picked it up and smelt the rose scent which still lingered.

A slight tap at the door startled me somewhat and almost guiltily I placed the scent bottle back on the dressing table and the door burst open to reveal Gareth. To say I was surprised would have been an understatement and I just stood there looking at him as he stood on the threshold of my room.

Was he taking in my dishevelled appearance? For my long black hair tidy this morning had successfully escaped the pins, my pale blue travelling cloak was grubby from its trailing around the graveyard. To Gareth my violet eyes must have shown their surprise for he smiled, after all I had said earlier he actually smiled.

'It's good to see you cousin Silvia, albeit that it's not just for a family visit.' His voice was deep and precise. I could see he was doing his utmost to be polite. Unlike Jared, my betrothed was handsome, he had the coal black hair of the Hunter family and the good looks to match it. His eyes working over me were almost as black too and he was tall. Whereas Jared was meticulous in dress, Gareth was clothed in a casual air which suited him. He must have come straight to my room as he still wore his black riding cape and boots and while he stood there he tapped his riding crop gently on the palm of his left hand.

I gathered myself together and stood straight and tall quite incensed with him for bursting into my bedroom unannounced. 'I'll thank you not to come to my room again, it's most ungentlemanly and bad mannered on your part,' maddeningly my voice was quavering and my cheeks flushed.

'But we are to be married, Cousin, does this mean you will bar me from your bedroom indefinitely?' It was a challenge and I had no ready answer. I watched him leave and heard the door close quietly behind him and for no apparent reason I burst into tears.

2

My tears subsided, I knew not why they had fallen at all, maybe being back in Lizzie's room again had brought to the fore my emotions at losing her and had brought back sweet memories that I yearned for after all these years. Or could it be that coming face to face with Gareth my betrothed had made me realise to the full what a position I was in.

An arranged marriage by a grandfather whose very presence in a room had filled me with fear and awe. Could I really marry this cousin of mine who was almost a stranger? Or was I missing my friend, Grace Caswell, whose friendship I valued more than anything? I longed for a week to pass so she would join us to be my bridesmaid.

A tap on the door interrupted my thoughts and the door opened to reveal a pretty young maid with blonde curls escaping her mop cap. She gave a small curtsey as she placed a tray laden with thinly-sliced bread and butter, a piece of sponge cake accompanied by a pot of tea with a bone china cup and saucer, on the small table next to the armchair.

'Thank you.' I said, sitting up straighter in the armchair, running my hands gently over the fading pink arms as my grandmother had done. 'What is your name?'

'Dotty, Miss, I'm not to linger, Miss, as I'm needed in the kitchen to help with dinner.' She dropped another curtsey, which I found quite endearing as she headed for the door.

'Oh Miss, almost forgot to say, Douglas is bringing your trunks up.' No sooner had she spoken, there was a tap on the door. Dotty opened it and Douglas, with a young man, carried in one of my trunks and set it behind the door.

'Is it all right there?' he asked in a gruff voice. I nodded in agreement.

'Then me and young Alfred here will go and fetch the other one, Miss, which I'm bound to say is a good deal lighter than the one we've just brought up.'

Dotty was still holding the door open and the three of them went out with Dotty dropping another curtsey before scuttling out and closing the door behind her.

I knew why the trunk Douglas had set to one side of the bed was heavier. It contained my trousseau, which Mother and I had spent all year stitching.

How I hated sewing! Books appealed far more to me and I picked up the latest English Woman's Domestic magazine my mother had purchased for me on one of her rare shopping trips. I flicked through the pages with little interest, Dickens and Lord Tennyson being far more to my liking.

On opening the lid of the trunk, I looked at the contents folded in painstakingly neat piles. Nightdresses, petticoats, silk drawers, chemises, corsets, reception dresses, walking dresses, day dresses, shawls, tea cloths, towels and tablecloths, everything a new bride would need for the start of married life. When I thought of all the stitches, embroidery and hours of work which had gone into it all, I felt quite tired and slammed the lid shut on it all abruptly, just as Douglas appeared with the second trunk.

Pru arrived, dear Pru she always managed to lighten my mood, in no time she'd arranged all my clothes in the wardrobe and drawers.

'Now what are you thinking of wearing this evening, Miss? I think you should look your best.' As she spoke, her expert hands searched through my many coloured dresses. Almost in triumph she lifted out my favourite violet coloured silk dress, smoothing the skirt and flattening the cream lace collar. 'Well, Miss Silvia?' she asked, as she shook the creation causing the silk to shimmer in the light of the oil lamps.

My lack of interest must have shown. 'Come now Miss, this matches your eyes perfectly and you know it, you will look a picture.' For her sake I smiled.

'All right Pru, you've convinced me, now I must set to getting ready.' I conceded.

'Your future husband will not be able to resist you, Miss, and that's a fact.' As Pru spoke she smiled broadly at me, but this thought dampened my spirits.

'I don't wish to think of him,' I said, far more sharply than I intended, and I laid a hand gently on Pru's arm.

'You may quite like him when you see him, Silvia,' Mother's voice interrupted.

I looked around to see her standing in the doorway, she'd entered so quietly neither Pru nor I had heard her. 'Mother I've seen him, he came to my room not an hour since.' My voice was full of indifference.

'Did he indeed, obviously a man full of spirit and strong intention.' As she spoke, my mother sat herself in Lizzie's chair. 'So child, what do you

think of Gareth Hunter?' The was silence for a few seconds. 'Well answer me, child!'

My silence obviously irritated her, but I knew not what to answer. What did I really think of this man who was to be my husband after so brief an encounter? As she sat looking at me her face full of expectancy her mouth slightly open, I knew Mother needed an answer.

'Gareth is a handsome man, this I cannot deny.' The words came out of my mouth slowly and quietly as I continued. 'He is bold and...' I searched for the word, 'and arrogant! There, now you have my answer, please allow me to dress for dinner.' Mother shuffled back in the chair obviously aware that was all I would say.

My crinoline hoop was in place as Pru helped me on with my gown. As I looked in the mirror I acknowledge Pru was right. The violet colour of the gown matched my eyes perfectly. Delicate cream lace adorned the high neckline and the elbow-length puffed sleeves. As I sat at the dressing table Pru deftly fashioned my jet black hair. I was ready to face the Hunters.

Mother had been dozing in the chair, the black skirt of her dress rising and falling with each breath, she suddenly came to and sat up straight.

'Of course, the Reverend George Poulter will be here this evening so Rachel tells me.' She spoke half stifling a yawn, then stood up on her feet, quite precariously as Pru steadied her with a gentle hand.

'Whatever for?' Was my sharp-tongued reply.

'Because dear girl, you and Gareth need to set a date for your wedding.' Mother's tone matched mine.

'We are surely not going to set the date at the dinner table!' I was aghast at the very thought of it and looked at Mother with some anxiety.

'It would appear so, Silvia. Now just you remember your manners especially in front of any strangers we may encounter this evening. I want to feel proud of you, for you look quite lovely this evening.' This was indeed a compliment from Mother and the reply hovering on my lips died as I thanked her if somewhat begrudgingly.

Walking along the corridor our skirts swishing on the carpets beneath our feet, a sudden thought came to mind. My grandmother's portrait had at one time hung at the top of the stairs, I'd not noticed it on our arrival earlier, my steps quickened eager to see the face I so loved.

To my utter disappointment the portrait I longed to see was gone. In its place hung a picture of my grandfather, Samuel. His likeness had been

painted standing by a gnarled grey oak, bluebells surrounding his feet and flanked on either side by large spaniel-type brown and white dogs. The portrait had obviously been painted in the latter part of his life for his sparse hair was a steel grey and, as I looked at his face I noted the cruel mouth, half of which curled in a sardonic smile.

'What are you looking so intently at my father's portrait for?' Mother's breathless voice interrupted my train of thought.

'Because I had hoped to see the picture of your mother and was surprised to see my grandfather instead.' My reply to Mother's questioning was half-hearted, because looking more intently at the wall I could see the faded wallpaper where Lizzie's picture had once hung, obviously being far larger than the one of her husband. I turned to my mother, 'So where has Lizzie's portrait gone?' It was a simple question for me to ask, but I was not to gain a simple answer.

'Goodness child, how would I know. Now let us get down to dinner for we are already late.'

I resolved to locate the missing portrait of my beloved grandmother.

As we entered the drawing-room which was situated at the front of the house, my first thought was that gone were the mellow warm pink colours that Lizzie loved. In their place were bright blues, the curtains and furniture shrieked with the colour and I suddenly felt cold, even though a fire already burned brightly in the old stone hearth.

My second thought was that there appeared to be several people in the room all seemingly unfamiliar except for Aunt Rachel, who amidst hushed silence when we entered steered my mother to a settle by the fire. Before I had chance to look around me a hearty, booming voice uttered my name. 'Silvia!' And I was drawn by two strong arms into a swift embrace. The gentleman put me at arms length and I could see it was Aunt Rachel's husband, my Uncle William, age had not altered him a good deal, he was greyer with bright rosy cheeks, which years on Dartmoor had accorded him. I realised now I was older and how short of stature he was being no taller than myself.

'Why, Uncle William!' I beamed with some pleasure, recalling all the happy times I'd spent with him as a child, playing hide and seek amongst all the nooks and crannies at Darkwood, rolling brightly coloured marbles along the path at the front of the house, me always winning and doing jigsaw puzzles together in the evenings under the dim light of oil lamps.

‘You no longer look the tomboy I remember,’ he observed. His eyes twinkling. ‘What a beautiful young woman you’ve become. A bright light for eyes as old as mine.’

‘Oh come, Uncle,’ I bantered, ‘You aren’t that old, just older.’ And we laughed.

‘I hear I’m not to give you away at your marriage to my son, Gareth.’ At his words my smile vanished. ‘You are displeased with this forthcoming union?’ my dear uncle queried, his face full of concern.

‘Not displeased as such Uncle, more apprehensive.’ I replied in a quiet voice, drawing my hands away from his.

‘Let it suffice to say for this evening at least, that I could wish for no more suitable a bride than you for my son.’ Uncle William spoke the words quietly also just as we were interrupted by Jared.

‘Come now Father, you’ve spent enough time with our lovely cousin, time for someone else to enjoy the pleasure of her company.’ As Jared spoke he steered me to the window opposite the fireplace where a young man and woman were in quiet conversation.

As we approached, the young man looked up, his eyes meeting mine, he was tall with short dark hair the front of which fell appealingly across his forehead.

‘Silvia, let me introduce you to the Reverend George Poulter, who will be officiating at your marriage to my brother, Gareth.’ As Jared spoke the words I noticed the clerical dress this prepossessing gentleman wore. He offered his hand, ‘It is my pleasure to at last meet you, Miss Harvey, and on such a joyous occasion,’ Mr Poulter enthused.

The young woman at his side looked on in silence as introductions were made, I fleetingly thought that she looked too young to be his wife for she looked eighteen, and the vicar in his thirties. But I was proved right by his next words.

‘Please allow me to introduce my sister, Isabel.’ As he spoke he drew the young woman forward. At this point I caught sight of Gareth out of the corner of my eye. I turned to observe him better, he was in earnest conversation with the most beautiful creature I had ever set eyes upon. She was slim and fair, her skin like polished ivory without a blemish, the pale green of her expensive gown matching perfectly with the green of her sparkling eyes.

As I started at the two of them, she suddenly threw back her lovely head and laughed. It was the loveliest laugh I had ever heard, like wind chimes tinkling in a summer breeze, but for some strange reason the sound of it stabbed at my heart like a piece of shattered glass.

3

‘Miss Harvey,’ the vicar’s questioning voice drifted across to me and I turned back to face him.

‘Apologies, Vicar, you must think me most rude.’ As I spoke I noted that Isabel still hadn’t uttered a word. Her pale face showed no expression and she seemed not to notice her surroundings, the yellow dress she wore was garish and did not compliment her pallid colour or her mousy coloured hair.

‘On the contrary, Miss Harvey, I can understand you being distracted by your betrothed, especially as he is talking to such a lovely young woman.’ His eyes twinkled as he spoke, and while the vicar found this entertaining, I most certainly did not. At this moment Jared offered me a glass of sherry which I took willingly, I would like to have drunk it in one go, but sipped it as decorously as I could.

Looking at Jared, the thought crossed my mind that he would be a far more attentive bridegroom, for Gareth had not even noticed my existence in the room, something I intended to rectify this instant. Swiftly I walked across to him and his beautiful companion.

‘Are you going to introduce me to this lovely lady, cousin Gareth, or are you too enamoured to tear yourself away?’ My voice trembled as I spoke.

After speaking the words I wished I could have retracted them and I knew that Mother would be furious at my manner. Gareth turned to look at me, an unfathomable expression on his handsome face. I noticed how his black jacket and waistcoat showed off the snow white of his ruffled shirt.

‘Cousin Silvia, please let me introduce you to a family friend, Miss Estelle Benedict.’ So saying, Gareth clicked his heels together and without so much as an, ‘excuse me’, left me with this lovely creature whose name matched her beauty, and for an instant I thought of the novel, Great Expectations, and idly wondered would Miss Benedict break Gareth’s heart or mine.

‘Delighted to meet you at last Miss Harvey.’ Estelle’s voice was as melodic as her laugh. As she spoke she offered a hand which was limp in my grasp. The smile on her face didn’t meet her eyes and knew instinctively that she hated me as much as I hated her. Thankfully we were not destined to engage in conversation that evening.

Mrs Trigg arrested our attention by informing us that dinner was ready. She was still a tall thin woman, her greying hair scraped severely back off her face which served to accentuate her large nose. As children we'd laughed about this and my mind flew back to Gareth.

As I looked around I caught sight of him with Aunt Rachel heading for the dining-room. Did he really not care about my existence, for surely, as his betrothed he should have escorted me into dinner. I felt a sense of total frustration at his complete indifference.

As it happened I walked into the dining-room with a silent Isabel, for her brother had escorted the lovely Estelle.

As we entered the dining-room, I noticed straight away the walls were blue as in the drawing-room, although the long dining table was beautifully laid with a white damask tablecloth, silver and crystal goblets, the room felt cold and I shivered involuntarily.

'Silvia, Gareth, please sit at this end of the table.' Uncle William indicated the two seats by him as he was obviously to sit at the head. Aunt Rachel sat next to Gareth and Jared took his seat by me. I found this difficult looking across at my future husband and feeling Jared's nearness throughout the meal. Surprisingly it was Gareth who first mentioned our wedding date.

'When would you like us to marry, cousin?' His words drifted across the table and I realised with some hesitation that Gareth had addressed me.

'I have no thoughts on this.' I replied quietly. 'Sometime next year would suit me, and yourself perhaps?' I asked sweetly.

His reply was unexpected. 'Indeed not, cousin, I had thought of Easter this year.' As he spoke he raised one dark eyebrow.

'But that is only four weeks away!' The alarm in my voice must have shown.

'The sooner the better, cousin. I shall be more than pleased when the deed is done and we can all get on with our lives. Do you agree, Mother?' he turned to Aunt Rachel.

'Why yes, an Easter wedding sounds delightful.' She agreed.

'Indeed it will be.' My mother, who sat next to her sister, responded, Not much time to prepare I will admit, but a lovely time of year none-the-less, and I can return to Exeter sooner rather than later.'

I looked at the three of them striving to think of some complication. I then realised that Estelle was in deep conversation, the Reverend Poulter quite oblivious to the discussion at this end of the table. While Isabel sat

morosely next to the lovely creature, like a moth next to a colourful butterfly.

Then the thought came to me in a flash, ‘But I have no wedding gown,’ I said in triumph, looking at them all in eager anticipation. But Mother’s words dampened my spirits further.

‘No dear, but I’m sure that will be no problem, you have your veil ordered from Honiton, and your head-dress and shoes being made in France, we will just have to inform them that we require an immediate delivery.’

Mother sat back in her chair, white napkin tucked in the neck of her dress, she was obviously tired and well fed.

Aunt Rachel turned her attention to me, ‘We have a very good dressmaker in Tavistock, Silvia, who we will visit tomorrow after lunch. There, does that make you feel more at ease, child?’

‘Enough of bridal dresses and flowers, there will be time enough to watch my wife sewing in the evenings, let alone talk of it before the marriage.’ Gareth spoke firmly and then applied his concentration to the cheese on his plate.

‘But Silvia hates sewing or embroidery.’ My mother’s voice boomed out, causing everyone to look, ‘She has more love for her novels and poetry than in normal women’s pastimes.’

At this Gareth raised his eyes and looked at me, ‘Who is your favourite poet, cousin?’ he asked with obvious interest.

‘Our Poet Laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson, our Queen’s favourite also.’ I replied almost shyly.

Gareth’s next words stunned me somewhat. ‘The Knights come riding two and two, she hath no loyal Knight and true.’

As he uttered the words, Gareth’s dark eyes locked with my violet ones, it was for only a matter of seconds, but in that short space of time I both admired the fact that he quoted from Tennyson’s Lady Of Shalott, and realised at the same time he was conveying to me the message, ‘you have no Knight in me.’

He wiped his beautifully-shaped mouth with his napkin which he then placed on the table. ‘So we are agreed, cousin. Easter Saturday, the fifteenth of April it shall be, if this is suitable for you, Reverend?’

‘It is indeed, I will call the banns for the next three Sundays. I would like to think you will both attend church.’ Reverend Poulter looked at us both.

It was the point that I realised that from now on we would be looked upon as a couple. My heart started racing and I felt my cheeks going hot at the thought, that in four weeks' time I would be sharing my life with a stranger. The men all stood as we ladies retired to the drawing-room, leaving them to their port and masculine conversation.

In the hall, Mother excused herself and said that she was weary and needed to get to bed, or she wouldn't enjoy our outing to Tavistock on the morrow.

The word, outing, was a most unfortunate term as I looked on it as a chore. We all bade her goodnight and made our way to the drawing-room. Much was said about my forthcoming wedding.

'Have you a bridesmaid, Silvia? For if not, I would be pleased to oblige,' said Estelle at one point in the conversation.

'Thank you for the kind thought, Estelle, but my friend, Grace, is to join us in a week. She will be my bridesmaid.' I replied with little charity.

My aunt sat opposite me by the fire. 'Why have the rooms been decorated in blue Aunt Rachel?' I had to ask.

Did I detect a slight hesitation as she responded, 'Your grandfather wished them to be this colour after...' And her voice trailed away.

'Also,' I interposed. 'Where has Lizzie's portrait gone which hung at the top of the stairs when I was a child?'

'I really don't know, but you could try the attic when you have a spare couple of hours,' Aunt Rachel offered. And I immediately resolved to visit the attic in the morning, for Grandmother's portrait was more important to me than a wedding gown.

I was tired. The many events of the day were overwhelming, not least my encounters with Gareth Hunter, but I didn't want to think of him. I excused myself and left the drawing-room.

As I put one foot on the bottom stair of the staircase, my skirt held up at the front with one hand I was stopped by a voice behind me.

'Cousin Silvia,' I turned back to see Jared leaning against the dining-room door a goblet of port in one hand. As I looked he raised the glass and quietly said, 'To you, cousin.'

'Goodnight, Jared, I am weary and in no mood to play games,' I said dismissively and turned back to climb the staircase. I was half way up when he gently caught my arm.

‘Favour me cousin, for you won’t regret it I promise you.’ Jared spoke quietly and with some urgency.

‘Jared, we cannot talk like this on the staircase, for one thing it is dangerous,’ I replied firmly. ‘And for another, you must be aware, it is improper given my situation with your brother.’

‘Then move up the stairs to the corridor, for I wish to speak with you alone,’ he implored.

I did as Jared asked, for nothing could be gained by lingering halfway up the staircase, if for no other reason than that we could be seen. We stepped into the corridor leading to my room when Jared turned me to him.

‘You must realise that Gareth will lead you a merry dance. He’s only marrying you so he can get his hands on his beloved Darkwood, whereas I hate the very name of this house, and could take you away and give you more attention than my brother ever will.’ He paused, ‘Please at least say that you will mull it over,’ he implored again.

Pulling my arm away from his grasp I realised I felt intimidated and unsure as to how to handle this unexpected situation. I knew that to humour him was the only way of dealing with him, for the moment at least.

‘I will agree to think about it, Jared, but now I wish to get to my room. Sleep is what is needed for I cannot think straight without it.’

My words seemed to please him for he made to descend the stairs, stopping briefly to say, ‘You must know that Gareth only has eyes for Estelle Benedict.’

I stood there for some seconds and then I heard him bid Gareth goodnight. I quickly realised the two brothers must have passed on the staircase and with some sense of alarm as Gareth appeared, I wondered if he had heard any of our conversation.

My betrothed looked at me, bid me goodnight, then strode in the opposite direction.

Entering my bedroom, I leaned back against the door, relieved that I was back in Lizzie’s room. In the hearth, embers of the fire still glowed brightly and I sank into my grandmother’s armchair, a hundred thoughts whirling in my head.

Why had Jared made this declaration and if I accepted, where would he take me? As far as I was aware he had no means of supporting me. I was sorely tempted, but that thought led me to Gareth, could I in time get to know this stranger, and even given time, love him?

Yes I thought, I will accept the challenge, and made a mental note not to find myself alone with cousin Jared, but this I was to learn, was going to be easier said than done.

The door opening startled me, but it was only Pru. ‘Come to help you prepare for bed, Miss Silvia. You look done in and that’s a fact. A good night’s sleep will refresh you so you will be ready to see everything in a new light tomorrow.’ Pru chatted on hardly aware that I was quiet and unresponsive.

I climbed into Lizzie’s bed, the feather mattress curling around my weary body, I snuggled into the pillows and thought about Grandmother. It was all very strange, no headstone in the graveyard and her portrait removed, for what reason I had yet to find out, but had every intention of scouring the attic in the morning. My last thought as I snuggled under the covers and drifted into sleep was what did cousin Gareth think of me, did I care? And the answer was, yes.

4

The following morning, attired in my powder blue day dress, I sat at the dining table alone. It would appear no-one else ate breakfast and I half expected Jared to appear, but prayed not. This was the day I would explore the attic before our trip to the dressmakers.

Making my way across the hall to find Mrs Trigg to ask if I needed a key to the attic door, I encountered Aunt Rachel.

'Ah Silvia, I was looking for you. Did you sleep well?' Aunt Rachel put a hand over mine as she spoke. Not waiting for an answer she continued, 'There is a change of plan, we are to visit the dressmaker this morning.'

'I was just about to explore the attic,' I said with some sense of disappointment.

'Never mind dear, you can do that on our return. Gareth has to go to Tavistock for some painting oils, so we may as well all go together. Your mother is getting herself ready as we speak, we'll meet in the hall at nine-fifteen.' With these words Aunt Rachel left me to make her way up the stairs, so I thought I'd best do the same.

To think I would be in close proximity to Gareth in the coach caused me some concern. On the other hand maybe it was a chance to draw him closer to me and vanquish the lovely Estelle from his mind.

All duly attired and settled in the coach, we made our way slowly across the moor. The wind had ceased today and the sun shone brightly on the windows of the coach. I felt stifled by the green cloak I wore and untied the ribbon around my neck, almost dislodging my bonnet.

Mother was snoozing in one corner, Aunt Rachel was looking out at the moor in all its glory, greens, browns and yellows were dappled by the sunlight and fluffy white clouds, the whole landscape seemed to stretch into infinity impeded only by intermittent slabs of granite, and I was watching Gareth who sat opposite me.

'What are your thoughts, cousin Gareth?' I bent towards him as I spoke. He looked at me for some moments before replying.

'I am thinking the pale green becomes you and that your bonnet is very pretty.' This was a compliment indeed and I felt my cheeks going hot praying Gareth did not notice my confusion at his words. It was my

favourite bonnet, the edge trimmed with pink lace, and the bonnet itself adorned with small pink rosebuds.

I noticed Aunt Rachel glance at us before turning back to the window, a gentle smile on her face, she was obviously pleased at the way the conversation was going.

'Why thank you, cousin,' I responded quietly. 'I understand that not only do you recite poetry, but you paint as well.'

'I only dabble in it from time to time, but it is relaxing and enjoyable, I have a small studio at the top of the house next to the attic.' My thought was that my betrothed was very talkative and forthcoming today, could it be because of the absence of Miss Benedict? He continued, 'Our grandmother painted, did you know she came from Ireland?'

'No I did not, but she had no accent so I had not realised,' I replied with some interest. 'Where did she come from?'

'Killarney in Southern Ireland, it is said that Grandfather fell in love as soon as he set eyes on her, and I suspect she lost her Irish brogue while living so long at Darkwood.'

Having spoken, Gareth looked out of the window, 'We are here,' he said, and as I looked I could see that we were in a small market town with sand-coloured buildings. Everywhere was a hive of activity, people selling their wares and children chasing hoops along the thoroughfare.

The carriage jolted to a halt outside a very imposing double-fronted building with a large bell under the roof. I guessed we were at the dressmaker's and felt quite cheated that the interlude with Gareth had ended so abruptly, but also felt that we had built part of the rapport so needed between us.

Mother opened her eyes, obviously woken by the stopping of the carriage, she looked at Aunt Rachel, a bemused expression on her face.

'We're surely not here already, I'd only just nodded off. No matter, let us hope we achieve what we've come for.' As Mother spoke she wriggled to the edge of her seat and Aunt Rachel helped her to her feet, her mauve dress getting caught under one shoe.

Gareth opened the door and jumped down nimbly offering his hand to help me alight. It was the first time I'd had physical contact with him and was somewhat surprised to find the touch of his hand grasping mine was a pleasant experience.

He helped Mother and Aunt Rachel out also saying, ‘This is where I leave you ladies, I will return for you in two hours.’

The three of us stood at the door awaiting an answer to the bell we’d just rung. I was interested in the highly-polished brass plaque to the left of the door inscribed with the words, Caroline Peacock, Dressmaker.

After greeting us, we were led into a room on the right by Caroline herself. She was slightly overweight with a rounded figure encased in a ruby coloured dress which suited her blonde wavy hair and rosy cheeks perfectly. As we stepped into the room we were confronted by bales of material in every hue and colour.

‘This is all I have in silk, but I’m sure Miss Harvey, that you will find something here to your liking,’ Caroline addressed me as she spoke, for my mother and aunt walked in and out of the tables looking at various materials. I was drawn to a dove grey silk and as I smoothed my hand across it Mother’s voice came to me.

‘Not grey, Silvia, please,’ she admonished. ‘Here is an ivory silk taffeta far more appropriate.’ I walked over to where Mother had indicated.

‘But grey matches my mood, Mother.’ As I spoke the words, I realised they weren’t strictly true now, for part of me was looking forward to a match with Gareth and I decided at that moment to enjoy the preparation for my inevitable union. ‘This is indeed quite lovely and will match my lace veil well,’ I said, quite astounding Mother as she had, I think, been prepared for a battle.

‘You’ve chosen well, Miss Harvey, and may I suggest that as your veil is lace, your dress should be plain,’ Caroline asked me tentatively.

‘I do agree, and what style do you recommend?’ I asked with some enthusiasm, for if this marriage were to take place, which indeed it would, I wished to look at my most captivating for my bridegroom.

‘I think perhaps a long-sleeved neat bodice, separate from the skirt, which should be full at the back to suit your slim figure and height.’ As she spoke Caroline was looking me up and down.

‘I will bow to your knowledge, Miss Peacock. I am confident you will make me a wedding dress that I will adore.’ As I spoke I looked at Mother and could see unshed tears in her eyes. She was very emotional about the whole situation, which I found quite endearing.

Caroline asked us to return in a fortnight for a fitting. As we stepped outside the carriage was waiting as Gareth had promised. We were all silent

on our way back to Darkwood, each with our own thoughts, Mother and Aunt Rachel no doubt like me thinking of the forthcoming wedding, even more so as I surveyed Gareth's handsome face, the expression of which was inscrutable and I wondered to myself just what he was thinking.

We arrived back at Darkwood in time for a light lunch. Much to my disappointment, Gareth declined to join us, and after eating I sped upstairs to change. My visit to the attic and Lizzie's portrait being uppermost in my mind.

Aunt Rachel had pointed me in the right direction and there was indeed a key which she had handed to me with the words, 'Don't fall over anything.'

I had to turn left at the top of the stairs, along the corridor Gareth had walked the evening before, and as I passed each door I was left wondering which room was his, but resisted the strong temptation to step through each door with the hope of finding out.

Sure enough, as Aunt Rachel had directed, at the end of the corridor to the right was a narrow plain wooden staircase. I walked up it slowly, lifting my skirts as I went. As I rounded the corner at the top I was confronted by a low door and I inserted the key, and with some anticipation then turned the brass knob.

Lowering my head, I stepped into the attic which was huge, far larger than I expected, and realised it must run the good length of the house. Looking up I saw the massive oak beams which held the roof in place and my dilemma was where to start.

There were pieces of old furniture, long forgotten chests and pieces of porcelain. I moved across to one table on which stood quite a few pieces of china and picked up a small figurine of a lady dressed in a rose-coloured pink dress with a yellow rose on her shoulder and one in her hair. I recognised this as a piece my grandmother had always kept in the bedroom on the mantelpiece. I placed it back on the table intending to take it with me on my way out.

A thought struck me as I walked slowly across the bare floorboards looking at the various chests. Would I find Lizzie's clothes? The thought spurred me on and I slowly lifted the lid of each chest to no avail.

They contained mainly men's and children's clothing. Frustration was creeping upon me as I neared the end of the attic finding I had to stoop as the roof was much lower here. Cobwebs impeded my path and tangled them-selves in my hair, but I pressed on as I'd spied a chest in the corner.

On reaching it, I first had to wipe the dust off with the palm of my hand, as I tried to lift the lid it would not move, but to my delight could see that the key was in the rusty lock. I turned it with some excitement and the lid lifted easily, swinging back on its hinges. I looked at the contents with tears springing to my eyes, for it was indeed Lizzie's clothing.

On top lay a green fur-trimmed hood and cloak, not dissimilar to the green I had worn today. Lovingly I picked it from the chest, holding it in my hands and laying the material against my cheek, Lizzie's perfume still lingered faintly and I took it in breathing deeply.

'Oh, Grandmother,' I whispered aloud, 'How I wish you were here, what's happened to you?' I waited almost expecting a reply, but the attic was silent except for the slight creaking of the floorboards under my feet. Almost reverently I laid the cloak back in the chest, I couldn't bear to see anything else today. Slowly I lowered the lid and turned the key in the lock slipping the key in the side pocket of my dress, not wanting anyone but me to look through Lizzie's things. But by the looks of the cobwebs at this end of the attic no-one had been here for many years.

Stooping even lower, I headed towards a small window at the end for I'd seen the back of a large picture leaning against the wall. On reaching it I pushed the cobwebs away with my hands and tried to lift it to turn it around, nearly dropping it because of its weight.

Full of determination, I placed my hands halfway down each side of the frame and heaving it up and around with a strength I didn't know I had, then placed it with some effort back on the floor. It was my grandmother's portrait, for I recognised the cornflower blue dress and the coal black hair, but to my dismay as I stood looking down at it I could see someone had fiercely slashed at her face with some sharp instrument. As I stood there because of my distress tears streaming down my cheeks, I wondered which malicious person had done this to my beloved Lizzie.

5

A few days passed without incident since I had found my grandmother's portrait. I'd not yet mentioned it to anyone, but at the right moment I intended to tell Aunt Rachel. Many times I'd turned it over in my mind trying to work out who would do such a thing and with such obvious hatred.

Since our visit to the dressmaker's I'd seen little of Gareth. He was either out or shut away in his studio. Consequently, we had not continued to build on our relationship. I had not seen Jared at all and was blissfully unaware that this was about to change.

April was nearly upon us. The warm weather was clement and I was restless. Grace would arrive tomorrow, but until then I needed something to occupy my day.

'What are you to do today?' Pru asked as she busied herself tidying up my bedroom. Tidiness was not one of my better attributes.

'I'm thinking I may go to Culmoor Church as it is such a beautiful day and maybe explore the graveyard again.' As I spoke I lay the Charles Dickens novel I was reading on the table.

'It will do you good to take your head out of that book, Miss, and get some fresh air. You are looking quite pale lately, now let us get you dressed.'

Pru's words brought to mind the fact that I was still in my night attire, so immediately set to dressing, Pru helping me into a pale pink day dress. She then wrapped a heavy cream lace shawl around my shoulders and helped tie the ribbons on a matching pink wide-brimmed bonnet.

'Will I do?' I asked Pru. Why I asked I didn't know except that at the back of my mind I knew I had to look my best at all times.

'You look perfect. Now run along while I finish tidying up here and then I must go to your mother and see if she will get dressed today.' These words from Pru made me realise I'd not seen Mother for a couple of days as she'd been suffering from one of her bad heads.

'Give her my love, Pru, and please tell her I'll see her later.' Closing the door behind me and making my way along the corridor, to my dismay I saw Jared walking towards the staircase also from the opposite direction. I quickened my step in the hope that I would reach the stairs before him, but we both met on the top step.

‘You look lovely today, cousin,’ he remarked quietly. As he spoke I looked down into the hall silently praying that someone would be there, but the whole house seemed silent.

‘Why thank you, Jared,’ I replied making a move to descend, but I was prevented from doing so by Jared turning me to face him.

‘Come with me cousin Silvia, for I have something that I wish you to see.’

As he spoke Jared took a firm grip on my arm and led me along the corridor towards the attic stairs taking no heed of my protestations.

‘Will you please release me, cousin,’ I almost shouted in vain hope that someone would hear. We had stopped in front of the last door on the left, looking at the door I felt a sense of impending gloom.

‘This, cousin, is the master bedroom, which if you choose to marry him you will share with my brother.’ So saying he turned the brass handle on the door flinging it wide open and dragging me in, only then did he release the strong grip on my arm. And while it was my chance to escape I could not help but stand transfixed to the dark wooden floor and look around me.

The large room held no warmth, the dark blue heavy curtains were drawn blocking out any sunlight, the fireplace was built of slate grey-coloured marble and even with a fire burning I could not image it radiating any warmth. The walls were the same blue as the drawing-room which I loathed. A huge dark mahogany wardrobe filled the wall by the window, and adjacent to the door was an equally large matching four-poster bed carved with grotesque faces.

I stared at it quite forgetting Jared’s presence until he spoke, his voice breaking into my almost mesmerised thoughts. ‘So cousin, does this little scene thwart any plans you may have of marrying Gareth for the sake of Darkwood? For this is Darkwood in truth, where our grandfather slept and ruled this house and all its occupants with a rod of iron.’

As Jared spoke I could feel myself trembling, but was it with fear or anger? I was outraged at the way Jared had brought me here, but at the same time grateful that he had shown me this hideous room.

There was no way that I’d sleep in this room as it was now, everything would have to be altered from the colour of the walls to the bed. Jared stood to one side of the window, walking swiftly across, I drew back the curtains with defiance as sunlight streamed in making little difference. I had no

intention of telling this cousin how I felt about anything for to do so would only serve to raise his hopes.

As I looked at Jared's face I could see the cruel twist of his mouth, so like the one I had seen in the portrait of our grandfather, Samuel, a trait Jared had obviously inherited, and wishing to get away from him as much as the oppressive room, I picked up my skirts and ran back along the corridor, not stopping until I reached the bottom of the staircase.

Taking a few deep breaths to calm myself I looked back towards the staircase, but thankfully Jared had not followed. At this moment Aunt Rachel's voice startled me.

'Silvia dear, where are you going?' she enquired in her soft voice.

'To Culmoor Church as it is a beautiful day and I wish to go out for a while.' I smiled as I spoke trying to control the tremor in my voice caused by my experience with my aunt's youngest son.

'I cannot let you go unchaperoned Silvia, I would join you myself, but I have a visitor calling later. Leave it until tomorrow when I can accompany you.' Her request was reasonable, but I was stubborn.

'I'm sorry, Aunt, but I have set my heart on going now. As Mother is indisposed I will take Pru.' These words obviously pleased her.

'That will be much more in keeping. We have a guest for dinner this evening, so please don't linger longer than necessary dear. I like to make Estelle feel welcome when she visits.' At Aunt Rachel's words my heart sank. I had hoped not to see the lovely Estelle again until my marriage to Gareth.

'Has she no-one to accompany her?' I asked as sweetly as I could.

'No dear, unfortunately she is all alone in the world since her mother died.' Aunt Rachel's voice was almost wistful being one to gather lonely people to her bosom and care for them.

'She is extremely pretty, I'm surprised some young man hasn't whisked her to the altar before now.' My voice held the interest I felt and I waited for my aunt's reply which stunned me somewhat.

'Estelle has eyes only for Gareth, and until you and he are married she will not look beyond him.'

The startled expression on my face must have shown for Aunt Rachel tried to pacify me. 'But that doesn't mean that Gareth returns her affection, quite the contrary.' Little did I know that later that day I would recall my aunt's words.

‘No matter, I must find Pru for time is pressing,’ I said wishing to change the course of the conversation.

‘You do that and I shall arrange for Matt to convey you in the pony and trap.’ She turned to go and then turned back. ‘By the way, Silvia, there is a letter for you. It is on the chest by the front door, enjoy your outing.’

At Aunt Rachel’s words I hastened over to the chest, picking up the letter. I could see it was Grace’s handwriting. Just as I was about to climb back up the staircase, Dotty was scurrying across the hall, and seeing me she dropped a curtsey. ‘I’m sorry Miss, I’ve been sent to light the fire in the drawing-room,’ she explained.

‘Before you do, Dotty, could you please find my maid, Pru, and ask her to get herself ready to accompany me. I will meet her in the hall in a quarter-of-an-hour,’ I asked, turning to the drawing-room, intent on reading my letter. I preferred not to go upstairs just in case I encountered Jared once more. Dotty didn’t answer, but scurried off in search of Pru.

Sitting on the settle in the cold drawing-room I eagerly opened Grace’s letter which read,

My dearest Silvia,

I am truly sorry to impart bad tidings, but I find I cannot join you this week as planned. My mother is so ill I just cannot leave her at present. I know this will cause you some distress as indeed it does me, but as soon as Mama is stronger I will join you, for I am so longing to see you and Darkwood. Have you set a date for your wedding? Please write soon with your news.

From your loving friend,

Grace.

I read the letter several times, tears springing to my eyes. So Grace would not be here to talk to as I had so hoped and above all else I had no bridesmaid, but I understood that Grace could not leave her sick mother.

When I left the drawing-room, Dotty already had a fire springing to life in the hearth. Pru was waiting for me in the hall dressed in her light brown moreno dress which accentuated the colour of her red hair.

‘Miss Silvia, what are we about? I have so many tasks to perform and your mother is quite put out that I should have to leave her.’ Pru chattered on hardly allowing me to explain, which I managed to do as we stepped out into the warm spring sunshine and Matt assisted us into the pony and trap.

As we bowled along the narrow lane, I looked back at the house. In the spring sunshine the building looked quite appealing and I caught sight of the bridge which led into the wood beyond. I was soon to be a married woman and no longer under my late grandfather's spell. I would one day very soon venture into the wood and see for myself if it was inhabited by ghouls and goblins.

The thought of Samuel brought to mind the master bedroom at Darkwood and my thought was to speak with Gareth about it at my first opportunity.

Nearly all the way I could see the church perched on top of the small hillock. As we reached the bottom of it I could see the steep path winding its way through the grass and idly wondered how Mother would manage to walk up to the church on my wedding day. As Matt helped me alight on to the path, Pru made to follow, but I stopped her from doing so. 'Please Pru, sit in the sunshine and rest for I wish to go alone.' I coaxed her and could see she was somewhat relieved, as to climb anything was not Pru's favourite pas-time.

As I made my way slowly up the uneven path, I realised it wasn't as difficult as I had imagined. Nearing the gate I took a look back at the view behind me. The whole landscape was a field stretching into the distance where I had a glimpse of the sea merging into the blue sky. Passing through the gate, the church loomed up towards me. My thought was that very soon I would walk this way dressed in my wedding gown.

As I walked around the side of the church to the entrance I could see that the view from here was the same on all sides, grass lay each side of the granite building and one solitary seat stood against the surrounding wall. I stepped out of the sunlight into the dark porch and was glad Pru had the sense earlier to lay a shawl around my shoulders which I pulled tightly around me as I felt suddenly cold.

Lifting the latch on the heavy door and pushing it enough to allow me to pass through, I stepped on to the cold granite slab floor. It was lighter in here for the sun slanted through some of the small plain windows set high in the outer wall, casting rays intermittently across the brown, well worn pews.

The interior of the church was far smaller than I had imagined. Making my way slowly down the aisle I looked up to the colourful window above the altar. It was then I noticed out of the corner of my eye that someone was sitting in the front pew, a man, who had obviously not heard me enter.

I made to retreat, the skirts of my dress catching on the pews as I turned to retrace my steps.

'Cousin Silvia,' the voice startled me and I realised I was caught in a beam of sunlight. My heart started pounding as it dawned on me that the voice belonged to Gareth. As I turned around to face him he said, 'We are of the same mind.'

'We obviously are, cousin.' I managed to stammer. 'I am pleased that I have seen you alone, for there is something I wish to discuss with you.' As I spoke the words I felt foolish, it was all I could think of to say. Gareth looked at me intently, moving towards me until he was so close I could feel his breath on my cheek as he spoke.

'And what would that be, cousin? Our wedding perhaps?' There was a playful gleam in his dark eyes, I noticed that he again wore black which so became him and his eyes glinted in the sun's ray.

'Indirectly yes, cousin, for I cannot, no will not, sleep in the master bedroom as it is.'

Gareth's expression changed at my words, he looked puzzled. 'And how did you come to view this bedroom, cousin?' he queried in a quite controlled voice.

'Because Jared had great delight in showing it to me this very morning, in truth he almost dragged me in there,' I replied, remembering with clarity the whole scene.

'Did he indeed.' As he spoke Gareth turned away from me so I could not detect the look on his face, but I knew he was displeased. He turned back to me. 'We will change it to your liking cousin, for we cannot have you disliking our marital bedroom, can we? Enjoy your look around, 'tis a pleasant enough place to wed. I will see you at dinner.' With these words and leaving me speechless he strode out of the church and left me.

A little while later I stepped thank-fully back into the sunshine. Walking across the grass I sat for a few minutes on the wooden seat savouring the warmth of the sun. Thoughts whirled again in my head, uppermost in my mind were three things. An inattentive bridegroom, his amorous brother and the absence of a bridesmaid. As I mulled this over an idea came to me and I hasted back across the grass through the gate down the path to the pony and trap.

'Home now, Miss?' Matt asked as he helped me back into the trap next to Pru.

‘No Matt, I wish to call at the vicarage please, wherever that may be.’

No sooner had I said it, Matt was in his seat skilfully steering the pony and us towards the vicar’s abode, which I was to learn was just across from the church.

‘Whatever do you want to go there for, Miss Silvia?’ Pru was beginning to sound like my mother.

‘You will see Pru, I have an idea,’ I said as we stopped outside a double-fronted building similar to Lizzie’s stitching of the house in her sampler, only instead of being red, this one was grey like the church. The whole place on the outside at least was shabby, paint was peeling from the window sills and the black front door.

I waited for an answer to my knock, and after a little time the door was opened by a pleasant looking elderly woman dressed in a royal blue dress covered by a clean crisp white apron. She looked startled to see me and said, ‘Oh Miss, begging your pardon, I expected it to be that young tyke, Jake again, knocking the door and running away, we weren’t expecting visitors, the vicar is out, Miss, I’m afraid.’

‘It’s Isabel I’ve come to see if she’s in, please.’ As I spoke I could hear a piano being played rather skilfully from somewhere in the house.

‘Come in.’ She pulled the door wider to allow me to enter into the shabby looking hall with brown threadbare carpet. ‘I take it you’re Miss Silvia, I remember you as a child I do. As pretty then as you are now, if you don’t mind me saying.

‘Why thank you.’ I enthused. ‘And you are?’ I smiled trying to put her at ease, the piano still playing.

‘Sorry Miss, I’m Mrs Ledbetter, been the vicar’s housekeeper and cook for over forty years. Not the same vicar I hastened to add, I’ve seen quite a few come through that door in my time.’

As Mrs Ledbetter spoke she led me to a door on the right at the back of the hall. ‘Please go in, Miss.’ As I entered the room I could see Isabel sitting at the piano at one corner playing avidly. As soon as she heard me she stopped and stood up, smoothing her hands nervously over the skirts of her dull grey woollen dress. She looked taken aback at seeing me and quite rightly too I thought.

‘You play the piano beautifully, Isabel.’ I spoke truthfully. A glimmer of a smile hovered on her lips and her eyes showed some animation.

‘Thank you,’ she replied demurely.

‘I’m sorry, but George is out.’

‘It’s you I’ve come to see, Isabel. I would like you to be my bridesmaid.’ These words provoked a response, one hand flew to her mouth and her eyes opened wide with pleasure. I could now see they were a startling blue, cornflower blue I thought, as I left the house with instructions that I would call for her at ten o’clock next morning. My intention was to turn this moth into a lovely butterfly.

6

While Pru helped me choose a dress for dinner that evening, my mother walked in and without ceremony sat down in the armchair. She looked tired I thought, and was obviously not joining us for dinner as she was not suitably attired.

'How are you feeling?' I enquired solicitously.

'No matter how many powders I take my head still pounds, but it will pass,' she replied with some optimism. Pru tells me you called at the vicarage today. May I ask why?'

'Not to cancel the wedding, Mother, if that's what you are thinking.' I laughed, and continued to select a suitable gown.

'Well, thank the Lord for that at least. So why did you visit?' she asked.

'To ask Isabel if she'd be my bridesmaid, and she very graciously agreed.' As I spoke I picked out my most daring dress, a creation of lemon coloured silk with a scooped off the shoulder neckline. Small cream coloured flowers decorated the hem and the short puffed sleeves and pointed bodice. My dilemma was should I wear it or not. As I thought of Estelle my mind was made up.

'Silvia, I'm talking to you,' my mother's voice interrupted my thoughts as I handed the dress to Pru. 'Why ask Isabel when you have the lovely Grace?'

'Grace cannot come,' and I handed Mother the letter which she perused while Pru helped me dress. Sitting at the dressing table I clasped cream pearls at my neck and Pru fashioned my dark hair, bunching it up at the back and covering it with a pale lemon snood to match my gown.

As I stood up my mother looked me up and down and then got up with Pru's help. Before leaving the room she asked, 'Why Isabel? Why not Estelle?'

There were many reasons I wasn't about to ask Estelle, but didn't wish to go into that with Mother. 'Because I wish to help Isabel see the beauty in herself. Under that plain silent exterior there is a lovely young woman fighting to get out. She just needs some feminine advice, and tomorrow when I take her to Caroline Peacock in Tavistock we shall see what beauty lies beneath.' I said all this with the hope that this would be an end to it, but my mother had to have the final word.

‘The real reason Silvia, I know it and you know it, is that you feel that you cannot compete with the lovely Estelle. I shall come with you on the morrow, enjoy your evening.’ As mother left I looked at Pru, exasperation on my face.

‘Don’t take any notice Miss, it’s her head. I know your reasons are as you say, you have a kind heart. Now you’d best get down to dinner.’

Pru’s words cheered me and I walked along the corridor with a spring in my step. As I started to walk down the stairs I heard voices to my right. Looking over the banister I could see Gareth and Estelle looking as lovely as ever in a pale pink gown.

Her words drifted up to me, ‘Don’t marry her, marry me dear Gareth,’ she pleaded.

‘I cannot Estelle, I have told you so many times,’ Gareth replied.

‘May I ask why? No, I will give you the answer, it’s because of this house, isn’t it. You aren’t marrying Silvia, you are marrying Darkwood.’ Her voice rose with each word. I waited with baited breath, what would be my cousin’s reply?

‘Keep your voice down please, Estelle. It’s true I love this house, it is part of me and my desire to own it is strong, but it isn’t the reason I can’t marry you.’ Gareth’s voice was firm.

‘Then kiss me at least, Gareth, for I have so much longing for you.’ So saying, she reached up to his face with her hands, but Gareth held her at arms’ length, gently pushing her away.

‘I cannot do that either, Estelle. Forget me, think of me only as a friend.’ His voice was soothing like a father to a child.

Miss Benedict stamped her foot and pulled away from him. ‘You won’t marry her. I promise!’ She almost screamed at him.

This is where I must continue my progress down the stairs, I thought. The conversation I’d just heard was most interesting and proved Aunt Rachel to be correct this morning. Gareth looked up as I reached the bottom of the staircase.

‘Silvia,’ he exclaimed. ‘Estelle and I were just about to go into the drawing-room. I hear from mother that you have had some bad news today.

As he spoke, my thought was that he was most courteous this evening, and for the first time had called me by my Christian name. The questions burning in my mind were, was my future husband feeling guilty or was he softening towards me? I fervently hoped it was the latter.

* * *

The evening did not go well. At the dinner table each time I glanced at Estelle she was watching me and then returned to flirting outrageously with Jared, who was obviously enjoying the attention and was flirtatious in return.

It was obvious to me that they were both trying to upset Gareth and myself, for my part at least it didn't work. I had no interest in my ruthless cousin. Aunt Rachel watched the pair throughout the meal and Gareth sat opposite me glancing in my direction while we talked with Uncle William. We were all like pawns in a game of chess and I idly wondered who would make the first move. I was to find out the next day that it would be Aunt Rachel.

Next morning after an early breakfast my intention was to seek out my aunt. Walking across the hall smoothing the skirts of the green dress I wore, I encountered Mrs Trigg who told me I would find her in the morning room. I made my way to the corridor which ran to the left at the back of the hall, opening the first door I realised it was a small library, books were stacked neatly around the shelves, four comfortable red armchairs had been placed around a table in the centre of the room.

Thankfully the walls in here had not been painted blue but a deep red to match the furniture, the whole room looking inviting. Closing the door I walked farther down the corridor. The sound of voices slowed me and as I reached the next door I could hear Aunt Rachel's voice. 'I've told you many times before, Estelle is out of bounds to you.' For the second time in as many days I realised I was eavesdropping as my aunt continued, 'You are to stay away from her and that is an order.'

'I'm a man now, not a boy,' came Jared's reply. 'And I shall do as I please. I notice that you do not admonish Gareth.'

'Gareth adheres to my wishes, and I should be most pleased if you would do likewise.' Aunt Rachel's voice was firmer than I'd ever known it.

'We shall see,' Jared said. 'I don't care for these confusing demands you are making.' As he spoke I realised that he was approaching the door, so gathering myself together I tapped at the door.

On pushing it open I came face to face with my cousin who looked at me and his mother with some disdain, and without so much as a good morning left us. I wondered what kept the lovely Miss Benedict apart from my two cousins.

‘Good morning, Silvia.’ My aunt’s voice sounded softer again. ‘You are early today.’

‘Yes, Aunt,’ I replied looking around this delightful room which was decorated in a soft green, the sun already streaming through the window, a ray of which cast a light on the highly-polished writing bureau at which Aunt Rachel sat.

‘Have you any idea where the key is to Grandmother’s writing desk?’ I continued.

‘No, dear, we’ve never found it. And your grandfather said that nothing was to be touched in that room except for my mother’s clothes.’ This I had already discovered I thought. ‘So why do you ask?’ my aunt queried.

‘I need to write to Grace,’ I replied and knew exactly what Aunt Rachel would say.

‘You can use my desk with pleasure, Silvia,’ she said rising from her chair and gathering up the papers she was writing on.

‘I’d prefer to use my grandmother’s, although I thank you for your offer,’ I said with a sense of discontent. ‘Surely Aunt, now Grandfather is no longer with us the rule no longer applies.’

My aunt looked at me for some seconds before she spoke. ‘You are quite right, Silvia. Who am I to prevent you using your grandmother’s desk. As we can’t find a key, I will send Douglas to your room to lever it open.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ I said with some joy, running over to my aunt and kissing her cheek.

She smiled. ‘And while you are here, Silvia, I have to say we have to organise the invitations for your wedding.’

‘Invitations?’ I queried. ‘Why surely there is no-one to send any to.’

‘We need to invite your Great Aunt Annie and her daughter, Constance, and then there is Estelle,’ Aunt Rachel explained.

‘Oh well,’ I conceded. ‘Perhaps we should do it now.’

‘No, dear, tomorrow will be soon enough, I hear today you are to take Isabel to Tavistock.’ I sensed displeasure in my aunt’s voice.

‘Why yes, I wish to do something nice for her, for her life obviously holds little to interest her other than the piano.’ At my words, Aunt Rachel smiled. I knew she would understand for she also had a kind heart.

‘May I join you?’ she asked.

‘Why of course, I’d very much like you to,’ I said with enthusiasm. We made to leave and suddenly I turned back to my aunt, a thought occurring to

me. ‘Aunt Rachel, why has Lizzie’s portrait been damaged?’

As I spoke she turned back to me. ‘I didn’t know it had been,’ she said with some concern. ‘Did you locate it in the attic?’

‘Yes, Aunt, but someone has slashed at your mother’s face with some sharp instrument. It quite upset me,’ I said, a tremor in my voice as I recalled the day I had found it.

‘I will look into it,’ my aunt said, squeezing my hand. ‘Let it not spoil our visit to the dressmaker. I will ask Douglas to come up to your room on our return. Now let us get ready.’

Duly we collected Isabel as promised. I noted that she had made some effort to look her best. She wore a pale blue worsted dress with a black lace collar, a blue cameo brooch pinned to the neck and a black shawl across her shoulders. The black bonnet decorated with blue flowers which she wore, suited her, and as she smiled at me on entering the carriage I realised that I was right, she had a pretty face and given the right circumstances would look quite enchanting.

‘How fortuitous, Miss Harvey,’ enthused Caroline Peacock as she let us into her establishment once more. ‘Your gown is ready for fitting.’

‘Fortuitous indeed,’ I replied. ‘But first I need to choose material for my bridesmaid,’ I said, leading Isabel forward. Caroline looked her up and down and went to lead us into a different room from our previous visit, but I stopped her.

‘No Miss Peacock, I wish to choose a silk for Isabel, a blue silk to match her eyes.’

‘Why yes, of course Miss Harvey, quite appropriate.’ And she led us into the room holding the bales of silk, while Mother and Aunt Rachel looked on, I chose a beautiful cornflower blue which I’d spotted before.

‘This will be admirable. Do you agree, Isabel?’ I said to her seeing her eyes light up with pleasure as she touched it.

‘Oh, thank you, Miss Silvia. I can hardly believe my good fortune,’ she said, and nor could Caroline Peacock I thought, as we were taken to the fitting room. While Isabel was measured, I instructed Caroline that I wished her to have a gown similar to mine which Miss Peacock agreed.

‘Now let us try your gown.’ So saying she led me behind a wooden screen. Aunt Rachel assisted me while my mother sat on a chair in the corner. Caroline returned with another young woman carrying my wedding gown.

As I saw the ivory silk laying across their arms, I felt a great sense of anticipation which I had not expected to feel. The skirt of the dress which must have held yards of material was placed over my head falling perfectly over my hooped petticoat, the back was secured with hooks and eyes then the fitted whale bone pointed bodice was put on by Caroline, after which the young woman did up the many hooks and hand stitched eyes at the front.

The silk felt soft on my arms and I suddenly seemed like a different person. As I looked in the full-length mirror I had the desire to twirl around as the effect was astounding. With my lace veil and flowers I would be fit to marry a king.

'You look beautiful, Silvia,' my mother and aunt both observed in unison, their hands covering their cheeks with obvious emotion. As I looked down at the shimmering skirt I could see the braid showing a little below the hem to preserve it and the long-sleeved bodice fitted my figure perfectly, my hair seeming even darker in contrast to the ivory of the gown. I was captured in the moment and felt a sudden longing to walk down the aisle to Gareth, but alas I had two more weeks to wait.

'You are pleased with the result, Miss Harvey?' Caroline's voice cut into my thoughts and I was transported back to the present.

'Absolutely delighted,' I enthused. 'I thank you and your seamstresses from the bottom of my heart.'

'We should remove it now,' Caroline said, 'as we need to do the finishing touches.'

'One moment,' I said as I thought of Isabel and walked out from behind the screen, the skirts of the gown moving as in one with me. Isabel had been sitting on a chair wearing her bonnet ready for our departure.

At the sight of me she stood up, walked slowly towards me then around me. 'You look so lovely, Miss Silvia. Am I really to wear a gown similar to this?' she asked, a pleasing smile lit up her face and her eyes sparkled.

'Indeed you are,' I replied. 'You will look lovely, and I'm so glad to witness such enthusiasm, you will make an admirable bridesmaid.'

'I promise I shall do my best, Miss. You are most kind.' As Isabel spoke I knew that the smile now would not vanish as she had something to look forward to. I could have hugged her, but decorum and Miss Peacock hovering around me obviously protective of her creation prevented me from doing so.

As we left, Caroline said that she would deliver both gowns to Darkwood in ten days time, bringing her senior seamstress in case there were any alteration needed on Isabel's gown.

I felt the whole morning had been a success and on the way back to Darkwood could think of no-one but Gareth. On our arrival back at Darkwood as if in answer to my thoughts as we stepped into the hall, I could see Gareth was waiting for us, lounging lazily at ease in one of the armchairs. At the sight of us he stood up and walked towards me.

'Silvia, I wish to speak with you alone.' As he spoke I looked around at my mother and aunt but they showed no opposition to this, so Gareth continued. 'In view of your dislike of blue walls, I suggest to talk in my mother's morning room.' As he spoke he made for me to follow him which I did like a lamb, my only wish was that I'd had a chance to refresh myself, but Gareth was, I realised, one who would catch the moment.

As I entered the morning-room for the second time in one day, I thought how restful this room was and that Gareth had chosen well.

'Please remove your bonnet, Silvia,' Gareth said quietly. I did as I was bid and laid it on a table by the door. 'Now please sit in the chair by the mantel.' He indicated a small green armchair between the window and the fireplace. I sat decorously on the edge of my chair, smoothing the skirt of my green dress around me and wondering what this was all about. Gareth knelt on one knee before me and opened a red velvet box which contained a ruby and diamond ring.

The light from the window caught the stones and as I looked at them with some fascination and awe they sparkled back at me, the sight of it held my attention for some moments and then I looked at Gareth's handsome face as he spoke, 'Will you marry me, Silvia?' His words were so unexpected I was speechless. 'I'm asking you to be my wife,' he continued.

'Yes Gareth, I will marry you.' My heart sang, and for my part at least my words were sincere. As he took my left hand and gently placed the ring on my finger, I knew I was falling in love with this handsome unpredictable man who was to be my husband, and I fervently wished with all my being that one day he could feel the same.

As he stood up I could see a satisfied look on his face as he smiled down at me. 'You can stand up now, Silvia,' and taking my hand he pulled me to my feet. 'I think a kiss would be appropriate to seal our betrothal.' Without

warning he drew me to him and bending towards me our lips met briefly for the first time.

His mouth was gentle on mine and I savoured the brief moment feeling quite bereft when he released me, his eyes sparkled as he looked down at me and I was sure something unspoken hovered on his lips.

‘We have lingered long enough, Silvia.’ The moment was gone and his voice brought me back to the present, as he gently lifted my left hand, looking at the ring he’d only moments ago placed on my finger. ‘Wear it well, lovely lady, for it is the Hunter betrothal ring and not given lightly.’

‘I will treasure it I promise, and to say I am honoured does not do my feelings justice.’ Thankfully I had at last found my tongue and as I spoke I wondered how my cousin would feel if he knew the extent of my feelings for him. But I realised that for the moment at least words I longed to say to him would need to be held in abeyance.

As we left the room and we made our way together to the hall, I glanced back at the green chair by the fireplace and thought it would forever be one of my favourite places.

The ruby ring burned delightfully into my hand. As we reached the bottom of the staircase the front door burst open and Estelle stood there dressed in an emerald green riding habit. She looked at us and striding towards us tapping her riding crop against her skirt, I was mesmerised by the wild look in her green eyes and the pure hatred etched on her beautiful face.

Without a word of warning she lashed out with her riding crop intent on lashing at my face, but Gareth caught it in one hand saving me from injury.

‘What are you doing, Estelle?’ he said as he removed the crop from her grasp.

I noticed blood on his hand where the whip had cut into his palm.

‘I find out today, that she!’ Estelle screamed pointing a finger in my direction, ‘She has asked someone else to be her bridesmaid!’ As I looked at the wildness in her eyes I thought she was either jealous to the point of distraction or unstable.

As I climbed up the stairs to my room, leaving Gareth to calm her I also thought that the whole unpleasant incident had completely spoiled what had been the most beautiful morning of my life.

7

I closed my bedroom door behind me and leaned against it, many thoughts tumbling through my head. Since I'd arrived at Darkwood, so many things had happened in a short space of time.

I couldn't find Lizzie's final resting place which irked me somewhat. Nor could I imagine who could have so wilfully damaged my dear grandmother's portrait and I felt helpless as I had no way of finding out. My only hope was that Aunt Rachel would eventually throw some light on the mystery which beset me, and why did Aunt Rachel forbid Gareth and Jared to associate with Estelle?

This was in itself another mystery which led me to think of the lovely Estelle's outburst in the hall, and I pondered over what the outcome would have been if Gareth had not been there to save me. Then the thought of Gareth brought to mind his proposal. Why had he done it? I chose to think he now wished to marry me, but in truth I was sure it was just a gallant gesture on his part to help me feel better about our forthcoming union, and if this was the reason then he was at least a gentleman.

The thought consoled me somewhat and I walked over to Lizzie's writing desk. Just as I reached it, the door opened and Aunt Rachel stepped in, accompanied by Douglas.

'I brought Douglas up to see if he could open the desk.' As my aunt spoke I could see that Douglas had a small flat metal lever in his hand. While he gently manoeuvred it in the lock, Aunt Rachel and I looked on.

What must she be thinking I wondered, and was somewhat surprised it hadn't been tried before. For my part I was just anxious to see what my grandmother's desk held. After a couple of minutes, the front of the bureau fell down with a sudden jolt and the interior was at last revealed.

'You won't be able to shut it properly, Miss,' Douglas said to my aunt. 'A new lock would be the answer. I'll set to finding one right now.' With these words he left us. Both of us just stood and looked, neither of us willing to be the first to touch anything. At that moment Aunt Rachel made a decision.

'I'm going to leave you, Silvia, to look through the contents and I trust that if there is anything at all of importance you will bring it to me.'

'But of course, Aunt Rachel, I promise.' As I spoke I reached out with my left hand to pick up a sheet of cream coloured paper which lay on its own

outside the tiny compartments and pigeonholes of the desk. As I looked down I saw the ruby ring flash in the light from the window. I looked at my aunt and could see by the look on her face that she was aware of it also.

'Why, Silvia, you are wearing the betrothal ring. Did Gareth give this to you?' Her voice held surprise.

'Yes, Aunt, he did,' I replied almost sheepishly. 'Only a short time ago in the morning room.'

'To say I am delighted is the truth,' my aunt said in a quiet voice. 'For Gareth had thought to present you with it on your wedding day. Does this mean...' Her voice trailed off, and I knew the reply I could give her was not the one she hoped for.

'It really doesn't mean anything, Aunt.' As I spoke the expression on her face changed to one of disappointment. 'But I can tell you, for my part at least, I am warming to your son. The very fact that he has given me this lovely token of our forthcoming marriage shows that he is no longer so adverse to it, don't you think?' I could see the words pleased her as my aunt smiled.

'Indeed, it would seem to be so and I am delighted, for you are a lovely gentle young woman. My wish is that given time, you and Gareth will be blissfully happy together. Now I must leave you and I will see you at dinner unless you have anything to show me.' So saying she kissed my cheek before leaving me to look through the desk.

In truth there appeared to be little of significance in it. I held the piece of paper in the light that fell from the window and three-quarters of the way down could make out the name, Lizzie, where the indentation of a pen on the previous sheet had left an imprint, but I could make out little else. I picked up the pen which was tucked in one of the compartments, the nib of which was stained with dry blue ink. As I held it in my left hand, for I was left-handed as Lizzie had been, I imagined her holding it and writing a letter as the sun fell on her smooth skin.

Maybe she'd written to some relative in Ireland whom she perhaps never saw again, or had she written invitations for people to dine at Darkwood? Whatever she had done, I wished so much that she were here with me now. I laid the pen back in its rightful place, not wishing to change a thing. Other small cubicles just held paper and envelopes.

On the left at the back was a small drawer with a tiny wooden handle. I gently pulled it open. Inside lay a neatly folded sheet of the cream coloured

paper. As I slowly unfolded it, the creases had left their mark across the words written on it, but I could make out that it was a poem. Taking it to the light, I read,

I see the bluebells softly lie,
A carpet of blue to walk upon and feel,
The beauty of this wood is real.
In April only do they flower,
But through the year, my mind's picture could,
Capture the tranquil peace of the bluebell wood.

I looked at it for some moments, tears pricking at my eyes, for the words revealed Lizzie's love of the wood at bluebell time. I had to see it now for myself, but must first take this poem to show Aunt Rachel.

Swiftly I took my cream shawl out of the wardrobe drawer and hastily laid it around my shoulders, my feet spurred on by Lizzie's poignant words. As I hurried down the hallway in search of Aunt Rachel, I could see some activity in the opposite corridor which distracted me, causing me to walk into Pru who dropped the linen she carried.

'Oh, Miss Silvia, now look what you've made me do,' Pru complained. 'Wherever are you off to in such a hurry?' As she spoke, she bent down and gathered up the articles she'd been carrying.

'Pru, I am so sorry,' I said with true contrition. 'I'm in search of my aunt.'

'She can be found with your mother in the drawing-room, taking tea,' said Pru breathlessly as she stood up, the said articles over one arm, albeit not so neatly.

'Thank you, Pru,' I called as I made my way down the stairs. Crossing the hall, I thought briefly of the unpleasant incident with Estelle. Could it really have been only a couple of hours since? As I entered the drawing-room, I could see Mother and my aunt sipping tea and partaking of tasty looking splits with jam and clotted cream which made me realise how hungry I was, not having eaten since breakfast.

'Why, Silvia!' Aunt Rachel exclaimed, 'I had not expected to see you so soon. Sit and join us.' I did as she bid, not needing much coaxing, and immediately started to spoon jam and cream on to the split in my hand while Aunt Rachel rang the bell for another cup and saucer which Dotty brought within minutes.

'It's good to see you back downstairs, Mother,' I remarked as this morning I'd not had much time to speak to her. Was it really only this

morning that we'd visited the dressmaker's and I'd tried on my wedding gown?

'So what has brought you so quickly to find us? For I can see you are flushed with excitement from some discovery,'

Mother asked in a booming voice. I reached into the side pocket of my dress, retrieving the piece of paper I'd found with their mother's verse on it.

'I found this,' I said triumphantly. 'It is beautiful.'

Mother took it from me and read it, then silently handed it to Aunt Rachel. Watching them both intently, I could see that Lizzie's words had more effect on my aunt. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she looked at it and I felt a greater affinity to her than I ever had with my mother who had always been a selfish person, whereas Aunt Rachel was kind and gentle and always thinking of others.

'It is quite lovely, Silvia. I must confess I had not known that my mother had written it,' said my aunt. 'But I knew your grandmother loved the time of year when the bluebells flowered. She would walk to the wood after luncheon every day when they were out. Here, Silvia, keep it.' As she spoke, Aunt Rachel pressed the piece of paper back into my hand and I placed it back into my pocket.

'Are the bluebells out now?' I asked for I had a great desire to see this bluebell wood.

'Yes, they should be, dear, although I have to admit I have not been in the wood recently,' answered my aunt, picking up her cup and saucer once more. She was obviously trying to take her mind off her recent emotion.

'Then is it all right for me to walk down there alone?' I ventured, getting to my feet.

'Good Lord, child, of course it is. You are old enough to know now that there are no goblins to frighten you,' Mother answered quite harshly I thought, as Aunt Rachel smiled at me. I needed no further encouragement.

As I stepped outside the front door, I stood for some moments savouring the warmth of the sun on my face. It was truly a glorious day with not a cloud in the sky. I tried to imagine which way my grandmother would have walked to the wood. Some instinct told me to stick to the path close to the house, so this is the route I took.

The path was in shade, and out of the sun it felt quite cool. As I reached the end of the house, the sun's rays warmed me once more as I continued walking towards the small bridge. There was a lightness in my step as I

reached the curve of the bridge and I stopped for some minutes to look down at the River Dart gurgling merrily over large stones and small pebbles.

The sun felt hot on my back, so I moved on and after a few paces stepped off the bridge on to the grass which felt pleasantly springy under my feet. I turned to look back at Darkwood.

The upper windows sparkled in the afternoon sun and my thought was how different it looked from the March day we arrived here just two-and-a-half weeks ago.

I felt quite drawn to the house now I was older, probably because my grand-father, Samuel no longer ruled it. I shuddered at the thought of him and walked quickly on towards the wood. As I reached the edge of it, my breath was quite taken away and I stopped in my tracks at the beautiful sight which lay before me.

Bluebells grew in abundance, covering the ground with a breathtaking blue carpet for as far as the eye could see, and I understood completely Lizzie's love for this glorious sight. A narrow path formed itself between the flowers and I started to follow it, looking around me. It was cold as the sun didn't quite penetrate through the stunted grey oak trees. They looked almost dead, with long, thick grey branches extending like huge creepers, some tangling together and I suddenly felt afraid.

Feeling sure I was being followed for I heard a twig snap behind me on the path, I turned around to see Jared walking towards me. At the sight of him my heart sank. Looking around I could see no way of escape but to trample over the bluebells.

'Jared,' I exclaimed sweetly, 'Is this coincidence or are you following me?'

'The latter would be more correct,' he said in a quiet, controlled voice. 'I observed you from a window and thought to see what you were about.'

'I just wish to see the wood, and especially the carpet of bluebells,' I replied meekly, looking at his immaculate dark blue jacket and matching waistcoat and a crisp white shirt. His hair was tousled by the slight, cool breeze and his pale blue eyes were cold and calculating as he weighed up the situation which was, I realised with some dismay, that we were alone, some way from the house. I didn't trust this cousin, recalling the day when he had almost dragged me to the master bedroom against my will. I found myself in an unenviable position.

‘As a child you refused to come here.’ As he spoke, Jared moved towards me and I took a step back, not wishing to be any closer to him. ‘You are surely not afraid of me, cousin?’ He laughed and moved swiftly nearer to me, catching my wrist in his cold grasp.

As I tried to free myself, the shawl I wore fell to the ground and I realised I was treading on the bluebells. I could hear them squelch under my feet. Jared was backing me against a snarled grey tree trunk. I felt the bark almost pierce into my back as he pushed his body up against me.

I screamed, knowing it was to no avail as he clamped his free hand across my mouth. My heart was pounding and although cold, I could feel the sweat on my brow.

‘Just one kiss, cousin, and you will be mine.’ His voice was quietly menacing as he spoke and his eyes looked directly into mine, so I closed them tightly as I did not wish to look at his leering face.

‘What are you doing, brother?’ Gareth’s angry voice was music to my ears. A relieved sob escaped my lips as I opened my eyes in time to see Gareth bring his hand up sharply across Jared’s face. Now go home!’ my gallant knight said between clenched teeth. ‘And never again touch or go near my betrothed or I will not be responsible for my actions. Believe me, brother, you have escaped lightly.’ Jared looked at us both then retreated back towards Darkwood.

Gareth turned to me and with one strong arm pulled me towards him. My head on his shoulder, small sobs escaped me, more with relief than anything as Gareth’s hand smoothed my hair gently. Calming down, I lifted my head and looked at him.

‘I can’t thank you enough,’ I said quietly, lifting my hand to touch his cheek. ‘I dread to think of my fate had you not chanced to walk this way.’

‘It was no chance, I assure you,’ he explained. ‘I watched you walk and linger on the bridge. As you stepped into the wood, I spied Jared following you and knew from past experience his intentions would not be honourable.’

‘You are right in that assumption.’ As I spoke I noticed I had at last stopped trembling. Gareth went across to the path and picked up my shawl. Bringing it back, he placed it gently around my shoulders.

‘Do you feel better?’ he enquired, cupping my chin in his hand.

‘I do, except I am concerned about all the bluebells we have trampled on,’ I said as I looked around our feet.

‘Do not worry, Silvia, there are plenty more.’ As he spoke he turned around, one arm conveying the carpet of blue. I smiled as I tried desperately to secure the pins back in my hair which was already falling in disarray around my shoulders. ‘Leave it,’ Gareth said. ‘You have such beautiful hair, it is a sin to hide it.’ At his words, my cheeks flushed and I hope he hadn’t noticed my confusion.

‘Tell me, Silvia, what caused you to walk in the wood alone? I recall as a child, tales of ghosts prevented you from doing so.’ As he spoke Gareth looked down at me, a gentle look on his face.

‘It is true. When we were children I was afraid to come here, not only because of yours and Jared’s tales of ghosts and goblins, but also our grandfather forbade it.’ I stopped, thinking back to Samuel’s hold over me and I realised even more how much Jared was like him.

‘Have no fear, my love, cousin Jared will not approach you again, you have my word as a gentleman,’ he assured me.

‘I do trust this is true, and in answer to your question, I found this poem today, written by our grandmother. On reading it, I had a sudden, urgent desire to see her bluebell wood.’ As I spoke I pulled the piece of paper from my pocket, thankful that after the recent encounter with Jared it was still intact.

I handed it to Gareth who read it. After some time he spoke, ‘Poignant words from a grandmother who loved poetry as much as we do.’ He handed Lizzie’s poem back to me. ‘Let us walk.’

As we walked in a companionable silence, I realised what was missing. No birds sang here and none sat on the grey branches of the trees. I could see it was getting lighter and that we were nearly at the other side of the wood.

I stopped and looked up at his handsome face.

‘Gareth, do you know where our grandmother, Lizzie is buried? I scoured the churchyard on the day of our arrival, but could find no trace of a headstone with her name upon it.’

‘I have no idea,’ he replied softly. ‘It is as if she vanished off the face of the earth. It is as much a mystery to me as yourself. Mother will not talk of it and I have pressed her many times on the subject, for I loved my gentle grandmother.’

‘Likewise,’ I replied with some emotion at Gareth’s words. This was another thing we had in common.

‘One day soon we will walk through the graveyard together, for two pairs of eyes may be better than one.’ His words pleased me. To know he wished to spend time in my company made me realise that he was now in some way closer to me.

Suddenly I became aware of my surroundings, the moor stretched away in the distance, the scenery reminded me of the view seen from Culmoor Church. It was hard to imagine how a wood had appeared in the middle of the moor.

‘What are you thinking?’ Gareth’s words drifted across to me.

‘I am unable to understand how a wood like this came to be in the middle of Dartmoor?’

Not wishing to alarm you further, Silvia, legend has it that the devil planted the trees and gallops through here each night on the stroke of midnight. But have no fear, it is but folklore.’ As he spoke I looked back at the wood and was startled to find I recognised this end of it and I searched my mind as to why I should.

The answer came to me suddenly. It was where Samuel Hunter, our grand-father, had had his portrait painted which now hung at the top of the staircase at Darkwood.

‘Your thoughts, Silvia?’ Gareth asked.

‘This is where our grandfather had his portrait painted,’ I replied, and Gareth nodded in agreement.

‘Let us return to the house, Silvia, for the sun is falling and I don’t wish you to catch a chill.’ At Gareth’s words I pulled my shawl tighter around my shoulders and taking the arm he offered, we retraced our steps back to Darkwood.

As I snuggled my face into the pillow that night, I thought what a long eventful day it had been and certainly one of mixed fortunes. I drifted off to sleep with a picture of the bluebell wood in my mind and Gareth’s gallant acts in saving me twice that day. I recalled him calling me ‘my love’, and my last thought was that I could hardly wait to be his wife.

8

The Sunday morning following that eventful day, we were all to attend church as it was the third time our banns of marriage would be called. Gareth had attended on his own the two previous Sundays, but today there would be a family gathering including myself and with the exception of my mother, who said that she was saving her strength to walk up to the church on my wedding day.

The invitations had been sent out to a great aunt and cousin I didn't know at Lydford and one to Estelle, who to date, had not responded. With only a handful of people it would be a quiet wedding, but none the less important.

Isabel and I felt some anticipation as our gowns would be delivered on Tuesday. We were a trifle concerned as my veil, headdress and silk boots had not yet arrived, but as Aunt Rachel had so rightly said yesterday, there were still seven days to go.

Pru helped me choose a dress for the morning's outing to church while I stood in only a bodice and hooped petticoat. 'What about this one, Miss Silvia?' said Pru as she took from the wardrobe a pale mauve walking dress.

'I think, Pru, it is admirable and I shall wear a matching cloak and bonnet.' As I spoke I realised my arms were cold. The fire had not been lit that morning and looking out of the window I could see only grey skies.

A fleeting thought crossed my mind, that I hoped the weather would be more favourable on our wedding day. Suitably attired, I stood in the hall waiting for the others.

Uncle William appeared first looking quite fetching in a loose grey striped jacket and matching trousers. 'Silvia, my dear, you look charming,' he said, walking across to me and kissing my cheek. I smiled back at him. 'You seem far more relaxed than on the day of your arrival,' he observed.

'You are so right, Uncle. Whereas I dreaded the whole charade, I now look forward so much to my forthcoming marriage to Gareth,' I replied with honesty.

'That is grand,' he said, just as Aunt Rachel, accompanied by Gareth, entered the hall to join us. My heart leapt at the sight of my future husband. He was indeed very handsome, dressed today in a dark grey jacket and trousers with a pale mauve shirt. Pru had indeed chosen my outfit well.

Aunt Rachel looked lovely in a pale grey silk dress with matching cloak and bonnet.

'We should be gone.' Uncle William's voice interrupted my thoughts of Gareth and I realised I was gazing at my betrothed with adoring eyes. Thankfully he seemed not to notice. We all stepped on to the path outside the house and into the carriage. Gareth sat next to me as on the day I had first visited Caroline Peacock's dressmaking establishment, but today I felt far more relaxed and unconcerned at his nearness.

Gareth's hand steadied me as we walked up the path to the church gate, villagers were headed this way, too, all dressed in their Sunday best. Some of the men touched their caps in acknowledgement of us.

As we stepped into the church porch the men removed their hats. We walked down the aisle to the first pew which was obviously reserved for the Hunter family as it had been left vacant. I could see Isabel sat at the small organ on one side of the altar. Seeing her I smiled and she smiled back, her whole face lighting up as she did so.

The vicar appeared and we all stood to sing the first hymn, during which there was a commotion at the back of the church. I looked around to see Jared and Estelle walking down the aisle. On reaching the front of the church they settled in the adjacent pew. Jared glanced across at the four of us conveying a look of total defiance.

Throughout the service, Aunt Rachel who was sitting next to me kept leaning across to observe the two of them. Jared looked back at her with a cruel twist to his mouth. I perceived Aunt Rachel was longing to say something, but in view of our surroundings, was forced to keep silent. Someone else, however, we were all to learn, would not keep so silent.

The moment had arrived for the publishing of the banns before the sentences for the offertory.

The vicar stepped forward saying, 'I publish the banns of marriage between Gareth Samuel Hunter and Silvia Eliza Harvey of Darkwood. If any of you know cause or just impediment why these two persons should not be joined in Holy Matrimony, ye are to declare it. This is the third time of asking.'

The church was silent. Gareth and I looked at each other and smiled, then a voice broke the silence.

'I have just cause why they should not be married.' Estelle's measured and melodic voice echoed around the church. My heart started racing as she

stepped forward from her seat to face the congregation.

George Poulter looked lost for words, but suddenly found his voice amidst the ensuing silence. He stepped forward only inches from Gareth to face the bewitching Estelle.

'My child, can you explain your reason for this interruption?' the vicar said with a slight quiver in his voice.

'Indeed I can, Vicar.' She turned to face Gareth, pointing a gloved finger in his direction, 'This man, Gareth Samuel Hunter, is already promised to me!'

Estelle's voice rose with each word and I recalled the evening at Darkwood when she had implored Gareth to marry her.

I felt Gareth's body stiffen beside me. Someone in the congregation coughed loudly.

'So what have you to say, Gareth?'

She almost screamed, her eyes staring wildly at him.

'Madam, you know as well as I, that this is not true and never has been.' His voice was gentler than expected under the circumstances, but I could tell Gareth was struggling to keep his self-control.

'Come now, Miss Benedict,' George Poulter's voice seemed more assured now. 'This obviously is not true, for a gentleman such as Mr Hunter would admit to it. Take your seat,' he coaxed gently, taking her arm, but Estelle wrenched her arm away from him.

'Take my seat, indeed! I will not, and Gareth shall never marry this woman!'

Speaking almost hysterically, she flew at Gareth without warning, intent on scratching his face, but he turned away just in time and she pounded with her fists at his chest. He gently pushed her away and she collapsed at his feet sobbing hysterically. There was no doubt she was unstable in the mind and I felt some pity for her.

It was Aunt Rachel who helped Gareth bring her to her feet and lead her out of the church, all eyes agog at the spectacle they had witnessed. Gareth took his place back beside me and gently laid his hand across mine.

The vicar gathered himself together and spoke quietly to us. 'Gareth, I should by rights defer the wedding, but I can see the unfortunate state of mind Miss Benedict is in, so will let it pass,' he said.

'Thank you,' Gareth and I uttered in one accord.

On arrival back at Darkwood I was somewhat calmer, but Gareth recommended a brandy which I partook in the drawing-room.

'You do believe me, don't you, Silvia?' he asked as I sipped at the brandy.

'I do indeed, Gareth, have no fear. Is Estelle unsound of mind?' I questioned.

'Yes, she is, but I can say no more now.' Little did I know then that I would not see the lovely Estelle Benedict again.

As I stepped back into the hall I could see Mother almost running down the stairs, 'Silvia, Silvia!' She called my name with some excitement in her voice. 'Silvia, where have you been and where is Aunt Rachel?'

'Mother, calm yourself,' I admonished. 'Whatever's wrong?'

'Your parcels have arrived, Silvia, from Honiton and France. I can hardly contain myself and am longing to see your veil. Come child, they are in your room.' So saying, she started back up the stairs with me not far behind her.

As I stopped and looked back at the hall Gareth was stood by the drawing-room door with a glass in his hand and as I caught his eye he raised the glass and smiled.

My purpose was now more assured than ever. As I stepped into my room there was a sense of great excitement.

'I put the packages on your bed, Miss,' said Pru, walking quickly that way.

'Let me at least remove my bonnet and cloak,' I said, and I did with Pru's help.

'Oh, come on, Silvia!' said Mother, exasperation in her voice. 'And where is your aunt?'

'I am here, Hannah.' Aunt Rachel's voice broke in, she was obviously as full of anticipation as everyone else, and no-one would have known but her and I about the stressful moments of the past couple of hours that we'd endured.

As we all surrounded my bed I could see a long white box and two smaller pink ones. The first box obviously held my veil and I undid the lid with trembling fingers, removing the layers of tissue paper quickly to reveal my Honiton lace veil.

'Take it out of its box, child,' said Mother impatiently as I stood for some seconds looking at it. I did as I was bid and gently removed the full veil from its box, shaking it with care. I ran my hand over the fine white

machine net, tracing with my fingers the pillow made lace motifs invisibly sewn to the foundation. It was beautiful and would complement my plain gown perfectly.

Mother, Aunt Rachel and Pru all touched it briefly with a reverent silence and awe before I laid it back in the box.

The next box contained my waxed orange blossom headdress. I took it out of the box amid cries of, 'Try it on, Silvia', so I placed it on my dark hair and ran over to look in the wardrobe mirror, Mother following with the veil which she draped over the headdress.

'It complements your dark hair perfectly,' offered Aunt Rachel, 'You look quite lovely.' And her voice wavered as she spoke.

'I must remove it,' I said, suddenly fearing I would spoil the veil before my wedding day. Mother removed the veil and Pru the headdress, placing them back in their boxes. Aunt Rachel brought the final box over as I sat in Lizzie's armchair. How I wished she were here now, and I wondered if it was possible she was still alive, but I was sure it was just wishful thinking on my part.

'Try these on, Silvia.' Aunt Rachel's voice interrupted my thoughts of Lizzie.

'Let me remove your boots.' As she spoke, Pru helped to remove them while I held the ivory silk half-boots in my hand. The laces were of silk also, and small eyelet holes had been fashioned for them. The small wood block heel was also covered in silk. They were exquisite and a joy to look upon, and thankfully, fitted.

The items all put away and the excitement over, Mother and Aunt Rachel left me to go down to luncheon. I declined as I felt a great tiredness had come over me. The events of the morning had taken their toll. I sank gratefully back into the armchair as Pru went to the kitchen to fetch me some lunch. After eating little, I dozed off to sleep only to be awoken by a gentle tap on my door.

'Come in,' I called sleepily. The door opened to reveal Gareth standing in the doorway and I, suddenly alert, thinking of the last time he had come to my room and hadn't even had the courtesy to knock. The situation had definitely changed since then, but what to, I asked myself, love or respect. The word love had not been spoken and this is what I longed to hear.

'I'm sorry to disturb you,' he said moving further into the room. 'Would you be able to join me now? For I have something which I wish to show

you.'

'But of course, just let me place the guard by the fire,' I replied.

I walked with him along the corridor to the far end and I knew for certain he was taking me to the master bedroom. On reaching the door he opened it and bade me enter before him.

As I stepped inside the room, I gasped with surprise, and my hands flew to my mouth. It looked a different room.

The walls were a dusky pink as were the curtains and bed hangings. Gone was the huge dark mahogany wardrobe and in its place a lighter coloured one. A plush pink carpet decorated with yellow rosebuds covered the floor and a fire was burning cheerfully in the marble grate.

'You are pleased, Silvia?' Gareth asked.

'Indeed I am,' replied, looking back at him. 'I can't quite take it all in.'

'See,' he said, walking into the room, 'I have had a dressing table placed under the window for you, and through here,' as he spoke he opened a door in the far corner which I had not even noticed. As I followed him to look, I could see it contained a hip bath with fluffy white towels on a hand rail.

'You've thought of everything,' I conceded.

'So you could sleep in here after our wedding?' At his words my cheeks grew hot at the thought of our wedding night and I turned back to the bedroom to cover my confusion, asking myself the question he'd just asked. Everything seemed so matter of fact and devoid of emotion, it would indeed be a marriage of convenience. Gareth, by the window, looked at me expecting a reply.

'Yes, I think I could,' was all I would say.

As I walked back along the corridor to my room I felt sorely disillusioned and questioned whether I was doing the right thing. Gareth had gained more than one opportunity of taking me in his arms and speaking of love. The fact that he had not done so led me to believe that he felt nothing other than a desire to inherit this house.

* * *

Tuesday arrived and so did Caroline Peacock with her senior, Mistress Harriet Ford, together with the gowns and work basket. Isabel also arrived and I took her up to my bedroom where we would try on our wedding outfits. Pru was there to assist us and ready to fetch my mother and Aunt Rachel when the gowns were in place.

We removed our outer clothing and Caroline arranged my gown while Harriet dressed Isabel in hers. When we were ready I turned to look at Isabel in her cornflower blue silk. She looked totally enchanting. A smile added to that enchantment and Pru had arranged her hair in a chignon and decorated it with silk flowers to match her gown. Pru then went to fetch the other ladies.

'You must try your headdress and veil,' Mother said. 'We need to see the total effect, don't we, Rachel?' Aunt Rachel agreed and between them placed my headdress on and arranged the beautiful veil.

Now both of you, stand in front of the mirror,' ordered Mother. Isabel and I did as we were bid. The picture which stared back at us seemed almost unreal. A bride who didn't seem like me at all and a beautiful bridesmaid in a blue which complemented the wedding gown perfectly.

'Oh, Miss Silvia, I can hardly believe it is me,' Isabel declared. As for myself I was pleased the veil covered my face for tears sprung to my eyes as I thought of Gareth and how much I loved him, a love which I knew he did not return, idly wondering at the same time what flowers he would choose for our wedding posies, as it was tradition for the bridegroom to present his bride with the flowers she carried and I also wondered what his feelings were for, alas, he had not proclaimed them to me.

That evening after dinner, I sat in Lizzie's armchair looking at my wedding gown which hung from the picture rail by the door, the flames from the fire casting eerie shadows across it, at times appearing that someone other than I wore it. Then I thought of Isabel and how pleased she was at being my bridesmaid and how lovely she had looked in the cornflower blue gown. What would she do when the wedding was over?

I fervently hoped she would not revert to her solemn ways. Maybe I could help by giving her some company to ensure she wouldn't be disinterested in life again and she could teach me the piano. I'd never play as well as her, but I could make some endeavour for her sake. Estelle came to mind and the outbursts I'd witnessed in recent days. She needed help, this I knew with certainty and pledged to assist all I could.

She was so exquisitely beautiful, would that I had half of her beauty. The thought of Gareth caused my heart to skip a beat. His proposal in the morning room had been a gallant gesture, but he'd only done it to make things easier for me, once he'd rescued me from his ruthless brother and from Estelle also, but surely any man would have helped a lady in distress.

He'd altered the master bedroom, but with what thought in mind, to please me or to ensure that I would share his bed? I walked over to Lizzie's sampler on the wall. Gently running my hand over it, I made a silent plea, help me, Grandmother, show me what is right.

After some thought I decided to seek out Gareth for I needed to speak to him. As I walked down the staircase I looked over the banister and recalled the evening I witnessed Estelle's outburst.

I tried the dining-room first for he sometimes lingered over his port. As I opened the door I knew this wasn't going to be easy. Gareth was sitting alone at the table, a glass in his hand. He looked at me with some surprise.

'Why, Silvia, I thought that you had retired for the night. What ails you, for you look pale.' His voice held concern and for a brief moment I hesitated before I spoke.

'I'm sorry, Gareth. I cannot marry you. For now at least we must cancel our wedding.' With these words I left him. He looked stunned and as I climbed the staircase to my room, I heard him call my name.

'Silvia, an explanation is called for.'

But tonight I could not explain anything for I hardly knew the answer myself.

9

‘I am mortified, Silvia,’ my mother’s voice berated me next morning when I was hardly awake. ‘You have your dress and the church booked, what are you thinking about.’ As she spoke, Mother paced up and down my room.

‘It is not about gowns and churches, Mother,’ I replied quietly.

‘Then what is it about? Tell me for I am interested to know why you have called off your wedding to such a catch as Gareth.’ Mother spoke harshly.

‘Love Mother! It is about love!’ I stressed the word.

‘And what would you know of love at your tender age?’ Mother scoffed.

‘I know I feel love, but it is not returned. I cannot marry a man that does not love me, Mother.’ I uttered with sincerity.

‘Well, he’ll certainly not love you now and that’s a fact.’ She laughed as she spoke. ‘And who’s to pick up the pieces and cancel all the arrangements?’

‘I shall do it myself today,’ I offered. ‘And it doesn’t mean I’ll never marry Gareth.’

‘You can be sure he wouldn’t consider marrying you after this charade,’ Mother interrupted, waving one arm in the air as she spoke. I could see she was getting more agitated by the second.

‘Calm down, Mother,’ I pleaded.

‘Calm down! When you’ve brought nothing but shame and disappointment upon me, and what will your Aunt Rachel think? Tell me that.’ Her voice was getting louder.

‘Aunt Rachel will understand.’ As I spoke the words I was sure that this would be so.

‘Understand!’ exclaimed Mother. ‘What I suggest, my girl, is that you come back with me today to Exeter, for that is where I shall be going as soon as it can be arranged.’

‘I have no intention of leaving Darkwood,’ I said stubbornly. Tor my intention is to get to know Gareth better.’ Mother headed to the door, before opening it she indicated with her hand to the ivory gown still hanging on the picture rail.

‘And what are you to do with this pray tell me, for it cost a pretty penny?’

‘My intention is to store it in the wardrobe and wear it one day soon.’ I hoped my voice held conviction. Mother tossed her head with an air of contempt and slammed the door behind her, while I stood on a chair and lifted down my wedding gown and laid it across the bed.

Sometime later Pru came to me, ‘The mistress is in a foul mood, Silvia, and says that we are to go home today.’ As she spoke, Pru dabbed a handkerchief at her eyes. I got up from the armchair and placed one arm around her shoulder.

‘Please don’t cry, Pru,’ I entreated. ‘You can stay with me if you care to, for Kitty will look after Mother.’

‘Could I really, Miss? Oh I’d like that.’ Pru’s face lit up and as quickly looked crestfallen again. Tut I’d need permission from your mother.’

‘Don’t worry,’ I consoled, ‘I’ll speak to Mother on your behalf.’ It was quite a battle, but Mother agreed to Pru staying with me understanding that I’d be left alone without a maid.

Mother left Darkwood with all her belongings at one o’clock that same afternoon, Aunt Rachel and I stood on the path waving until the carriage was out of sight. I felt a great sadness in my heart which Aunt Rachel must have sensed for she took my arm and suggested that we have a cup of tea in the drawing-room.

‘Silvia,’ began Aunt Rachel as she poured tea for the two of us. ‘If you are not ready for marriage to Gareth I do understand, but may I ask how you feel about him?’

‘I truly love him Aunt, but before I can marry him I need to know that he loves me too. I cannot condone marrying someone for the wrong reasons, for some time I thought I could, but realised last night it would be the wrong thing to do,’ I replied truthfully.

‘And you have no misgivings?’ My aunt inquired.

‘None at all,’ I replied emphatically.

‘This is all that matters. Now I want you to go and rest in your room and come down to dinner this evening looking your best for I shall ensure Gareth joins us. In the meantime, I shall call at the vicarage and explain to Mr Poulter and Isabel, I will also need to get a letter to our relations at Lydford.’ How kind my aunt’s words were, so different from Mother’s and I wondered how two sisters could be so different.

‘And what of Estelle?’ I asked, suddenly thinking of her also.

‘Estelle is indisposed and could be for some time, but I don’t want you to worry your pretty little head about it. Now run along and I’ll see you at dinner.’ My aunt’s voice was firm and would brook no argument.

I sat in my room by the fire all afternoon mulling things over in my mind, and praying Gareth would not be adverse to joining us for dinner that evening, for I longed to see him. Pru carefully put my wedding gown away in the wardrobe covering it with muslin. That evening it took me some time to decide what to wear. I decided on the lemon-coloured silk with the scooped neckline, simply because I’d worn it on the first evening Gareth had addressed me by my Christian name.

I asked Pru to fashion my hair the same as well, covering it as the back with the snood that matched my dress. I tried to recreate the effect of that previous evening which seemed so long ago. I clasped the cream pearls at my neck and slipped the ruby and diamond betrothal ring on my finger, it sparkled in the light of the lamp and I knew that to wear it would be a statement for Gareth, hopefully conveying the message that I was still betrothed to him.

Looking in the drawer of the dressing table for a handkerchief, I chanced on the lace bag belonging to Lizzie which I had placed here on the day of our arrival at Darkwood after finding it at the bottom of the wardrobe.

The yellow roses were almost the colour of the dress I wore, and thought to take it to dinner with me. I pressed the lace to my cheek feeling close to my beloved grandmother who I felt sure had guided me last night.

Putting the bag on the top of the dressing table I selected a pretty white lace handkerchief which I intended to place in the bag. Opening the twisted gold clasp I went to push the handkerchief inside when I felt something tucked in the bag, taking it out I could see that it was a folded envelope very like the ones in Lizzie’s writing desk. I took it over to the armchair and sat down unfolding the envelope. I looked at it back and front several times.

Although it was sealed, I could see nothing had been written on it. I got up and went to the desk and took an envelope out, it matched perfectly to the one I’d found. Sitting back in the armchair I considered what to do.

Part of me said that I should take it to Aunt Rachel, but my heart said to open it as I’d found it. The lace bag had obviously been overlooked when the wardrobe had been cleared out. I looked again in the bag to see if it held anything else. Reaching my hand in the bottom I touched on a small metal

object. On bringing it out into the light of the lamp I could see it was a small brass key, probably the one missing from the desk.

I'd discovered it too late as Douglas had put a new lock on only the other day, so I tucked the key back in the bag. Holding the envelope again for some time I made a decision, right or wrong to open it myself for she was my grandmother and I loved her. My hand was unsteady as I unsealed it, thinking that this had lain unseen for many years.

There was a sheet of paper inside which at first I was reluctant to remove. My heart pounding, I eventually found the courage to retrieve it, unfolding it I could see bold handwriting written in blue ink which had faded a little over the years. Tears stung my eyes as I saw the name Lizzie at the bottom of the page. I lay my hand which held the letter on my lap trying to pull myself together before reading something that had been written so long ago. It could be a letter never posted to her family or an invitation, things I'd mulled over before when the desk was first opened, but unless I read it I'd never know. Nothing could have prepared me for the content of the letter as I read.

April the 23rd 1851.

No longer can I stand Samuel's infidelity. I see Jared's face at every turn to remind me of it, my heart bleeds for his mother, Kate, who died giving birth to him at the tender age of sixteen years.

I lay no blame on her, she was just a child and would have succumbed to Samuel's persuasive ways with women as I surrendered to it long ago. I have some sympathy for Jared not knowing his true parentage, will he ever know that he is Samuel's illegitimate son? The sad fact is that after laying him at Rachel's door he disowned him, I feel I should lay bare to Jared the truth, but can no longer endure Samuel's wrath either, and now the servants are gossiping yet again that a girl in the village is with child by Samuel.

I cannot bear their hushed silence as I walk into a room or the glances of sympathy in my direction. Whoever reads this first will know why I must end my misery and explain it to my beloved grandchildren, Gareth and Silvia, when they are old enough to understand it. Gareth who is full of endearing ways already and Silvia who at such a young age appreciates the written word.

My heart is heavy that I shall not see them grow into adulthood, but my depression is such that I can no longer carry on. The laudanum awaits me, calling me and I have to reach for it, Samuel will despise me for it, that I

would dare to escape in this way, but that is the trump card I shall forever hold over him for I have no other and I shall lie forever surrounded by the bluebells in Darklady's Wood.

Lizzie.

I could not at first take it in, Jared's name jumped up at me as I looked at the letter again, I could hardly believe it. Jared was Samuel's son, or should I believe it? And I recalled the cruel twist of his mouth and ruthless manner so like my grandfather, and that led me to think that Jared was in truth my uncle.

A sob escaped my lips as I realised my beloved Lizzie appeared to have taken her own life because of my grandfather's cruelty and philandering ways. Oh my Lord, I thought, clutching the letter to my bosom and recalling the words, I shall lie forever surrounded by the bluebells in Darklady's Wood. She had taken the laudanum in that beautiful wood and lay to die on a carpet of bluebells, I could not bear it, I needed someone to share this pain with me and my thoughts flew to Gareth, my beloved grandchildren, Gareth and Silvia.

I stood up tears streaming down my face, tucking the letter back into the lace bag intent on finding Gareth before dinner, was there no end to my misery? The thought ran through my mind, Gareth's endearing ways, was I so wrong to doubt him, wrong to tell him that I could not marry him on the foundation that he had not declared his love for me?

My feet practically ran along the corridor, sobs escaping my lips as I ran, my hand tightly clutching the bag lest someone take it from me. The fact that I didn't know which was Gareth's room hadn't occurred to me. I ran blindly on, the skirts of my lovely dress dragging along the carpet as another miracle happened and Gareth stepped out of the master bedroom into the corridor.

'Gareth, Gareth!' I shouted, sobs still racking my body as I tumbled headlong into his arms, his arms went around me cradling my head on his shoulder, no matter how I tried I couldn't stop crying, I'd never felt such despair.

'Silvia, sshhh,' he whispered trying to calm me but to no avail so he led me into the bedroom which he'd so caringly refurbished for me, the thought of which made me worse. He sat me in the armchair by the fire which was still burning in the hearth and pulled a bell cord that I had not noticed before.

Leaning on the floor before me he tried so hard to pacify me, in no time at all Dotty appeared, her eyes were like saucers taking in the scene before her, we would be the talk of the kitchen, but I didn't care. My dishevelled hair, red cheeks and sobs would be relayed to the cook no doubt.

'Dotty, please fetch Miss Silvia a large brandy and tell no-one,' Gareth instructed the bewildered girl. 'Now Silvia please tell me what causes you such distress.'

'Jared... Jared...' I sobbed looking Gareth in the eye, I must have looked a sight. 'Jared is not your brother, he is our uncle!' I paused for breath, 'And our beloved grandmother took her own life in Darklady's Wood! Oh Gareth, I cannot bear it.'

Dotty arrived with the brandy, Mrs Trigg at her heels.

'Is there something wrong, sir?' Knowing full well there was, as she took in the scene before her.

'Please leave us, Mrs Trigg and tell no-one,' said Gareth, thrusting the glass of brandy into my trembling hand.

'But the mistress is asking for you both, sir. What shall I tell her?' Mrs Trigg persisted.

'Tell them we'll be down soon, Mrs Trigg please, now leave us.'

'Come along, Dotty,' said Mrs Trigg pushing the girl through the door, taking her displeasure out on the poor child. I gulped the brandy, clutching the glass with a trembling hand, and thankfully the sobs subsided.

'I know you are distraught dear heart, but tell me how you found this out,' Gareth asked softly.

'I found this letter in Lizzie's bag.' And I fumbled to unclasp the bag and handed Gareth the letter, sobs starting again as I handled it. Gareth stood by the fireplace slowly reading the words which must have been as painful to him.

'This would explain why we can't find Lizzie's grave, for it would be in unconsecrated ground. I can understand your distress for I feel it to, but we need to tell my mother, for it would appear she could shed further light on all this.' Gareth spoke sensibly I realised and at last I was beginning to calm myself, sound sense was suddenly replacing hopelessness.

'You are right, Gareth, but I need to freshen up and do something with my hair,' I said to him and once again he rang the bell. On this occasion Mrs Trigg answered it.

'Yes, sir,' she said with a hint of dissatisfaction.

‘Please bring Miss Silvia a jug of hot water and a face cloth.’

Mrs Trigg returned once more with Dotty who carried a jug of water which she tipped slowly into a china washbowl on a stand near the door.

‘Dinner is ready, sir,’ Mrs Trigg addressed Gareth as she spoke, ‘What shall I tell your mother?’

‘I shall come down and speak to her myself. Now that will be all, I thank both of you.’ No sooner had Gareth spoken than the housekeeper and Dotty left the room.

‘I cannot go down to dinner Gareth, for I could not eat a thing, this has upset me so much.’ My voice was almost a whisper as I held the warm face cloth to my burning cheeks and eyes.

‘Don’t fret, I will go down to Mother and explain that you are feeling unwell, and that we will see her and Father in the drawing-room afterwards if you are able. I will fetch you a towel,’ he said thoughtfully. When he handed it to me some seconds later he asked, ‘Shall I send Pru to you to tidy your beautiful hair?’

‘Yes please Gareth, you are so kind, however could I have thought...’ My voice trailed off, not wishing to tell him that I’d misconstrued his motive for marrying me. Another sob escaped my lips at the thought of it.

‘Silvia, calm yourself.’ As he spoke he laid his hands gently on my shoulders and planted a kiss on my cheek.

‘Pru will need my hairbrush,’ I said suddenly thinking logically. ‘Maybe I should go back to my room.’

‘No,’ Gareth said emphatically. ‘I wish you to stay here where I can keep an eye on you. I shan’t be gone long, I promise.’ As he left I felt bereft without his calming presence and wished with all my heart I could return to yesterday.

Pru arrived with a hairbrush not long after Gareth left, she’d also brought with her a powder puff. I sat at the dressing table on a soft brocade chair and looked at my reflection in the mirror while Pru brushed and re-arranged my hair.

‘It’s not for me to ask what troubles you, Miss Silvia, but what I do know is that the young gentlemen who is to be your husband is most concerned about you and that’s a fact.’ As she spoke Pru skilfully rearranged the snood and then set to dabbing my cheeks with the powder puff. When she’d finished I certainly looked better and somehow older and wiser for the experience of the past days. I wished so much to put right my relationship

with Gareth, but knew that it would have to wait until other issues had been resolved.

An hour later, Gareth and I entered the drawing-room together, Aunt Rachel and Uncle William were on the settle together by the fire.

'What is amiss?' Aunt Rachel asked anxiously. As I looked at her I thought how much like her mother she looked, a fact I'd not noticed before. Aunt Rachel got up and walked towards me placing a protective arm around my shoulder and seated me on the matching settle opposite. Uncle William was by the fire. Although warm, the cold blue walls chilled me and I shuddered.

Gareth took a seat next to me. 'Where did you find that reticule?' Aunt Rachel exclaimed as she seated herself once more. 'I do believe it belonged to my mother.' As she spoke I could feel the tears pricking my eyes once more, my throat burned and I could not speak, but Gareth answered his mother.

'You are right, Mother, it is indeed Lizzie's lace bag. Silvia found it in the wardrobe the day of her arrival at Darkwood, but until today had not picked it up.' Gareth continued while my aunt looked at him as if spellbound. 'The cause of Silvia's distress is a letter she found in the bag, which has been written by your mother and reveals to us secrets which we had not known until now.'

Saying this Gareth took the bag gently from me, unclasped it and handed Lizzie's letter to Aunt Rachel. The room was silent except for the occasional crackling of a log on the fire as she read it, she then folded the letter and passed it back to Gareth.

'It is true, my children.' Aunt Rachel spoke in a hushed voice. 'Your grandmother did take the laudanum on that very day in the wood, your grandfather found her a couple of hours later lying under a tree among the bluebells. He never forgave her as she so rightly says, for escaping him that way, her lifeless body was carried back to the house by Douglas who was younger then.' Aunt Rachel looked in some kind of trance as she continued. 'The lovely fur-trimmed green cloak she wore was removed and banished to the attic.'

'I saw it,' I interrupted, 'On the top of her clothes in a chest in the attic.' The thought of it causing tears to swim before my eyes.

'My father was adamant she would not be buried in the churchyard, but outside the boundary wall with no headstone to mark this beautiful lady's

final resting place. But I have tended her grave all these years.' She stopped, her emotion overcoming her.

'And what of Jared who I have always thought of as my brother?' Gareth's questioning voice cut the silence.

'He is indeed my half-brother, Samuel's son. He so wanted a son and asked me to bring him up as my own so he could live at Darkwood. Jared turned out to be as cruel as his father and had no love for Samuel, so Jared was disowned from an early age.' Again my aunt stopped, obviously reliving the past which Lizzie's letter had brought to her mind.

'And where is Jared now?' My voice was strong once more, 'He needs to be told the truth of his parentage,' I insisted.

'We've not seen Jared since your banns of marriage were called on Sunday.' Uncle William spoke for the first time. I had quite forgotten he was there opposite me.

'And will you tell him, Aunt Rachel, when he reappears?' I asked quietly.

'Yes, I will, for as I say he needs to know the truth for many reasons,' she agreed.

'And my grandmother's portrait? Do you know who disfigured the likeness of her lovely face with such hatred?' I asked, keen to have all the mysteries surrounding Lizzie solved.

'I can answer that,' offered Uncle William. 'Your aunt does not know this for I spared her any more unhappiness. It was Samuel, I saw him as I walked along the corridor repeatedly slash at her face with inane fury. It was I who took the portrait down and with Douglas' help placed it in the attic so Rachel would not see it.'

Uncle William paused and then continued, 'Samuel then had his portrait painted in defiance of Lizzie's death, by a tree in Darklady's Wood, and he hung it deliberately at the top of the stairs where his wife's portrait had been.'

'Is there anything else you have to tell us?' Gareth spoke quietly looking from his father to his mother as he spoke.

'For my part at least,' said Uncle William leaning forward in his seat, 'The only thing I know is that Samuel instructed that the walls of the drawing-room and dining-room be painted the colour of the bluebells so no-one would forget what Lizzie did to him. His anger was so fierce he never forgave her.'

‘And you, Mother? Have you any further revelations we should know about?’ As Gareth spoke my aunt looked at both of us deliberating whether she should tell us more.’

‘Estelle.’ She spoke the name and it had hung in the air between us, almost tangible, and the sound of her name being spoken conjured up to me the sound of Estelle’s beautiful melodic voice and laugh which I’d heard and loathed on the evening of my arrival at Darkwood.

‘What of Estelle, for I already know that she is unsound of mind,’ said Gareth as if breaking a spell which had been cast on us all.

‘She is Samuel’s illegitimate child too,’ said Aunt Rachel, wiping a tear from her eye with the back of her hand. ‘Such a beautiful child but her mother was deranged and died not long ago in a mental institution. I very much fear that Estelle will follow in her footsteps.’

At this point Aunt Rachel did cry. What secrets she had carried these past years and how difficult it must have been for her, and I knew now why she strived so hard to keep Estelle apart from Jared and Gareth, for she was Jared’s half-sister and Gareth’s aunt.

Gareth and I left my aunt and uncle to spend much needed moments together. As we were leaving the room, Aunt Rachel looked up and said, ‘I will show you both Lizzie’s grave tomorrow.’ We both nodded in agreement.

Gareth walked me back to my room dropping a kiss on my brow as he left me saying he would join me for breakfast. ‘Sleep well dear heart,’ he said.

As I climbed wearily into bed that night thoughts of Lizzie whirled in my head, but I was thankful the mystery was solved. Uppermost in my mind was the thought that I needed to tell Gareth the secret of my heart which was that I loved him so very much. With that thought, I drifted into a restless sleep, my dreams were of beautiful Estelle and I knew she would forever haunt me.

10

‘You look so dark under the eyes, Miss,’ said Pru the next day, ‘And your eyelids are all puffed up.’

‘Do I really look that bad?’ I questioned with some dismay going across to have a look in the mirror. Looking closely I could see what she meant, but under the circumstances I could have looked far worse.

‘I agree with you Pru, but nothing can be done about it,’ I said with some resignation.

‘What will you wear today?’ Pru asked, and I went over to the window to see if there were blue or grey skies today. Pulling back the pink curtains I could see it was a glorious day, the sun shone in a cloudless blue sky and as far as I could tell there was hardly any breeze. I knew we were going to the graveyard today and recalled how cold it had been on the first day we had come to Darkwood.

As I looked from the window I could see primroses growing in the flower border and I thought to pick a bunch to lay on Lizzie’s grave. Thinking of it I felt my throat ache and quickly went to the wardrobe to choose what I would wear. As I looked through my array of gowns I touched on my wedding gown, which caused me to think how I should have been marrying Gareth in two days’ time.

I thought back to the day that Gareth had first seen me here in this very room. The memory helped me decide what to wear and I lifted out the pale blue dress I’d been wearing on my arrival that day. I then lifted down the blue bonnet which matched the gown, and handed it to Pru.

‘I know why you’ve picked this, Miss,’ she said, helping me into the silk dress, Tut it’s not my place to make a comment and that’s a fact.’

‘You are right in your assumption, Pru, and I am quite happy for you to say whatever is on your mind,’ and added, Tor today at least.’

‘Well Miss, if that’s the case I’d just like to say I hope you and the young gentleman can put things right and very soon,’ Pru bravely answered.

‘And so do I, Pru,’ I acknowledged adjusting the skirt of the dress and flattening the lace collar. ‘I’ll wear my cameo brooch today for Grandmother gave it to me when I admired it as a child.’ At the words I had another fleeting thought about the events of yesterday and tried to dismiss it from my mind or I would start weeping again.

After Pru had arranged my hair, I went down to breakfast, for the first time Uncle William, Aunt Rachel and Gareth were sitting at the table, they all looked at me as I entered the room. I took a seat which Gareth held for me, quite the gentleman I thought. However could I have doubted his intentions, I so desperately needed to talk to him but needed to wait until we had visited the graveyard.

Little was said at the breakfast table other than Aunt Rachel asking, 'How are you today, Silvia?'

'I feel a little better thank you, Aunt,' I responded quietly. It was true in as much as I wasn't spilling tears everywhere, but inside I felt as if I had a huge knot in my stomach.

I'd fetched my bonnet and Pru had laid the cream shawl around my shoulders. 'Just in case you feel cold,' she had explained. The shawl caused me to think of Gareth and the bluebell wood. More unpleasant thoughts and question came into my head. Where is Jared?

We stepped into the April sunshine and I could see a very handsome landau with the roof folded back had been brought to the front of the house. Aunt Rachel and Uncle William seated themselves inside and Gareth indicated for me to do the same.

'One moment, Gareth please, I wish to pick some flowers for our grandmother,' I explained.

'I'll come with you,' he said, following me to the flower border. The primroses were turning their pretty yellow heads to the sun and I felt almost cruel as I picked about twenty and arranged them in a small bunch which I asked Gareth to hold while I tied them with some pink ribbon I had found in my work basket.

'Silvia,' Gareth caught my arm gently as I was about to walk back to the carriage, his deep brown eyes looked at me appealingly, 'when we return to the house I need to speak with you alone,' he confessed.

'We are of the same mind, cousin,' I said with some relief, for he had saved me from broaching the subject myself which could have appeared quite unladylike.

Comfortably sitting in the carriage next to Gareth for all of our journey, I could see Culmoor Church perched on top of the hillock. My thoughts were in disarray, Lizzie, Gareth, Jared, Estelle and my wedding gown were all jumbled up in my head, and as hard as I tried I could not separate one from the other. We stopped near the graveyard as in that first day and my thought

was that I had come around in a full circle in just over three weeks. The difference being that today instead of an icy wind a cool breeze blew pleasantly across my face.

Gareth by my side, we entered the graveyard following Aunt Rachel, with me clutching the posy I had picked for Lizzie. We walked among the gravestones to the far side and I could see Aunt Rachel unlatch a gate in the corner which I hadn't realised was there. We followed her through it and she led us behind the wall where halfway along I could see a mound of earth.

Thankfully the sun shone through the trees on to the grave which made me feel a little more at ease. I loathed to think of my grandmother lying in the cold earth away from the sunlight.

Gareth gently squeezed my arm to give me comfort. I noticed a small varnished wooden cross had been placed in the earth at one end, as I bent to look at it I could see the name, Elizabeth, had been lovingly carved into the wood with the date 1851.

I looked at Aunt Rachel. Now Grandfather is gone and has no bearing on this grave anymore we should place a small headstone here, Aunt.' I'd made a statement which I felt very strongly about, for this lovely lady who was my grandmother, had taken her life because of a grandfather who caused her nothing but pain.

'I agree with Silvia,' Gareth spoke up. 'The wooden cross is admirable but not enough.'

'We will order one,' agreed Aunt Rachel. 'We should get back for I feel all of us have endured enough,' she said quietly.

'Could you please leave me here a moment?' I asked tentatively, 'For there is something I wish to say to Grand-mother alone.'

'But of course, dear,' said Aunt Rachel placing a cold hand over mine. She suddenly seemed more her normal self, perhaps bringing us here had been a trial for her, and now the deed was accomplished she felt more at ease. I stood amongst the trees, bending down I laid the posy of primroses on the sandy coloured earth.

'I found you,' I whispered, 'and would never have stopped searching, I love you and Gareth also, please lead me on the right path with him and help me choose my words wisely.' So saying I walked back to the carriage feeling a great sense of peace. Gareth was waiting to assist me as I climbed in and all the way back to Darkwood his hand lay closed over mine.

Stepping on to the path outside the house Gareth detained me while his mother and father walked on inside.

‘It is time for us now, Silvia. For there is something I want to say to you,’ Gareth’s words conveyed to me that he was as eager to say what was on his mind, as was I. We agreed to talk in the morning-room and, as we stepped through the door of this delightful room, I cast my mind back to the last time we were here together when Gareth had proposed to me and slipped the betrothal ring on my finger.

As if reading my thoughts Gareth said, ‘You are not wearing the ring today.’ As he spoke I removed my bonnet and lay it on the table by the door.

‘Only because I feared I may lose it,’ I answered as I sat in the armchair while Gareth turned his mother’s chair around to sit on.

‘Silvia, I don’t know why you said you wouldn’t marry me, but before you say anything, I’d like to explain myself if I may,’ he said questioningly.

‘Please do, Gareth, for I ardently wish to know your thoughts,’ I replied, impatience welling up inside me.

‘When our grandfather’s Will was read and I came to your room I was determined to dislike you, but at the same time determined to marry you for the sake of this house.’ He paused momentarily, standing up, arms behind his back, he started pacing the floor. ‘And then I admired you for your liking of Tennyson and Dickens, what I hadn’t expected was to fall in love with you.’

‘Oh Gareth,’ I exclaimed, ‘if only you had declared this before I cancelled our wedding, I was so sure you didn’t love me.’

‘And do you love me?’ he asked, stopping his pacing he stood before me.

‘Without hesitation I can say yes, I do love you,’ I declared.

‘And will you marry me?’ he asked, raising one dark eyebrow in question.

‘Yes Gareth, I will marry you,’ I agreed, breathing a sigh of relief that this conversation had gone well. He took my hand and pulling me to my feet drew me near to him.

‘Then let us marry on Saturday as arranged.’ The words he spoke made my heart sing and I was happy once more.

‘But the church is cancelled,’ I said with some alarm.

‘We can rebook it, the banns have been called.’ The words made me think of Estelle. Now what has distressed you, darling?’

‘It is nothing,’ I answered untruthfully.

‘I can tell by your face it is something.’ Gareth’s words showed how astute he had become at assessing my emotions. ‘Now tell me for we must have no secrets between us.’

‘It is Estelle.’ My voice faltered. ‘What will become of her, Gareth? For she is so lovely.’

‘Dear heart, Estelle is being cared for by the nuns at an Abbey not far from here, it is for the best. My mother arranged it. Now smile for me please and tell me that you are happy,’ he coaxed.

‘Now let us go and tell my father and mother,’ suggested my husband-to-be, dropping a gentle kiss on my lips, nothing felt matter of fact or unemotional now.

Uncle William and Aunt Rachel were delighted. While Gareth went to Culmoor to the vicarage with Uncle William, I stayed to talk with my aunt.

‘So Silvia, you are now ready for marriage to my son?’ she asked seriously.

‘Completely and without doubt, Aunt, for I know the union is for love. It is such a pity Mother is not here, and what of Jared?’ I asked, anxious to know what had become of him.

‘It is a shame about your mother. She left far too hastily and as for Jared, he’ll turn up one day like the prodigal son.’ This led me to believe that my aunt had experienced this problem before with the ruthless son of the ruthless Samuel.

‘Aunt Rachel,’ I said cautiously, ‘there is one thing about your mother I wish so much to know.’

‘Ask me child, for it will not distress me now,’ said my aunt.

‘Whereabouts in the wood was Lizzie found?’ The question had been burning in my mind since we had left the graveyard.

‘I can show you if it will not cause you any more pain.’ My aunt looked at me gently as she spoke.

‘I’d like that, it will lay the ghost to rest completely,’ I answered truthfully.

Aunt Rachel and I walked together in the sunshine across the bridge, stopping for some seconds to watch the river sparkling in the sun. As we neared the wood both of us looked at each other.

‘It is so beautiful Silvia, a carpet of blue, I can see why my mother loved it here.’ As she spoke we stepped on the path between the bluebells, as I followed Aunt Rachel I knew that we were following Lizzie’s last steps.

Passing the tree that Jared had pushed me against, I thought of that moment and how Gareth had stepped in to save me. We walked farther into the wood until I could see we were nearly at the other side.

Just as we were about to step into the sunshine, Aunt Rachel stopped and indicated the tree where Samuel had his portrait painted. I felt anger, anger at a man who could be so cruel as to stand where his loving wife had died and then have the audacity to hang the picture at the top of the staircase for everyone to see.

How I hated him and all he stood for and I vowed then that when I was Mistress of Darkwood in two days' time that I would have the portrait burned and the blue walls painted in the green and pink my grandmother had loved. I would thwart him as Lizzie had, and with that thought in my mind I walked back through the bluebell wood with a strength I never had before.

* * *

The morning of my wedding day dawned and I hardly dared draw back the curtains, but when I did I could see that the sun shone for us in a cloudless sky. We were to be married at twelve o'clock. Before getting ready, Aunt Rachel asked me to go to the dining-room and on stepping inside I was astounded to see that, as if by magic, the walls had been painted a pale green overnight.

The wedding breakfast was laid, the table looked so inviting with an ivory cloth covering it on which had been laid silver knives, forks, spoons and serviette holders also pretty rose-coloured dishes and in the centre of it all was a beautifully-decorated two-tier wedding cake.

'Aunt Rachel, thank you so much,' I said kissing her on the cheek.

'It is my pleasure, and here is a small gift from me to remember your wedding day by.' As she spoke my aunt offered me a small oblong package. On removing the tissue paper I could see with delight it was a lovely hand-stitched book mark with Gareth's name and mine in green and the date of our marriage the 15th of April 1865 in gold, underneath were the words, *God bless you both.*

'I shall treasure it,' was all I could say, for I suddenly felt an emotion, not sad but happy and I could have twirled Aunt Rachel round the dining-room, but a sense of decorum prevented me from doing so.

As we stepped back into the hall a familiar voice boomed out, 'So Silvia, you've changed your mind again, most inconvenient as I was just getting

settled, now here we are again.' Before I turned in the direction of the voice I knew it was Mother, it could be no-one else, she had a bit of Samuel in her, not cruel but domineering.

'Mother!' I exclaimed and I thought my happiness would never end.

'Come on, child, I need a hand or I'll never be ready.' As she spoke Aunt Rachel and I threw back our heads and laughed. 'This is a solemn occasion Silvia and I'll thank you to remember that, and you Rachel,' Mother admonished with a rare smile on her face.

Isabel arrived full of excitement and Pru could hardly contain herself, not helping at all really just bustling about, my only hope was that she could keep still long enough to do my hair. Just before we got ready there was a tap at the door, it was Gareth.

'You can't come in, sir!' shrieked Pru, 'it's bad luck.'

'If you could just hand this to the bride and tell her it's to match her eyes.'

I could hear Gareth's deep voice, 'And this is for her bridesmaid. Tell the lovely Silvia, I'll see her at the altar.' Pru shut the door swiftly and turned to us.

'Oh look, Miss,' she said and broke into tears, 'it's so lovely, it really is so lovely.' I looked at what Gareth had handed to Pru, for me a posy of violets wrapped in lace with an ivory silk ribbon and for Isabel a posy of white primulas also wrapped in lace with a blue ribbon.

We stood ready Isabel and I, complimenting each other on how we looked, as we glanced in the mirror the reflection looking back at us appeared so different from the other day in as much that it really looked like me, the lace veil was exquisite and I could see my black hair shining through it.

I looked down at my feet and the dainty half-boots of silk, and said to myself, 'Enjoy this day for you will never look or feel like this again.'

Mother wore a light purple gown with a matching bonnet and I noticed she carried a white lace handkerchief. Aunt Rachel wore a dress of pale rose-coloured silk with a rose pink bonnet, Pru had been told she could attend the service and wore her best outfit, a pale green dress, her mop of red hair escaping a matching green bonnet.

As Isabel and I walked down the staircase my thought was that when I walked up it next time I would be Mrs Hunter.

I clung to Uncle William's arm as we walked up to the church gate, Isabel close behind us also I suspected savouring every moment, she did indeed

look like a brightly coloured butterfly, the moth had disappeared and I intended it to stay that way.

As I walked down the aisle on Uncle William's arm to meet my bridegroom, the sun's rays slanted through the windows and every few steps we were caught in a beam of light which momentarily obscured my vision. But as I reached Gareth's side my heart skipped a beat for he looked more handsome than ever, his coal black hair and dark eyes shining, dressed in a black jacket, trousers and waistcoat with a white ruffled shirt that suited him perfectly and I notice through a haze of sudden brief tears that he wore a violet in his lapel. As he looked at me and smiled he whispered, 'You look captivating.' And then I heard George Poulter's voice.

'Dearly beloved, we are gathered...' And I knew today there would be no interruption.

We stepped out as man and wife, rice was thrown and a voice held our attention for a moment.

'Good luck, brother.' It was Jared, I looked at him and thought of what he needed to be told, but not today and I felt some compassion for him in spite of the incident in the bluebell wood.

Much later I said to Gareth, 'I desire to walk with you in the fresh air, husband.' He smiled an engaging smile.

'Whatever my beautiful wife wishes,' he replied. So we walked to the bridge, it was a warm night and as we stood there together I looked back at the house, moonlight bathed the walls and I knew Darkwood was at peace having relinquished its secrets.

I turned back to Gareth, 'I have something for you.' And out of his pocket he took a small book, on looking at it closely I could see it was a red leather bound volume of Tennyson's Lady Of Shallot.

I was lost for words, but not my husband, Tor when the moon was overhead, came two young lovers lately wed,' so saying he took me in his arms, I looked at the window of the master bedroom and thought with some joy that tonight I would share it with my husband whom I loved with all my heart, and reaching up to him our lips met in a slow lingering kiss and I knew Grandmother would have approved of our love for each other. We drew apart and walked back to Darkwood to start our lives together for always.

THE END

BOOK 3:
MATTERS OF THE HEART

Dedicated to my dear Dad, George Broadest, sadly departed.
Thank you for believing in me.

1

I arrived at my mother's childhood home, Pendenna Reach, one afternoon in late September, 1873. I'd come with some trepidation, and as I sat in the carriage waiting for the tall, black, wrought-iron gates to be opened, I thought of the circumstances which had brought me from London to Cornwall in such a short space of time.

I thought back to the day, only three weeks ago, when I sat in the apartments of my godmother, Amy Godbeares, in fashionable Grosvenor Square. The letter from my maternal grandmother lay before me on the table. I'd read it through several times, noting the neat, sloping handwriting, and the slight shake of hand with which it had been written. It had come to me from Pendenna Reach, at the beginning of September.

Dear Jane

You will be somewhat surprised to hear from me, but I have followed your progress through life with love and great interest. I am getting older and have a great sadness in my heart. It would please me so much if you would come to stay at Pendenna for a while, to allow us to get to know one another. Your grandfather passed from the world a year ago and since then I have thought a lot of the past, and wish to redeem in some small way the wrong accorded to your mother, my daughter, Felicity.

Think on this request, my child, and I look forward with anticipation to your reply.

Your loving Grandmother,

Harriet Pendenna.

I rose from my seat and walked to the window looking out over the square. Since my father and mother died of influenza three years ago, Amy had taken me under her wing. I was very happy here, but knew that at the age of twenty I should be looking to my future. Was this a chance to explore new horizons? My mother had often talked of Pendenna Reach, of the rambling corridors and the sea beyond the house.

She'd also told me how, at the age of eighteen, she'd eloped with my father, an artist, to Paris and married him. It all sounded very romantic to me as a girl, but as I grew I sensed sadness in my mother and knew she yearned to see her old home.

My grandfather had disowned her for thwarting him, and had never forgiven her for marrying beneath her. As it turned out, my father became a

very successful artist, and the name of John Merriock became famous for his landscape paintings, even more so after his untimely death. I had the consolation of knowing Mama and Papa were always happy together. I had wanted for nothing and after their death had gone to a finishing school for young ladies in Paris.

Amy had been my rock since returning to London a year ago. She'd launched me into Society where I'd met countless young men but none appealed to me. They were all far too shallow and one very much like another. I had definite views on the husband I envisaged, a man strong of character and one who would stand out in a crowd. So, much to Amy's chagrin, I did not succumb to the elegant men I met.

My parents' house near the Thames Embankment, where Papa loved to paint, was sold. I had no desire to keep it on, apart from the fact I could not have afforded its upkeep. So I was left with a useful inheritance to be gained at the age of twenty-one, Mama's personal possessions still under lock and key in a mahogany chest, Molly our housemaid who had learned many new skills under Amy's roof, and my memories.

I picked up Grandmother's letter and made my way to my room. Looking at my reflection in the mirror I thought how much like Mama I looked. My dark brown hair was drawn back in a chignon, one or two tendrils escaping each side of my oval face. I was slim and tall with blue eyes. The pink striped, high-neck blouse I wore, and grey skirt with a small train, made me look even taller. I'd made up my mind, a quick, positive decision, so like me.

I'd go to Pendenna, partly because I felt I owed it to my mother. Also, to know my family would be a new experience. It had always been just the three of us, as Papa's family had sailed to America and settled there, so I never knew them either. But to have a family at this time in my life could only be a good thing, and hopefully give me some direction. Little did I know then what direction my life would take in such a short time.

When Molly came to dress my hair for dinner that evening, a skill she'd acquired from Amy's personal maid, I broached the subject of going to Cornwall.

'Will you come with me, Molly?'

'I'd go to the ends of the earth with you,' she replied immediately.

I was delighted she felt this way, for Molly had been part of my life since I was ten years of age. She was five years my senior and I knew she would

be a good companion, but also I knew we both had a lot to learn, as we were both so used to City life.

After two weeks of packing, various farewells to friends and acquaintances, and a tearful goodbye from Amy with a promise to write, Molly and I arrived at Paddington Station for the ten-hour journey to Penzance, where, my grandmother assured me, someone would meet us.

We were amazed at the size of the black locomotive which was to pull our train to Cornwall. A kindly porter assisted us into the first-class carriage and walked with us along the narrow corridor to help us find our seats. I thanked him as he placed our luggage on the rack. The compartment was small but adequate, with red seats, numbered above.

I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror which was located under the luggage rack. I was aghast to see specks of black soot dotted on my face and when I looked at Molly could see she was speckled the same. I dabbed both our faces with my lace handkerchief.

'Oh, miss,' Molly squealed with obvious delight, 'this is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me. I can't wait to get going.'

I seated myself by the window as she spoke, wondering if it would be proper to remove my bonnet. Deciding to do so, I laid it on the seat beside me, with my reticule, and looked out of the window at the goings on.

Without any warning, the carriage jolted and we could hear the hissing of the mighty engine. At the same moment, a piercing whistle was blown and the train moved forward slowly with a chugging sound, gathering speed as we left the station.

'I feel quite elated,' I said to Molly. 'This is quite an adventure and I must confess I feel quite hungry.'

We both laughed as we partook of cook's luncheon which she had so kindly put together for us. As we ate, we looked out of the window and marvelled at the changing scenery. After the blacks and greys of the city, the countryside unfolded like a colourful ribbon speeding by.

We arrived at Penzance at four o'clock in the afternoon. Molly and I stood outside the station, our light luggage around our feet, scrutinising each carriage which arrived. Half an hour passed and I was feeling restless. Surely my grandmother hadn't forgotten our arrival time. I was just about to go and ask the stationmaster if there were any messages for Miss Merriock when a voice startled me.

'Jane Merriock?'

The voice was deep and questioning, and as I turned to face its owner, I was pleasantly surprised. The gentleman was tall and well-built with fair hair and deep brown eyes set in a handsome face. He was smart but his clothes rested on him casually, in fact his whole manner was of a casual nature. His eyes smiled into mine.

'Why, yes,' I stammered and felt foolish as I said it.

No-one had caused this effect on me before. He bowed almost mockingly before me.

'Robert Thornton at your service, Miss Merriock. Your carriage awaits.'

I followed him without question, Molly at my heels. The carriage was an open one and, Robert Thornton handed me a grey woven rug to cover my legs as the late September afternoon was chilly. Molly sat up front next to the driver, so I was left with this stranger for a companion, and an interesting companion as it turned out.

Robert Thornton sat opposite me on the plush seat, his eyes surveying me and, I thought, waiting for me to speak. I did, for the question had been hovering on my lips.

'And what role do you play at Pendenna Reach, Mr Thornton?' I asked him sweetly.

He looked at me a few seconds before replying.

'I'm your grandmother's estate manager, your grandfather's when he was alive, and have been for ten years. I trust that we will become good friends, Miss Merriock.'

It was a statement rather than a question. He leaned towards me and smiled, and I thought his hands were going to reach out for mine, but they relaxed in his lap. He looked at me seriously.

'You must feel strange coming to see a Grandmother you've never met.'

'You are right, Mr Thornton, it is a very strange feeling, but I know from my grandmother's letters she is as eager to see me as I am to see my late mother's home.'

There was something else I had to know.

'Can you tell me, Mr Thornton, who else lives at Pendenna Reach?'

'Your Aunt Laura.'

He leaned back. Did I sense contempt in his voice? My mother had spoken of her sister, Laura, who had been engaged to be married, but her betrothed, Andrew Trehaine, had disappeared mysteriously the same time as my mother left Pendenna.

‘Is she married now?’ I asked tentatively, wondering if had any cousins.

‘No,’ was all Robert Thornton replied and I sensed by his manner that was all he would say about Aunt Laura, for now at least.

I looked around at the countryside, thinking how different this land was to the hustle and bustle of London. Small, whitewashed cottages were dotted here and there amongst the fields and hedgerows. My companion pointed out various landmarks.

We neared the top of a hill and I could see the sea shimmering in the late afternoon sun, and on the cliff I caught my first glimpse of the house. Robert Thornton must have heard my sharp intake of breath, for the house was far larger than I’d imagined. It stood stark and grey against the backdrop of the blue sky. Then we dipped down over the hill and it vanished from view.

‘You are impressed?’ my companion queried with a smile.

‘Why, yes,’ I stammered. ‘I had not imagined it to be so immense.’

As I spoke, we pulled up at the tall black wrought iron gates where we stopped momentarily for the lodge-keeper to open them. I felt the butterflies in my stomach and had not imagined that I would be so nervous. Robert Thornton then threw propriety to the wind and laid a hand over mine.

‘Do not worry, Miss Merriock, you will be made welcome and will always be safe while I am here.’

Although taken aback by the touch of his strong hand, the unexpected encounter gave me courage and I felt quite bereft when he drew away.

As we rounded a bend I caught my first close look at the house. Sea mist had started to curl around the chimneys, but many of the mullioned windows still glinted in the late sun. Mr Thornton helped me alight. I felt weary and apprehensive as the great oak door swung open as if in greeting.

Molly disappeared with the carriage and I forced my aching limbs to move forward to the door. Then something suddenly troubled me.

Had I imagined Mr Thornton uttering the word safe?

2

The housekeeper, Mrs Dobbs, greeted us as we stepped into the vast hall. She was a small, plump woman, her grey curly hair escaping from a bun drawn back carelessly from her kindly face. She was dressed in black from head to foot, a large bunch of keys jangling at her waist. I quickly took in my surroundings, noticing a fire burning cheerily in the large, stone hearth. Mrs Dobbs saw me glance toward it.

'The house gets chilly this time of year in the evening, Miss Merriock, and we wished to give you a warm welcome. If you follow me, miss, I'll show you to your room.'

As I followed Mrs Dobbs, I glanced back at Robert who gave me an encouraging smile. I noted the huge portraits covering the stone walls and guessed them to be my ancestors. The red carpet beneath my feet had at one time been thick, but sadly was now almost threadbare in places. As we reached the top of the wide staircase, corridors stretched to the right and left, and were rambling, as my mother had said. Even now, oil lamps were lit to dispel the impending gloom of evening. I followed Mrs Dobbs. It seemed we passed a hundred doors before she opened an oak door on our right.

'This is the yellow room, Miss Merriock, your mother's until she left this house over twenty years ago. We hope you'll be very comfortable in here.'

I stepped into a room which gave the appearance of continual sunlight. The heavy curtains and bed hangings were of a yellow damask material. The heavy rug on the polished floor was interspersed with large yellow roses. Even the pictures were of all things yellow. I looked around me with delight.

'It is a beautiful room, Mrs Dobbs, and even more so as it was my mother's.'

Mrs Dobbs stood in the doorway, a gentle smile on her face. I longed to ask her if she'd known my mother, but thought it best to wait.

'Your grandmother will be delighted you are so pleased. She is anxious to meet you.'

I was as anxious to meet her, and was a little disappointed that she had not greeted my arrival. At that moment a man appeared behind Mrs Dobbs.

'Miss Merriock's bags,' he said in a thick accent quite unfamiliar to me.

The housekeeper thanked Thomas, as he was called, and he carried my bags into the room.

'I will send your maid to you shortly. You are no doubt tired after your long journey and such a lot to take in.'

As she spoke she moved toward the door.

'I will tell the mistress you have arrived,' she added, and closed the door. Like a child, I twirled around and almost ran to the full-length window, eager to see the view. There was a balcony, I noticed, and excitedly I undid the window catch and stepped out on to it, leaning over the stone balustrade. I was at the front of the house, but I could see nothing, the mist was now so dense. I guessed the sea to be on my left as I could hear the muffled sound of the waves crashing on the rocks. I was disappointed but prayed for a clear day tomorrow.

I had the rest of the day to deal with first, and the thought of the meeting with my grandmother brought the butterflies back to my stomach. I had a fleeting thought of Robert Thornton, wishing he were near. As I fastened the catch on the window, there was a light knock at my door and Molly appeared. I could sense she was as excited as I was.

'Oh, miss, what a lovely room,' she enthused. 'I'm to share a room with Lizzie, as some rooms are being done up.'

'And is she nice, this Lizzie?' I asked, anxious to ascertain that Molly was content.

'Why, yes, miss, except she talks sort of foreign.'

At this I smiled, thinking of Tom.

'Miss, we must get you ready for dinner. We are to meet Mrs Dobbs at the head of the staircase at seven-thirty so you can meet your grandma.'

I quickly undid the ribbons and removed my bonnet while Molly lit the lamps. A maid brought water and filled the hipbath. She never spoke a word and just bobbed a curtsey as she left. I sank gratefully into the scented water and washed the grime of the day's journey away while Molly unpacked what little clothes I had with me. I would be glad when our possessions arrived by coach at Penzance the following day.

Molly helped me into my pale blue silk evening dress and redid my hair in the chignon I so loved. The finishing touch was the pearls my papa had given me on my sixteenth birthday. I looked at the finished result in the full-length mirror on the wardrobe door. My reflection pleased me.

All too soon it was nearing seven-thirty and we made our way to the staircase where the housekeeper was waiting. Molly left us and I descended the stairs with Mrs Dobbs, feeling quite confident, until I caught sight of Robert Thornton in the hall below. He was dressed for dinner in a black jacket and white shirt. My legs suddenly turned to jelly and I caught hold of the banister as he looked up at me, following my progress.

'Miss Merriock,' he murmured meeting me at the bottom of the staircase, 'I've come to wish you luck.'

He smiled and I suddenly felt confident again. As Mrs Dobbs led me to the door of the drawing-room, I took a deep breath before entering. I stepped into the huge drawing-room and quickly took in the tall french windows opposite with heavy blue velvet drapes.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see a fire burning merrily in the large stone fireplace.

'Thank you for coming, my child.'

I heard the voice before I saw my grandmother. There was a rustle of stiff taffeta and as the shadow moved towards me I could see she was dressed entirely in black with a lace mantilla over her greying hair. The only hint of colour came from a large emerald ring she wore on her left hand. Although Grandmother was in sombre dress, her person was anything but. I had imagined her to be tall and austere but the plump and pretty face looking at me was suffused with joy. Suddenly the cloud which hung over me disappeared for I knew that she was sincerely pleased to see me. She held out her hands to me.

'Jane, my dearest child.'

I almost ran to her, placing my hands in hers. Then she clasped me to her and I was engulfed in a soft, fragrant embrace. She held me at arm's length.

'How lovely you are, child, and so much like your mother. I believe you have her charm and will bewitch any young man who looks at you.'

'Oh, Grandmother!' I exclaimed huskily, scarcely able to believe my good fortune. 'I was so afraid you might not really want me here.'

'Not want you, my dear child? I have been counting the days.'

As she spoke, she indicated for me to be seated on the floral couch by the hearth. She seated herself opposite me and pulled the bell chord by her side. In what seemed no time at all, a maid appeared.

'Ah, Lizzie, please light the lamps and replenish the fire.'

My grandmother spoke softly, all the while surveying me by the firelight. Her next words addressed me.

‘You are not spoken for?’

The question puzzled me.

‘I have never met a gentleman who reached my expectations.’

As I spoke, I thought fleetingly of Robert Thornton, so was amazed at Grandmother’s next words.

‘You have met Robert, my estate manager. I hold him in high regard. It would please me greatly if you and he could be good friends.’

There was no answer to this and I guessed Grandmother expected none as she continued.

‘Tell me about your mother, my dear. Was she happy?’

‘As happy as any person could be, with the man she loved. They’ve made me happy, too, and it was a great loss when they died.’

The thought of them saddened me. My grandmother must have sensed my mood for she laid a hand over mine.

‘You have me now, my dear, and I have you. I have wanted to know you since your birth but your grandfather was very stubborn and ruled this house with an iron hand. Far too harsh he was at times, I felt, but when one is married to such a man...’

Her words trailed off and I understood. She wanted me to understand my mother’s banishment was not of her making and I believed this to be so. My grandmother wanted me to talk of my mother as she continued.

‘Do you have any possessions belonging to your mother, Jane?’

‘A small chest holds her valued treasures but I have not been able to bring myself to open it.’

This was true. The thought of looking through my mother’s things upset me and I had put it off many times, despite my curiosity. Grandmother’s voice cut across my thoughts.

‘Perhaps now you are in her home it will be easier for you, my child. Your mother kept a diary, you know, maybe more than one. She let no-one see them. It would be nice to think you will find them so that you will have some insight into her life here.’

We had no more time to talk as at that point Robert Thornton entered the room, accompanied by a pleasant-looking, dark-haired woman. As my grandmother rose, so did I to face the newcomer who appraised me with piercing, cold blue eyes and I instinctively knew I faced an enemy.

‘This is your Aunt Laura, your mother’s elder sister.’

There was no similarity between my mother and her sister, Laura. My mother had been fair and tall, Laura was short and dark.

She held out her hand condescendingly toward me and I took it with as little grace as she offered it. My spirits sank as Aunt Laura linked her arm almost intimately through Robert Thornton’s. He had been watching the scene before him and suddenly spoke in a soft, authoritative voice.

‘I shall escort Miss Merriock into dinner as she is our guest,’ he said, much to my aunt’s displeasure.

Dinner was a quiet affair, interspersed with trivial conversation. We sat at one end of a vast table in a huge dining-room with red walls, which by the end of the meal started to swim before my eyes. I excused myself as I was obviously over tired and the soft bed in my room beckoned me.

As soon as I stepped into my room, I knew someone had entered it while I was at dinner. A trace of perfume, not my own, lingered in the air. I looked around but nothing seemed to have been disturbed. Then I saw it — a piece of grey paper on my dressing-table. I stood transfixed for a moment before picking it up in my trembling hand. The words leaped up at me.

LEAVE PENDENNA BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE.

Who would write such a thing? I screwed the paper up fiercely and threw it in the wastebin. As I climbed into bed, I wondered if I had a friend or an enemy at Pendenna and guessed it to be the latter.

3

Although tired, I slept fitfully that night. The unfamiliar bed plus creaks and groans from the house contributed to my sleeping and waking. I imagined the mist whispering conspiratorially through the cracks in the old, stone walls. I must have fallen into a more restful slumber in the early hours as I awoke with a start to the sound of Molly drawing back the heavy curtains. She turned and saw I was awake.

'It is a glorious morning, miss. Did you sleep well? You look a little dark under the eyes but perhaps this will refresh you.'

She placed a tray laden with tea and bacon with scrambled eggs on the bed. I hadn't realised how hungry I was after picking at my dinner the previous evening. I ate and drank while Molly tidied my clothes and tipped steaming water out of a huge pitcher into a china washbowl. I idly wondered how on earth she had carried the water up the stairs.

On climbing out of bed, I went to the window and stepped on to the balcony, eager to see the view. All the mist had vanished and I could see the sun glimmering on the calm sea. I realised the house was built on the edge of a precipitous cliff and tried to imagine a path to the sea below. Suddenly I was eager to explore my surroundings just as I heard Molly tell me to get back in before I caught a chill and realised I was in my nightshift.

'Lawks, miss,' Molly said, fussing around, 'you will catch your death.'

'Don't fuss so, Molly,' I admonished lightly as she helped me into an emerald green day dress. 'I am anxious to explore and I would like you to come with me, Molly. My grandmother doesn't rise until late and I promised to meet her for luncheon. Aunt Laura takes breakfast in her room.'

'And rarely leaves it,' Molly cut in, 'or so cook says.'

I turned at Molly's words.

'But I met her last evening. She was quite sociable, if somewhat aloof.'

'Sorry, miss, it's not for me to say.'

'Don't worry, Molly. I want you to tell me everything about the people in this house even if it is idle kitchen gossip. Come, we have a lot to do before luncheon. I will take my cream shawl because the morning air could be chill. Run and get yours and I will meet you in the hallway.'

'But, miss, I ain't allowed out the front way, Cook says.'

‘When you are with me you can go out any way. Now run along.’

While waiting for Molly in the hall I remembered Robert Thornton mentioning the stables to the rear of the house. That would be my first place to visit. While not an accomplished horsewoman, I had learned to ride in Paris and enjoyed it.

The sun shone warmly from a clear blue sky as Molly and I made our way to the rear of the house. We lingered to look out to sea as Molly had never been out of London till yesterday. She didn’t, however, seem overawed by the scenery before us.

‘It’s not as wild as I thought it would be,’ she observed.

‘Not at this moment, Molly, it is true but the sea has many moods and this is only one of them. I know it can be very wild.’

I ventured toward the cliff edge much to Molly’s dismay as she stayed rooted to the spot. As I got nearer, peering over the cliff, I could see that below lay a small cove covered in shingle and rocks. I could see a path zig-zagging down towards it and couldn’t wait to get down there but guessed Molly would not be keen to accompany me. No matter, I would find a moment to go myself. I stepped back and made my way to Molly who was relieved to have me back safely by her side.

To the rear of the house was a full-length courtyard and we could see the stables at the far end. As we approached, I could see a female mounted on a grey horse and as we neared I could see it was Aunt Laura. Her horse was restless and I wondered why she waited.

‘Good morning, Aunt,’ I ventured pleasantly. ‘What a beautiful mount.’

‘This is my mare, Misty. Did you sleep well, Jane?’ she enquired and I thought how different her manner was this morning and wondered if I had imagined her hostility the previous evening.

Before I had time to reply, Robert Thornton appeared, leading a large black horse, a magnificent-looking creature.

‘Do you ride, Miss Merriock?’ he enquired graciously.

‘Indeed I do,’ I replied with pleasure.

‘Then tomorrow perhaps you would care to accompany your aunt and myself. We could ride to see the Dancing Damsels, an intriguing stone circle a short way from here.’

‘I would be pleased to if my aunt is willing.’

I looked at Aunt Laura. Did I imagine the hostility return to her eyes?

‘I will be glad to ride with you, Jane. You could take Amber, a gentle mount. On my return I will arrange for her to be saddled tomorrow.’

My aunt’s reply could not have been more courteous.

‘That is settled then. Come, Thunder,’ Robert Thornton said as he swung himself into the saddle. ‘I will see you at dinner, Miss Merriock.’

Molly and I found a pleasant rose garden to the side of the house where we sat for some time enjoying the warmth of the sun amidst a fading riot of colour. How lovely this must look in the height of summer, I mused. On glancing at my fob watch, I realised with dismay it was nearly time to meet my grandmother. Molly made her way to the side entrance while I crossed to the front of the house. Glancing up, I noted where my room was. It was easy to pick out as it had the only balcony. I was about to look away when a movement at the window caught my attention and I was astonished to see a woman’s face looking down at me, watching me. I turned away and looked back. I had not imagined it — it was still there.

I picked up my skirts and ran to the door. Swiftly I ran up the staircase and along the corridor, intent on finding who would be so presumptuous as to enter my room, but on reaching it and flinging wide the door, the room was empty. All that remained was the lingering scent of lavender I had detected the previous evening.

As I pondered over this little mystery, a ray of sun glinted through the window casting its light on the rug beneath my feet. It was then I noticed my luggage, my mother’s polished chest included, stacked neatly against the wall. Perhaps it had been a maidservant looking down on me, but I dismissed the idea.

Whoever it was the same person who had left the note while I was at dinner the previous evening, I was sure of it.

Looking at my watch, I realised I was late. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror, smoothed my hair and removed my shawl. As I reached the foot of the staircase, Mrs Dobbs crossed the hall from the direction of the drawing-room. She stopped and smiled her cheery smile when she saw me.

‘Miss Jane, your grandmother is waiting for you on the terrace where luncheon has been served as it is just the two of you. Are you settling in? Is there anything you need? You only have to ask, you know.’

With that, she paused.

‘I’m fine, thank you, Mrs Dobbs. I noticed my luggage has arrived.’

‘Yes, miss. Thomas took it up. I let him in your room as it arrived just after you went out this morning.’

So there had been no maidservant in my room. The whole incident puzzled me and as I made my way through the drawing-room, I had every intention of asking my grandmother who it could have been.

The tall French windows were open and led out on to a delightful terrace. Grandmother was sat at the end of a table laid with cold meat and salad. She smiled when she saw me.

‘My dear child, come and sit by me.’ She patted the cushion on a wicker chair next to her.

‘Tell me what you’ve been doing this morning.’

‘I’m so sorry to be late, but the time went so quickly,’ I apologised.

‘Apology accepted, Jane. Tea, my dear?’ she asked and as she poured from a while china pot she continued. ‘I know how it was when I came here as a bride nearly forty-five years ago, so much to see both inside and out. I spent days exploring, as I am sure you will do.’

‘Why, yes, Grandmother, I am impatient to see the rest of the house and the beautiful cove I glimpsed this morning,’ I replied enthusiastically. ‘Is it all right for me to wander through the house?’ I asked eagerly.

‘Of course it is, child. I want you to think of this house as your home and if you have any questions, Mrs Dobbs will be only too pleased to help. Of course, the rooms in the east wing are no longer lived in. It is where the nursery and the schoolroom are but since your mother and Aunt Laura grew up, no children...’

Her voice trailed off. I looked up at her and saw a woman saddened by her memories. It may not have been the right time to ask about the occupants of the house but nonetheless I had to know.

‘Does anyone else live here with you, Grandmother, other than Aunt Laura and Mr Thornton?’

Did I imagine the hesitation before she replied?

‘Why no, dear, apart from the servants, of course.’ She changed the subject quite quickly and was smiling once more. ‘Now tell me, Jane, do you read?’

‘I most certainly do, Grandmother.’

‘It would please me so much if you would read to me sometimes, dear. My eyesight isn’t what it once was and the library is at your disposal. One other thing, Jane, your Aunt Laura. If she seems unfriendly at times, take no

heed. She has never got over her betrothed, Andrew Trehaine, disappearing before their marriage.'

We spent the next couple of hours talking, mainly of my mother. I learned more of her childhood and I in turn told Grandmother of my childhood and Mother's life in London. Not once was my father mentioned but given time I felt sure he would be.

We left each other about four o'clock so my grandmother could have a rest before dinner. I returned to my room. On entering it I could see instantly that my belongings had been put away. Molly had obviously been busy while I was downstairs. Mother's chest stood against the wall. Now was as good a time as any to open it. I retrieved the key to unlock it from my trinket box and as the lock clicked back I opened the lid slowly, almost reverently. I suspected that the chest held the fabric of my mother's life. I kneeled on the floor, surveying the contents which lay before me, still laid neatly in order despite the moves the chest had been through.

On the top lay a long yellowing envelope. I took it in my hands and stared down at it. The words *Marriage Certificate* were written on the front in my mother's neat, bold handwriting. I sat on the armchair by the window and took the certificate slowly out of the envelope. Unfolding it, I could see my mother's name, Felicity Ann Pendenna, and my Father's, John Merriock. It was the date that jumped up at me.

November, 14, 1852. I worked it out quickly in my head and realised my mother had been four months pregnant with me when they had married.

4

I was still turning over in my mind my parents' wedding date the next morning while Molly helped me into my riding habit. If Grandfather had known about my mother's pregnancy I could see why he would be incensed but to have let the ill-feeling last until the day he died, that, I could not understand.

Looking out of the window, I observed small waves chasing each other to the shore and the sun shining on the water sparkled like precious gems. I thought of my mother and how she would have looked down on a scene such as this all those years ago.

'You are thoughtful today, miss.'

I turned as Molly spoke.

'I've been thinking of my mother.'

I glanced at the chest against the wall. What other secrets did it hold, if any, I wondered.

'She was a good person, miss, and always kind to me.'

How true this statement of Molly's was. No matter that Mother had left this house in some disgrace, she was good and kind. This thought cheered me and I realised how much I was looking forward to my ride. On reaching the stables, I found Aunt Laura already sat on Misty while the stablehand held Thunder's reins. Robert Thornton held those of a delightful light brown mare with a golden patch over one eye.

'Oh, she's beautiful!' I said as I walked quickly towards where she stood.

Robert Thornton handed me a lump of sugar and as I offered it to Amber she took it from my hand, nuzzling her wet nose against me.

'There you are, friends with her already, Miss Merriock,' Robert observed as he swung up on Thunder while the stable-hand helped me mount.

All the while, Aunt Laura watched and never spoke a word so I thanked her for Amber which she acknowledged with a nod of her head. Bad manners was the thought that crossed my mind but with Aunt Laura living in the countryside all her life perhaps drawing-room etiquette had eluded her, although I tended to think her bad manners arose from my intrusion on her and Robert Thornton's time together.

As we rode along the side of the house, Robert Thornton stopped and I slowed down beside him.

‘Have you noticed the small fishing village of Polgent, Miss Merriock?’

As I looked in the distance to where he had indicated, I could indeed see a small harbour with some craft moored.

‘How delightful. Maybe we could go there one day,’ I suggested, but it was Aunt Laura who answered.

‘That is one place I won’t be accompanying you to.’

As she spoke she turned to the front of the house. Robert Thornton and I had no option but to follow her, leaving me quite perplexed.

‘Mr Thornton, may I ask about the small cove below the cliff?’

‘You mean Pendenna Cove?’

‘Oh, it belongs to the house? Is it private then?’

‘Indeed it is, Miss Merriock, and if you have intentions of going down there may I suggest you take good care? The path is steep.’

This I had already realised, but made a mental note of Robert Thornton’s words of warning.

Our horses trotted along at a leisurely pace, with Aunt Laura a short way ahead of us. I had thought to take the opportunity to converse with her this morning but she obviously felt in no mood to do this as I chatted idly to Robert instead all the while thinking how regal he looked astride Thunder. The horse and his master appeared to tower over Amber and myself. Every now and then I patted Amber’s head and whispered soothingly in her ear, wishing to gain her confidence.

We passed several cottages dotted here and there amongst the hedgerows. One in particular caught my eye. It had an old, thatched roof with white-washed walls, and a short path with fading flowers either side led to the black oak door. Without consciously realising it I had reined Amber to a halt.

‘I don’t know if I should be the one to tell you this,’ Robert Thornton’s voice came drifting to me.

‘Tell me what?’

‘Your namesake lives there.’

I turned back to look at the cottage again and as I looked, the door opened and an elderly woman with white wispy hair bent and placed a bucket by the door. As she stood up she smoothed her hands across the front of her white apron. She gave us only a cursory glance before going back inside.

‘My namesake?’ I asked somewhat stupidly.

‘Yes,’ Robert Thornton said, looking down at me. ‘That was old Granny Merriock.’

My mind was working overtime as he led me onward. She had to be a relative, family of my father. I had every intention of returning to the cottage and knocking on the door, maybe with Molly, for in view of Robert’s words I was sure it was some sort of secret. I had no desire to mention it to my grandmother before I had spoken to this Granny Merriock myself.

As we reached our destination, I caught a glimpse of the church with its squat tower reaching above the trees in the distance. When I took notice of where we were I had a sudden intake of breath. Before me in the field was a circle of weathered stones, each some five foot high. Robert Thornton had dismounted, but Aunt Laura had decided to stay on her horse. She had obviously been here many times before.

‘Miss Merriock, may I help you down?’

Before I could answer, his strong hands had encircled my waist as he swung me to the ground. His hands lingered for a matter of seconds and I felt the colour rise to my cheeks. Why did this man have such an effect on me? Aware of his gaze and the knowledge he had noticed my confusion, I turned my face away from Aunt Laura who was watching us intently with, I felt, veiled emotion. As Robert let me go I realised Aunt Laura’s affections lay in his direction and began to wonder if mine did also.

I moved around the stone circle, counting as I went. There were thirteen stones, each the same height, a few inches shorter than myself but not as tall as Robert. There was something earthy and evil about them and I felt half-afraid and half-drawn to their overbearing dominance. I had certainly never seen anything like it before, nor had I felt the presence of something so evil. It was almost tangible. I moved away, wanting to get back to Amber and home to Pendenna. Robert caught my arm gently.

‘You are surely not afraid, Miss Merriock?’

‘No,’ I lied. ‘What is the legend you mentioned?’

‘On the Sabbath, the damsels were dancing although forbidden, so they were turned to stone.’

‘And do you believe this, Mr Thornton?’

‘We all believe what we want to believe, my dear, but do not be afraid of anything, especially while I am near.’

I thought of his words as we rode back to Pendenna and recalled with some pleasure him calling me dear and I no longer felt afraid.

Mrs Dobbs met me in the hall with a silver salver which she held out to me. I picked up the small cream-coloured card. On reading it, I realised it was a calling card from a Jason Trehaine.

Thanking Mrs Dobbs and clutching the card in my hand I quickly made my way to my room. I knew from experience living at Amy's that it was usually some time before a stranger in the district received a calling card. To have received one so soon meant there was a good reason. I suspected that Jason Trehaine was in some way related to Aunt Laura's betrothed. It was too much of a coincidence for him not to be, but even so what could he possibly want with me?

Looking at the card again on reaching my room, I realised Jason Trehaine had indeed invited me to call at Mannamead, his house in Polgent, at three o'clock on Tuesday afternoon. I recalled that Polgent was the small fishing village Robert Thornton had pointed out to me that morning and where Aunt Laura had said she would not go. I partly understood the reason now. A visit to Polgent would have brought back painful memories of Andrew Trehaine.

So I would take Molly with me and realised I would need some conveyance. I would have to seek out Robert and ask if he could arrange it for me. I was not altogether sure if Grandmother knew of Jason Trehaine's visit. Mrs Dobbs had told me my grandmother was indisposed and would see me at dinner. Could it be Jason Trehaine's visit had upset her?

While eating luncheon alone on the terrace I set to wondering where Aunt Laura and Robert ate their lunch and thought that perhaps they ate together. This conclusion on my part did nothing to ease my already overactive mind. Many questions were whirling around in my head. Who was the face at my window and who had left the message on the scrap of paper in my room? Why was Aunt Laura so hostile towards me when she knew nothing about me? And now why would Jason Trehaine, a man I didn't know and who didn't know me, invite me to his home?

As I had been left to my own devices that afternoon, I decided that it being such a glorious afternoon, I would explore Pendenna Cove. I calculated that the tide would have gone out by now so it was as good a time as any and I wanted to be alone with my thoughts. The hall was empty as I passed through and let myself out. I took a quick look back before

stepping out down the steps and into the sunlight. I had the strangest feeling that I had escaped, but from what? Certainly not my grandmother who had made me so welcome and it wasn't just Aunt Laura.

As I made my way along the cliff path and looked back at Pendenna Reach, I realised that the house itself was oppressive, maybe because of its age or had I become fanciful since entering its doors? I had not noticed the tall, soot-blackened chimneys before which reached upward towards the blue sky. I tried to shake off my morbid thoughts and concluded that I had not been the same since visiting the Dancing Damsels and vowed I would not go there again.

I had reached the top of the path which led to the cove below. It was indeed steep but to my relief a small handrail had at some time been constructed. Picking up my skirts, and holding on to the railing, I started the walk downward. I was overjoyed to see wild flowers growing in abundance on the cliff.

My mood had lightened and I suddenly had a spring in my step as I neared the cove below. Stepping on to the shingle beach, I stood for a moment and breathed in the salty sea air, walking precariously as the shingle was uneven in places. I headed for the sand the receding tide had uncovered, eventually sitting on a rock. I was alone with only the seagulls for company. Daringly, I removed my boots and stockings, enjoying the feel of the cold, damp sand beneath my feet. The warm sea breeze caressed my face and gently lifted tendrils of my hair. I felt more relaxed than I had since leaving London. Looking to my right I could see craft in the harbour, the glint of the sun catching the masts.

So engrossed was I with my surroundings and thoughts it wasn't until the last minute that I heard the crunch of shingle. As I whirled around, I saw, striding towards me, was Robert, his haired ruffled by the breeze. He was almost beside me and in my confusion I glanced down at my bare feet and gathered my boots and stockings in one hand.

'Janie.'

No sweeter word could have escaped his lips and tears pricked my eyes as the memory of my father uttering the same word sprang instantly to mind. I looked at Robert and, sensing my distress, his hands gently touched the top of my arms.

'I've upset you,' he whispered. 'For what reason I cannot imagine. Did I startle you?'

‘No, it’s just that you brought to mind the memory of my father who always called me Janie.’

The desire was so strong to touch his cheek I had to turn away.

‘Apologies, Janie. I would not intentionally cause you distress. I don’t know what makes me call you such. All I know is it seems the most natural thing to do.’

‘There is no need for apologies, sir. It was just a sweet reminder.’

I turned back to face him, my hands still clutching my boots and stockings. As I glanced down so did he and we both laughed. The poignant moment was gone.

‘You caught me unawares, sir, most unladylike.’

‘No, it is good that you sense the beauty of nature. I caught sight of you and wished to warn you that the mist will roll in suddenly.’

Even as Robert spoke, I could see a haze starting to form on the horizon.

‘And, Janie, if I may call you by your name, please address me as Robert. Let us be formal no longer.’

Sitting back on the rock, I proceeded, as discreetly as I could, to put my stockings back on. I noted that Robert averted his eyes until my stockings and boots were in place once more. I stood up, adjusting my skirts, at the same time looking at Robert’s broad back and thinking all the while how depend-able he seemed. Gently I touched his arm and he turned to face me.

‘I shall call you Robert from this moment.’

His answer was to smile.

‘And as you say, we should get back to Pendenna before the mist overtakes us. I remember on my arrival mist shrouded the house.’

We headed back across the shingle and to me it seemed the most natural thing to do, walking alongside this man who was barely a stranger. My heart leaped at his nearness and I prayed silently that he felt the same.

5

I awoke next morning after a restless night dreaming that I walked down the aisle with a faceless bridegroom by my side. These fanciful thoughts must stop, I chided myself, and the thought of the day brought me back to reality. It was today I was to meet Jason Trehaine.

After dressing, I intended to look through Mamma's chest, but I stood looking out of the window for some time. Grey clouds scudded across the sky where there had been none the previous day. The sea looked a murky colour and not at all as inviting as the day before. For some reason, since yesterday, I had taken some aversion to the house and wondered idly what a winter spent here would be like.

Grandmother had already said how nice it would be to have me here at Christmas time and I could not disappoint her but at this moment Amy's comfortable drawing-room and cheery nature seemed far more inviting, but now there was Robert. The thought of being far from him filled me with such sadness. My heart was here and I knew this was where I should stay.

Lifting the lid of Mamma's chest, I immediately set eyes on her marriage certificate but today I dismissed this intending to find out the truth at some later time. I lifted out four dark red books embossed with gold filigree and on each bottom right hand corner were the initials F.A.P. printed in gold. I opened the cover of one, and printed on the fly-leaf in my mother's hand was written, *The Diary of Felicity Anne Pendenna, July 1850*.

Skimming quickly through the pages I could see it was a daily account of Mamma's life here at Pendenna, and one name jumped out at me from the page — Jason Trehaine. I read the paragraph.

August 15, *1850*.

Today Laura and I walked to the church with Andrew and Jason Trehaine. *Laura has eyes for Andrew who is tall and dark*, *Jason on the other hand is fair and not a lot taller than myself*. *We hope to walk with them again on Sunday afternoon*.

My mouth formed a smile as I thought of my mother at the age of sixteen. It is always hard to imagine one's parents at that age. I looked forward to reading these diaries on a dreary day but I had spied something else in the chest. A small blue velvet box was tucked away in the corner where it had lain beneath the diaries. I picked it up and instinctively knew that whatever

this box held was going to have a marked effect on my life, or so I thought. On opening it, I could see it contained a small brooch Mamma had worn for as long as I could remember. It was so familiar to me but as it lay in the palm of my hand it was as if I had never seen it before.

A heart-shaped pale violet amethyst was set in gold which surrounded the stone and was fashioned in small hearts. It looked very dainty but was in fact quite heavy. I turned the brooch over and could see some letters inscribed on the gold backing. Peering closely at it in the light from the window I made out the words, *I adore you forever*.

I stood for some moments thinking of the words and how romantic they were and yet I had never thought of my father as a romantic. How wrong one can be! Deciding to wear the brooch that afternoon, I placed it back in its velvet box on my dressing table. It would go well with my lilac-coloured dress which I intended to wear to make as good an impression on Jason Trehaine as I could. Jack, the head stablehand, was to convey Molly and myself to Polgent. I guess Molly was pleased about this and was sure she had a soft spot for him as she had mentioned him on a couple of occasions.

Placing a heavy shawl around my shoulders, I made my way outside. On passing through the hall I collided with Robert as he walked from the library.

'Robert, I'm so sorry. I was daydreaming as usual.'

'My dear young lady, it is I who should be apologising. I was in far too much of a hurry. Forgive me.'

He looked at me, smiling, and I was jelly under his gaze.

'Where are you off to, Janie? It is today you are visiting Mannamead, of course.'

It was a statement rather than a question.

'Why, yes,' I stammered, 'though why Mr Trehaine would request my company, I do not know.'

'He's a good man, Janie. I know him well. I'm sure that he is anxious to meet Mrs Pendenna's granddaughter after all this time. He and Andrew were good friends of your mother's.'

'So Andrew is Aunt Laura's betrothed, Mr Trehaine's brother?'

'Indeed he is, or was. We will talk some other time of the Trehaines but for now would you please excuse me, Janie? I shall be late for an appointment.'

So saying, he cupped my face gently in his hands and kissed me on the forehead. Almost before I had time to realise what had happened Robert was gone.

As I made my way to the rear of the house with the intention of exploring the small, wooded area behind the stables, I pondered over the kiss that Robert had placed on my forehead, but my sensible side told me to dismiss it. However, my heart sang with the thought that Robert held some affection for me.

On the edge of the wood, I hesitated. Even in the light of day, it appeared dark and forbidding. The large oak trees were set quite far apart but the boughs of them overlapped one another, shutting out the sky above. Boldly I stepped on to the moss-covered ground, twigs snapping gently beneath me here and there. The farther in I went, the darker it seemed, then I stopped in my tracks for I fancied I could hear voices.

Straining my ears, my heart pounding in the stillness, I realised it wasn't a fancy. Someone was indeed speaking, not far from me. I moved as quietly as I could behind a large tree trunk in the direction of the sound, picking my skirts up so they would not disturb anything. Peering around the gnarled tree trunk I clamped my hand to my mouth so as not to let my gasp of surprise escape my lips.

Robert and Aunt Laura were stood together in a small clearing, his hands holding her arms as he had held mine and they were gazing at each other. Their words I could not hear, just the murmur of their voices as they spoke softly to one another. Tears sprang to my eyes and, picking up my skirts, I ran back out of the wood.

As I reached the edge of the wood and ran across the gravel, I heard Robert's voice calling my name. I ran on, my breath coming in short gasps as I raced through the house, past a bewildered Mrs Dobbs. On reaching my room, I shut the door and stood with my back to it, sobs escaping me as I thought what a fool I was to even think that such a man as Robert Thornton could fall in love with me.

An hour later, I had composed myself and had decided resolutely to treat Mr Thornton with the contempt he deserved. There was a sudden knock at the door and my grandmother entered, leaning heavily on a silver stick. My heart sank as she surveyed me for some moments before she spoke softly to me.

‘What is wrong, Jane? Mrs Dobbs tells me you rushed past her not an hour since as if you had the devil at your heels.’

I turned away from her gaze, not wishing to be rude but also not wishing to tell her the truth.

‘It was a large bumble-bee, Grandmother.’

As I faced her, the small lie just escaped my lips.

‘And would you cry over a mere bumble-bee, Jane? I think not, for you have been crying, and don’t deny it. I may be getting old but I can still see when a young woman has been reduced to tears.’

I faced her stubbornly, not wishing to change my story.

‘Please sit down, Grandmother,’ I said and I led her to the armchair by the fireplace. Tumble-bees do indeed fill me with dread and I was afraid of being stung as I was when a child. My tears were tears of relief that I had not been.’

Grandmother continued to look me up and down. Her eyes were keen and I knew she was taking in my dishevelled appearance and red eyes.

‘We will speak no more of it, but needless to say I do not believe you. I had hoped you could confide in me as your mother used to but I see you do not wish to speak the truth. However, I do believe a person of the male variety is involved and that you have been sorely disillusioned. As there is only one man it could be, I can guess, but not why. Perhaps sometime in the near future you will tell me, for now I suggest you send for Molly, dress for your outing and join me for lunch before you go.’

She had a very authoritative voice and I felt very meek on the receiving end of it as I pulled the bell. I assisted Grandmother to her feet and walked with her to the door. Before she left she turned and said to me, ‘Please convey my kind regards to Mr Trehaine.’

Two hours later, attired in my lilac-coloured day dress which was adorned with cream lace on the v-neck bodice and long sleeves, my matching bonnet and cream lace gloves and my mother’s amethyst brooch firmly in place, I stepped into the open carriage with a composure I did not entirely feel. Molly tucked a travelling blanket across my lap and joined Jack up front for our short journey to Polgent. I really was apprehensive, as on other occasions in London I had always been accompanied by Amy.

The scenery looked completely different on such a grey day compared to when Aunt Laura, Robert and I had ridden on horseback to see the Dancing

Damsels, but the grey sky matched my sombre mood. I knew Molly had been aware that something was amiss but as always she kept silent.

As we passed Granny Merriock's pretty cottage, I resolved to visit her on the morrow. It wasn't far to walk and I prayed silently that the weather would be kind. My spirits had lifted suddenly and I pushed Robert to the back of my mind and set to wondering about Jason Trehaine. I was curious to know what Mannamead was like and wondering what sort of man Mr Trehaine would be.

It wasn't long before we were turning into a short, hedge-lined drive. The house was enchanting, Georgian in style and white walled, with an aura of wealth. The tall windows were grey today but I could imagine how, with the sun shining on them, they would sparkle.

Jack helped me down from the carriage and while he and Molly rode around to the servants' quarters, no doubt for a cup of tea and cake, I smoothed my skirts, pulled the shawl farther around my shoulders and walked up the many steps to the front door and pulled the bell. It was several seconds before an elderly manservant opened the door to greet me, revealing a beautiful hallway with a green and white mosaic floor. Relieving me of my bonnet, shawl and gloves, Simms, as he told me he was called, went off in the direction of one of the many double doors, leaving me to take in my surroundings.

The hall was light and spacious and my eyes were drawn to the ornate ceiling above me. There were two alcoves either side of the tall, marble fireplace, in each standing a partly-clothed stone statuette. Intricate pillars embraced each double door and a stone balcony ran around each side of the hall, reached by an intricate staircase. I could see the upper door quite clearly. Compared to the clean shabbiness of Pendenna Reach, this was opulent and yet it appeared hardly lived in. Plush rugs in bright colours of red, gold and green were placed outside each door and in front of the fireplace there were two high-backed chairs with red and gold braid.

A portrait under a light caught my eye. It was of a very handsome young woman with dark, curling hair and bright blue eyes. Although handsome, she looked delicate. Her face looked down on me and no matter where I stood, the melancholy eyes followed me. She wore a white organza dress with a high bodice and short, puffed sleeves. The white rose in her hair accentuated the black of it. Curious to know who she was I moved nearer to look at the writing on the small plaque beneath.

‘It is my wife, Charlotte,’ a man’s gentle voice cut through my thoughts. ‘She died of consumption two years after we married.’

How long he had been there I could only guess, but turning to look at the owner of the voice I could see he was a man of about forty-five years with light hair greying at the temple. He was taller than I and slender of build but there was something familiar about him and I wondered idly if we had met before. He came towards me and held both hands out which I took in my own, instantly liking this man.

‘Jane Merriock, welcome to Mannamead. I am so delighted to meet you. I knew your mother well when she was a young woman. I felt such sadness when I knew of her passing.’

Momentarily, the smile vanished from his face.

‘Mr Trehaine, I am pleased to be here and to make acquaintance with one of my mother’s friends. Although she never spoke of you, I have heard of your friendship.’

His smile returned and he led me into the drawing-room. It was as grand as the hall and I looked about me in awe. The ornate fireplace dominated the room with a carved surround. A large, brass fender surrounded it with a cheery fire burning in the grate.

‘Apologies for my rudeness in surveying the room, Mr Trehaine, but you have a beautiful home.’

‘Even more beautiful if I had someone to share it with, but after... I never loved again.’

He paused, then smiled.

‘Forgive me. Please be seated and I will ring for tea.’

I sat on a plush settee covered in green damask, and curtains to match hung at the tall windows. I realised how silly I had been to be apprehensive about visiting Mr Trehaine but I now sensed a similar nervousness in him and deduced from what he had said that he wasn’t used to female company. He rang a bell at the side of the fireplace and then seated himself opposite me.

‘You’re as lovely as Felicity, if you don’t mind my saying so.’

His eyes regarded me with a warmth I could almost feel.

‘Thank you, I am indeed like my mother and hope that my personality matches hers also, for she was gentle and kind.’

I noticed the sombre expression had returned to his face, so to change the subject I glanced to the other side of the room. It was then I noticed, with

startled surprise, several of my father's landscape paintings on the wall and I got to my feet and walked over to them, Mr Trehaine following me.

'These are my father's work,' I said softly, turning to him for some explanation.

'Indeed they are, Miss Merriock,' he replied and moved to the window. 'John was a good friend of mine and I bought them from him over a period of time, a long while ago.'

Accepting this without any question I carried on looking at the pictures before me. A tear fell down my cheek as I saw the embankment and the house where I spent so many happy years, painted by my father's hand. At this moment the door opened and Simms entered with a young maid who deposited a large tray on the table before the fire. This interruption pleased me as I didn't want Mr Trehaine to see me upset. We both took our seats again. I poured tea from a silver pot into delicate rose-coloured cups and we drank and ate small sandwiches while generally talking of Polgent and Pendenna and my childhood in London which we kept coming back to at Mr Trehaine's direction of conversation.

'And are you happy at Pendenna, Miss Merriock?'

The question was unexpected and I hesitated. Should I tell this stranger, who didn't seem like a stranger, my true feelings? I felt I should.

'Not completely is the true answer. My grandmother has welcomed me admirably but Aunt Laura is very cool and indeed almost rude. I find the house oppressive. Your home is more favourable.'

There, I had said it, actually spoken the words as to how I had felt since entering Pendenna Reach. Jason Trehaine had listened without interruption. He placed his cup on its saucer, looking at me thoughtfully.

'Aunt Laura is a very unhappy woman and has been since my brother, Andrew, disappeared a week before they were due to marry. This doesn't excuse her manner towards you but may contribute towards it. The house itself is, as you say, oppressive, due to its dark rooms and almost granite-like exterior so I do understand how you feel.'

'And there is a smell of lavender often in my room, which mystifies me.'

'This I cannot comment on, but appraising you, I am certain you are a sensible young woman and not prone to flights of fancy, so the fact that you do smell lavender I do not dispute. There is probably a simple explanation.'

I really enjoyed my afternoon at Mannamead and felt quite sad when I left. Just before I seated myself in the carriage, Mr Trehaine took my arm

and spoke softly to me.

‘You will be welcome to stay here at Mannamead any time you may choose, Miss Merriock. Please don’t forget that.’

I left with these words ringing in my ears and thought with some pleasure how I would look forward to our next meeting.

6

Molly helped me dress for dinner that evening. I picked the prettiest dress from my wardrobe hoping to impress Robert Thornton. It was made of silk and the turquoise colour shimmered in the evening light as Molly helped me into it. I decided not to adorn myself with jewellery of any type but leave the creamy whiteness of my throat bare.

Adeptly, Molly fashioned my hair up in a soft style and covered it with a delicate lace snood which matched the colour of my dress. I looked at my full-length image in the mirror and moved sideways so I could admire the silk train. I was more than pleased with my appearance.

'You look beautiful, miss,' Molly enthused. 'The colour suits you perfectly.'

'Thank you, Molly. Don't ask me why but I wish to look my best this evening. Now run along for your meeting with Jack.'

We both grinned at one another for Molly had confided in me of her proposed meeting with Jack that evening. How I wished I could confide in Molly, but to tell the secret of one's heart to a servant, even one as dear as mine, just wasn't done. Making my way downstairs, I glanced at the grandfather clock in the hall and realised with some misgiving that I was a trifle late. Standing outside the drawing-room door, my hand on the doorknob, I took a deep breath before I entered. As I opened the door and stepped into the room I could see they were all assembled, plus a young man who was a stranger to me. They all looked up at me as I stood there and Robert was the one to break the awkward moment.

'I will get you a drink, Miss Merriock,' he said going to the drink trolley, and I was grateful to him even though I was still smarting at his betrayal that very morning.

Grandmother, dressed entirely in black from head to foot, beckoned me to sit by her on the settle by the fire, a seat I had on previous occasions found most uncomfortable. I seated myself and took a small glass of sherry from Robert with a demure thank you, hardly able to look him in the eye for fear of him reading my thoughts.

Aunt Laura was dressed in a yellow gown which did everything to enhance her dark colouring. Even as I looked, she caught hold of Robert's arm and I was angry with myself at the pang of jealousy which shot through

me. I realised this gesture was deliberate on her part as she looked straight at me with animosity, a secret little smile hovering on her lips.

The newcomer had been in earnest conversation with Robert until he had been interrupted by my aunt. He was not as tall as Robert but he was dark and prepossessing. Grandmother's voice cut into my reverie.

'How did your meeting with Mr Trehaine fair today, Jane?'

'Why, very well, thank you. Mr Trehaine is a charming, friendly man. I like him very much and Mannamead is quite lovely,' I enthused, smiling at my grandmother.

'I'm pleased you liked him, Jane, for he was a good friend of your mother's. How I wish things could've been different.'

Her words trailed off and a faraway look had replaced the inquisitive one.

'In what way?' I asked, for it seemed my grandmother had made some sort of implication concerning my mother and Jason Trehaine.

'No matter, Jane! It is an old woman's rambling,' she said and abruptly changed the subject. 'Robert please introduce my granddaughter to our guest.'

Robert Thornton headed towards us with the stranger at his side. I stood to be introduced. Maddeningly the colour rising in my cheeks at Robert's nearness.

'Miss Jane Merriock, this is Alan Lester, my good friend who is a historian at Cambridge.'

I proffered my hand which Mr Lester took gently in his own.

'It is a pleasure, Miss Merriock. Robert has told me much about you.'

Had he indeed, I smarted, and gave Robert a look of dismay which was returned by a mocking smile to which I was becoming most accustomed. Indignation flowed through me at the casual way he looked at me as if nothing had happened earlier that day. At this point, we were interrupted by Mrs Dobbs to say that dinner was ready to be served for which I was thankful.

The table was laid as I had not seen it before, silver knives, spoons and forks of the best quality, white serviettes in silver holders and goblets rimmed with gold. At the centre of the table was a beautiful flower arrangement of yellow roses in a silver bowl. I guessed this was in honour of our guest, Alan Lester. I was thankful I had taken such trouble earlier when I dressed for dinner. Grandmother took her seat at the head of the table and startled us all when she spoke.

‘Please be seated by Robert this evening, Jane.’

As she sat down, Robert held the elaborate dining chair for her. I saw Aunt Laura glance in my direction, a scowl on her face as she seated herself by Mr Lester. So it was, I sat close to Robert at the dinner table with our guest opposite me, much to Aunt Laura’s distaste. While eating our first course, I addressed Alan Lester to break the uncomfortable silence.

‘You are quite far from home, Mr Lester. Are you on holiday or is it some other reason which brings you to Cornwall?’

I smiled at him and realised all at the table were waiting for his answer.

‘To tell you the truth, Miss Merriock, I am here to study the stone circles in this county,’ he said quietly as if only to me, but it is indeed like being on holiday. I understand from Robert that you visited the Dancing Damsels.’

‘Why, yes, only last week.’

‘And what was your opinion of this piece of history?’

‘I found it fascinating, but also decidedly evil.’

‘I had no idea you felt this way, Miss Merriock,’ Robert’s voice drifted across to me. ‘Did you, Laura?’

‘I agree with Jane.’

My aunt, who rarely spoke in my presence, surprised me at her words.

‘It is no matter to me whether I see them again or not for the whole place fills me with dread.’

‘My dear ladies, you have nothing to fear. Is it mere superstition which makes you think thus?’

Alan Lester sat back in his chair. His voice had become stronger and I realised he thought passionately about this subject.

‘It is not only superstition, Mr Lester, but an enormous, tangible feeling of menace.’

Aunt Laura obviously felt very strongly about this.

‘You have no need to fear folklore. Believe me when I say this for the stone circles are in fact attributed to the Druids and are certainly not maidens turned to stone. I assure you that history is fascinating and not to be feared. We have history all around us. Why...’

He paused, his hand indicating our surroundings.

‘This house is a prime example. I wouldn’t doubt there is a priest’s hole somewhere in this building. Would you fear that also?’

I glanced across at Aunt Laura and saw her face had paled significantly and her hand was clenching the serviette she held, her knuckles turning

white.

‘There is much talk of it,’ my grandmother now joined the conversation, ‘but one has never been found.’

She turned to Laura.

‘You were fascinated by this when a young girl, weren’t you, Laura?’

‘Yes, Mother. Both Felicity and I searched the house from top to bottom,’ she said, her voice trembling as she spoke, ‘but we found nothing. So, Mr Lester, this assumption is unfounded.’

‘Yet I would have bet my life on it, but I bow to your knowledge of the house, Miss Pendenna.’

Mr Lester bowed his head briefly in my aunt’s direction.

‘We will change the subject now,’ my grandmother interposed. ‘Let us talk of lighter things, like my charming granddaughter, Jane, who has brought such light into my life.’

Grandmother raised her glass of wine as she spoke.

‘To Jane. Long may she stay at Pendenna Reach and come to love it as all Pendennas before her.’

I felt weak with embarrassment as I watched them all raise their glasses, Aunt Laura reluctantly, Alan Lester with a guest’s enthusiasm and Robert, well, he looked toward me glass in hand, and said quietly, ‘To Jane.’

After a delightful evening of witty conversation with Mr Lester, we stood in the hallway to bid him good-night.

On reaching me he whispered, ‘Hold fast when you have it.’

I looked at the others but thankfully no-one had heard him. As I looked into his dark sparkling eyes I realised the words had indeed been meant for my ears alone. What had Robert been telling this man? I felt my cheeks go hot once more as I saw Robert looking at me, that secret smile on his lips once again.

No sooner had I climbed into bed and nestled into the feather mattress than a thunderstorm started to rumble in the distance. It wasn’t long before it had moved nearer. I got out of bed and, drawing back the curtains, stood silhouetted as I watched the lightning dance across the water. The thunder appeared to shake the foundations of the house as each clap got louder and even nearer.

The storm made me restless and I knew there would be no chance of sleep so, putting on my robe, I made my way to the library with the intention of selecting a novel. As I stepped into the corridor, the house seemed even

more eerie at night. Candles still flickered in the sconces and the dim light cast my shadows across the walls as I moved slowly towards the staircase. Before descending, I glanced almost furtively around me. The clock startled me as it chimed the hour of three. The sound of it appeared louder at night and I marvelled that I could not hear it in my room, the walls being so thick.

On opening the library door, I was even more startled. Robert was sitting in an armchair, a book open on his lap. He was just as surprised to see me but quickly gained his composure.

'Are you frightened of the storm, Jane?'

As he spoke, I was very aware of my attire. I pulled the open robe around me and bunched my loose hair over my shoulders.

'No, sir, I am not afraid but restless and thought to find a book to read.'

'Come and sit by me and let us engage in some conversation while the storm rides itself out. I feel like some companionship and yours would be most welcome.'

As he spoke, Robert indicated the empty armchair opposite him. As I hesitated in the doorway, unsure as to whether to go backward or forward, Robert got to his feet and walked towards me, his hands outstretched. In that moment my resolve to be aloof to him dissolved and, trembling, placed a hand in his and let him lead me to the armchair. As I sat down, Robert placed a finger very gently on my bottom lip, bending to me, his eyes looking into mine.

'Has anyone ever told you, Janie, that you have the prettiest mouth?' he whispered.

I was lost for words and was sure his intention was to kiss me but he moved to the fireplace to replenish the fire.

After stirring the pine logs he leaned his hands toward the blazing warmth while I watched the flames that leaped in unison towards the chimney, lighting the room with a golden glow. The only other light was from a lamp on a small table.

'There are plenty of books,' Robert said as he moved away from the fire his arm indicating the book-lined walls, 'but it would be difficult in this light to choose. Maybe you could peruse the shelves later, in the light of day.'

'Indeed,' I agreed.

I made to get up off the chair but Robert stopped me gently with one hand and sat leaning forward in his chair, his hands clasped casually in front of

him. The light from the fire outlined his good looks and I could see the fire reflected in his eyes. I suddenly realised I was staring at him and averted my gaze.

'Don't look away, Janie. I sensed at dinner you were displeased with me.'

It was a question and brought to mind his association with Aunt Laura and my anger returned for I would not and could not share him with another woman. What had happened to me? Never before had I responded to a man with such feelings.

'I would very much like to know what you said about me to your friend Alan Lester.'

'Only the truth.'

'Which is?'

'That you are a beautiful, young woman and that I hold you in high regard, but there is something else bothering your pretty little head and I can guess what.'

'If you know, why ask? It should be I asking the questions.'

'A woman's body, a child's mind,' he whispered.

His words cut deeply. I knew it was true. I was behaving like a sixteen-year-old and it wasn't the impression I meant to convey to this man.

'I apologise for behaving as such,' I said meekly, 'but soon after dropping a kiss on my brow, I see you in intimate conversation with Aunt Laura.'

I could've eaten my words for they conveyed the truth, that I was indeed jealous. I saw the startled smile on Robert's lips and then it vanished.

'Don't press me on this, Jane. Believe me when I say the meeting with your aunt was purely innocent.'

He looked more serious than I had seen him before and I half believed him.

'Let us talk no more of it.'

I knew for the moment at least, the subject of Aunt Laura was closed.

'Tell me, Jane, have you any aspirations?'

The subject was indeed changed. Should I tell him my one aspiration was for him to fall in love with me? But, no, I thought of my days prior to coming to Pendenna Reach.

'I don't know that it is an aspiration, more a desire to travel, to see places I have only read about. The Leaning Tower of Pisa at dawn, following the footsteps of the Egyptians, walking through the sand on a foreign shore or seeing the moon glimmer on the Serpentine. It is but a dream.'

I looked at Robert who was watching me attentively.

'How did I know you would be different from most young ladies of your position? The majority would aspire to find a husband and raise a family.'

He watched my face as he spoke. How I wished to kiss his strong mouth.

'Dreams can come true, Janie. Would you wish to share this world adventure with someone?'

The question came quite unexpectedly and I wished with all my heart to answer it adequately. I cast my eyes on the dying embers in the grate and then looked back at Robert.

'Only with someone who truly loved me, and loved me enough to share my dreams.'

There was a pause for what seemed like a lifetime yet it was only seconds.

Robert bent forward and cupped my face in his hands and gently brushed my lips with his. I wished that moment could have lasted for an eternity but it was gone and I felt a trembling through my whole body and was afraid when I got up that my legs would not hold me. The clock in the hall struck the hour of five, each chime seeming to move us further from that precious moment.

'I must go,' I said and realised my voice did not sound the same.

Nothing would be the same again.

'Yes,' Robert's voice came to me as if in a mist. 'The maid will be in soon to lay the fire.'

So saying, he rose to his feet and helped me to mine. As I walked to the door, I heard him call my name softly.

I turned to look at him, my hand on the doorknob.

'Trust me,' he said.

As I opened the door, I knew that a girl had entered two hours before and a woman was leaving, a woman very much in love.

7

I made my way back to my room along the now dark corridor as if in a daze. As I shut my bedroom door behind me, I leaned back on it, savouring again the moment Robert's lips had briefly touched my own. What joy filled my whole being at the memory then I recalled his words, trust me, and I really believed that I did with all my heart.

It was still dark and, suddenly feeling cold, I lit the lamp on the small table by my chair and bent down to light the fire laid ready in the hearth. As I sat watching the paper alight and listening to the dry crackling as the flame caught the wood, I thought of my mother and how she must have come back to this very room with a heart full of love and longing for my father. The thought of her brought to mind her diaries. This was as good a time as any to read some more.

Swiftly I retrieved the second diary from the chest for I was anxious to know at which moment she had fallen in love. As I skimmed through the pages, the entries were of mundane things, such as visits to a dressmaker, church outings and my mother's and Aunt Laura's walks with Andrew and Jason. From what I read, I gathered Mamma and her sister were very close. Then I sat upright in my chair as I read an entry near the end of the diary.

October, *12*, *1851*.

Today Laura and I discovered the priest's hole quite by chance whilst dusting the doll's house. *It was amazing*, *but Laura has* sworn *me to secrecy*, *why I can't imagine*. *I am longing to tell Mamma but will not for I do not want to be the recipient of Laura's bad temper*. *I just hope Miss Blackstone does not find out as she has eyes which are sharp and a tongue to match*.

The words jumped up at me and I thought with some dismay of Aunt Laura lying and denying any knowledge of the priest's hole to Alan Lester only last evening. The question was, should I keep it a secret also or should I tell Grandmother? I would mull it over in my mind and decide what to do. There was no more mention of the priest's hole so quickly I replaced the diary in the chest and reached for the third one with some excitement. As I leafed through the pages I realised this was more revealing and was what I was seeking.

March 1, *1852*, I read.

Oh, what a day. My heart is singing for he kissed me. My first kiss! I swear I am in love and can hardly wait to see him again, to talk and laugh with him and maybe feel his arms around me.

April 5, 1852.

Laura is jealous that I am in love and that I don't spend much time with her, but she and Andrew appear to be getting along well. I earnestly hope she will find the happiness I feel for I am deliriously happy. My every waking moment and my dreams are filled with thoughts of him.

June 4, 1852.

If this is love, what joy. I am suffused with such fulfilment I pray that it will last forever.

June 28, 1852.

Laura told me she and Andrew were walking out together. She mentioned the priest's hole today and hoped I hadn't told anyone. In all honesty, I had forgotten about it. Laura also said I seemed different, not at all the Felicity she knew.

July 18, 1852.

Two things of importance happened today. Laura announced she is to marry Andrew Trehaine in November. She doesn't act like a woman in love. Today I realised that I was with child! What are we to do? My beloved will know.

October 20, 1852.

Papa refuses to let me marry and says I have brought nothing but shame on the Pendenna name. I have confided in Mama. She understands but cannot go against Papa. What he says is final. Tonight I shall cry myself to sleep, if sleep will come, for my mind is in turmoil. Laura has no sympathy for the position I find myself in. It is as if she hates me.

This was the last entry in the diary and to my surprise there was only one entry in the fourth diary.

November 7, 1852.

Today we are to leave for France. Granny Merriock came to the house today and told me not to have anything more to do with her grandson but John is noble. My heart is filled with sadness for I will be leaving all that is familiar to me and what is worse, I cannot say goodbye to dearest Mama but I have to be strong for the child I carry. All I can wish for is that Papa will change his mind when the child is born. Farewell.

Tears sprang to my eyes as I imagined my mother's pain and at that moment I hated the Grandfather I had never known and Granny Merriock, being no more understanding it appeared. What my parents must have gone through for me. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I replenished the fire, leaned back in my chair and drifted into a troubled sleep.

Molly startled me into wakefulness gently shaking my shoulder.

'Why, miss, what is wrong? Are you ill? And the curtains all drawn back, and it's hot in here.'

Molly's anxious face looked down at me and I remembered, as if in a dream, the night's events and I felt emotions both happy and sad.

It's all right, Molly. It was the storm that kept me awake,' I assured her as I bent down to pick up Mama's diary which had slipped to the floor.

As I got up to place it in the chest, I could see that the rain was pouring down which would prevent me from my much-desired visit to Granny Merriock, but no matter. I had the desire to get ever closer to my mother and would visit the schoolroom instead. Suddenly I remembered Molly's meeting the previous evening with Jack. So bound up was I in my own thoughts I had forgotten Molly and I realised she did seem especially happy this morning. On asking her how she faired, Molly replied with a sparkle in her eye.

'It was really good, miss. Jack is a real gentleman, and, miss...'

'Yes, Molly, go on.'

'He kissed me.'

Her voice trembled as she spoke and it brought to mind the early hours of the morning in the library and although she would never know it, I knew exactly how she felt and thought how strange it was that we should have gone through the same experience on the same night.

I had hoped with intense longing that I would see Robert that morning but alas there was no sign of him. I would have to wait. I ate breakfast in solitary silence, alone with my thoughts. As I then made my way across the hall to the stairs, Mrs Dobbs crossed from the kitchen towards the library.

As she passed me, she asked, 'Did the storm disturb you, miss?'

She looked at me almost knowingly and I suddenly felt guilty. As I made my way to the schoolroom, following Mrs Dobbs' directions, I told myself not to be fanciful.

As I opened the door of the room, the first thing to catch my eye was a doll's cot! It looked totally out of place amongst the desks, blackboard and

easel. As I walked over to the wooden crib, I could see there was a large, porcelain doll in it, tucked up with blankets and wearing a white lacy bonnet. How strange, I thought.

'I wonder what you are doing in here,' I said aloud.

The four wooden desks were badly ink marked, the white china inkwells caked in ink. I lifted the lid of each desk and in the last one there was a notepad on which had been written in large capital letters, I HATE YOU. It has obviously been written with some feeling as the pencil had pressed hard on to the paper, piercing it in places.

Who would have written it and about whom? It was hard to tell if it was done years ago or quite recently. As I walked across the wooden floor to the blackboard, my boots sounded very loud. I started to write the name Felicity with the white chalk I found when I detected the smell of lavender. Turning swiftly, I came face to face with the lady who wore it.

The tall, grey-haired, gaunt-looking woman who stood in the doorway was dressed in clothes of a past age. Her hair was parted in the middle, the side hair being drawn over the front of her ears and then looped up to a small bun at the back of her head. She wore a dark blue dress with black stripes, printed at the waist, the full skirt falling gently around her, and on her head a white day-cap trimmed over the ears. She just stood there and looked at me. I felt somewhat ill-at-ease and sensed she was waiting for me to speak first.

'Who are you?' I uttered softly.

There was a pause before she spoke, in a Welsh accent.

'I know who you are. You're my Felicity's little one. I watched you arrive from this very window and have watched you on many occasions since.'

As she spoke, she took a couple of steps into the room, her skirts swishing on the wooden floor and the waft of lavender became more apparent.

'You are correct,' I said, 'but it doesn't tell me who you are and why you had the right to enter my room without invitation, for it was you, wasn't it, and you left me the warning note?'

My voice was unsteady and I spoke with an authority I didn't feel.

'Yes, it was me who entered your room, but only because of my concern for your safety.'

'It pleases me that you admit it but I must ask you again, who are you?'

As I spoke, she moved farther towards me and picked up the china doll, gently smoothing the doll's dress. I noticed her eyes were a fading green as

she looked directly at me.

‘I am your mother’s governess, Nora Blackstone. Felicity was a good girl, so gentle and kind, to animals as well as people. I am still waiting for her return. The nursery is in readiness.’

She paused and laid the doll back in the crib.

‘But don’t you know?’ I said gently. ‘My mother died some years since.’

‘No-o-o-o.’

The word became such a wail it frightened me but then she calmed down.

‘Felicity will return to me. She promised and Miss Felicity never breaks a promise. Laura on the other hand, she is cruel and unfeeling with a harsh streak in her, like her father, Morgan Pendenna.’

She grasped me by the shoulders so suddenly I trembled.

‘It is because of Laura you must leave. She will do you harm and I want no harm to come to my Felicity’s girl.’

‘But why? Why would she harm me? She is my mother’s sister.’

Her hands relaxed their hold on my shoulders for which I was glad and I moved away from her and sat on the chair by the ink-stained desk, my knees trembling.

‘I cannot tell you why. You will learn soon enough. If you will not go then I must protect you some other way. Miss Laura only comes to see me to make sure I’ll keep my mouth shut.’

She suddenly clamped her hand over her mouth and I could see tears rolling down her cheeks.

‘You see, Jane, it is the priest’s hole. No, I cannot and will not speak of it for fear of my life.’

‘Tell me, Miss Blackstone, what is it you fear so much? I may be able to help you. I will speak to my grandmother on your behalf.’

I felt sorry for her now. She was obviously a very frightened woman.

‘I cannot tell you. Just believe me when I say there is such horror to be found in these walls and to think it is the nursery where my beloved Felicity lay so sweetly as a child, sleeping like a baby. That is how I shall see her again one day when she returns and all will be well again.’

I knew now there was something very odd about Miss Blackstone’s ramblings and tended to think I should not believe a word she told me for it was quite plain to me that she was living in the past.

‘Where is your room, Miss Blackstone?’ I ventured.

‘Why, next to the nursery, of course, where it has always been. Don’t you remember?’

She spoke to me as if I was a child.

‘Come with me, Felicity, back to the nursery, like a good girl. Lessons are over for today. We will get our coats and walk in the wood like we used to. Come, child.’

She held out her hand toward me.

‘I cannot come now, Miss Blackstone. I have to see my grandmother.’ I waited with baited breath but she seemed to accept this.

‘Later then, child. I am feeling weary now.’

So saying, she looked at her fob-watch.

‘Polly will be bringing my lunch any time now and then I will make sure everything is ready in the nursery.’

‘Miss Blackstone,’ I had to ask, ‘why is the crib and china doll in the schoolroom?’

‘Why, don’t you know? I couldn’t let Felicity’s baby lie in the nursery, poor little lamb. She will be safer here.’

Thankfully, she walked to the door then and paused and looked back.

I knew she was back in the present when she said quietly, ‘Watch out for Laura, child, but I will protect you if needs be.’

She then left the schoolroom and I could hear her skirts swishing along the corridor. To say I was confused about this meeting was very true. I was left baffled by the conversation I had just had with my mamma’s former governess. Was there really a priest’s hole or was it something conjured up by a woman not of sound mind? And while Aunt Laura had not been as affable as I would have liked, was she really so evil?

As I made my way down the stairs, along the dimly-lit corridors, determined to find Grandmother, I felt a panic rising in me and longed to escape to normality, but where? My thoughts turned to Jason Trehaine. How I wished I were at Mannamead now, in the light, airy rooms. Instead I was here, stifled by the suffocating atmosphere of Pendenna Reach. I wondered now, although no harm had yet befallen me, if I would be safe in my bed.

8

My grandmother wasn't to be found in the drawing-room and looking out of the window I could see the rain still fell relentlessly and guessed she would not be out on the terrace either. I would seek out Mrs Dobbs, hoping she may know her whereabouts for I was anxious to talk to her about many things, Nora Blackstone being number one on my list.

Not since arriving at Pendenna had I entered the kitchen, Mrs Dobbs' domain. I tentatively pushed open the door and was faced by an alarmed-looking, buxom woman dressed in black with a frilly white apron and mobcap. Stood beside her, up to her elbows in flour, was an equally-alarmed-looking girl, as slight as cook was buxom, tendrils of hair escaping her white cap.

'Can I help you, miss?' Cook asked, her rolling-pin suspended in mid-air.

As she spoke, the young girl drew one arm across her forehead leaving a smudge of white flour down one side of her plain face.

'Agnes, how many times have I told you not to do that? Now run off and wash your hands and face.'

So saying, Cook gave her a little push with the rolling-pin and Agnes scuttled off.

'Sorry, miss, this is what I have to put up with. Now, what can I do for you? A nice cup of tea, perhaps? I take it you are the mistress' granddaughter, Miss Jane?'

She paused for breath and I spoke quickly.

'Yes, I am indeed Jane Merriock. I'm sorry to intrude but was wondering if you could tell me where I may find Mrs Dobbs, please.'

Cook had gone back to rolling her pastry. She stopped long enough to indicate with her rolling-pin a door to her left. As I stepped into the large kitchen I took in the huge black range over which hung pots and pans of various shapes and sizes. The wooden table on which Cook was baking was immense and took up a third of the kitchen. Various dishes were scattered on the top of it and flour was everywhere. As I stood taking in my surroundings, Agnes returned looking much tidier and ready to immerse her arms once more into the large mixing bowl.

'I'm Nelly, miss,' Cook said, stopping her rolling-pin once more in mid-air. 'It's pleased we are to have you here. Your mother was very much loved

by all. I won't say more, miss, it's not my place, except to say as how I don't agree with what happened. Would've given me notice in but I loves the mistress and nothing will change that.'

I was lost for words but as Nelly resumed her rolling I uttered, 'Thank you, Nelly, I understand.'

I walked to the door she had indicated, and stepped into a small corridor. I guessed it was the door opposite me which I needed for the one on the right was marked pantry. I knocked gently on the door and Mrs Dobbs' voice called, 'Who is it?'

Opening the door a fraction, I saw Mrs Dobbs get up from her chair and smooth her skirts.

'Oh, it's you, miss, come in, please.'

The room was small but comfortable and very warm. I felt quite stifled and was pleased when Mrs Dobbs asked if I would partake of a glass of lemonade. Seating myself on a high chair stood against the wall, I looked around me at the many ornaments placed on small tables scattered around the room. There was hardly a space left on the walls as they were covered in pictures, mainly of the sea and coastline. On a table beneath the window were small, stuffed animals which I found quite distasteful and looked quickly away at the small fire burning in the grate, listening to the rain as it splattered against the window pane.

I gratefully accepted the glass Mrs Dobbs gave to me and sipping the cool drink slowly I asked her where I could find my grandmother. As I spoke, a bell tinkled above my head. Looking up I could see three rows of bells, thirty-six in all, which I hadn't observed before.

'That's the mistress now, miss. She is still in bed as she suffered one of her bad heads today and has taken a powder. She will be wanting a cup of tea, so if you would like to come with me, miss.'

'Will that be all right?' I asked between gulps of lemonade.

'Of course, my dear. The mistress will be pleased to see you.'

I was glad to escape the stuffy atmosphere as I watched Mrs Dobbs place a guard in front of her small fire. In no time at all, Nelly had prepared a tray of tea for two and sandwiches and I found myself following Mrs Dobbs up the now-familiar staircase. Instead of turning right as I did to my room, we turned left and stopped outside the third door on the right. Mrs Dobbs tapped lightly on the door and entered, balancing the tray on one hand.

'You have a visitor, madam.'

I followed Mrs Dobbs into the room and could see my grandmother sat up amongst many pillows in a huge, carved, four-poster bed which dominated the room. She was dressed in a white cotton nightdress, a white lace bed jacket covered her shoulders and arms. Her grey wavy hair fell loose around her shoulders and it was covered in a white lace cap. It seemed strange not to see her in black, and propped up against the white pillows she looked almost ethereal.

'Why, Jane, what a delightful surprise. Come and sit by me.'

I moved across the carpet to sit on the chair at her bedside. Before seating myself I placed a kiss on her cheek.

'I hope this isn't an imposition, Grandmother, but I wish to talk with you.'

'It is not an imposition and tell me, child, what is it you wish to talk about?'

I glanced at Mrs Dobbs who was busy placing a tray in front of my grandmother.

'Pay no heed to Daisy,' Grandmother coaxed. 'There is nothing that can't be said in front of my housekeeper after forty years of loyal service. Come, Jane, what troubles you, for you do look troubled? Pour the tea, please, Daisy.'

Grandmother was looking at me in anticipation of my words.

'Well,' I began, 'I'd like to know more about Nora Blackstone.'

Both women looked at each other and then at me. The cup and saucer Daisy Dobbs held was suspended in mid-air. There was a pregnant pause before my grandmother spoke at last.

'I take it you have met Miss Blackstone,' she said quietly, 'and where was this, pray tell me?'

'In the schoolroom, not an hour since.'

'And what were you doing in the schoolroom, Jane?'

I was afraid she was going to avoid the issue of Miss Blackstone.

'I wanted to see where Mama spent her childhood and in view of the weather, I thought today a good time to explore the house. Miss Blackstone came upon me as I wrote on the blackboard. I smelled the lavender and was intrigued, as she had on occasions been in my room. The scent was the reason I knew it was her.'

'And what did you make of our governess, Jane?'

'Very strange in manner and very obviously living in the past.'

At this point I wondered if I should mention the priest's hole but decided against it for some reason.

'You are right, Jane. Nora Blackstone is indeed odd.'

Grandmother took a sip of her tea.

'This is why we allowed her to stay here for she would never have gained another position and I felt sorry for her. I still do for she never steps outside these walls. What she finds to do with her days I cannot imagine. Laura visits her from time to time, I believe, but to gain any information from my daughter is like getting blood from a stone.'

She paused and I noticed her cheeks had become very pink and her eyes bright. 'Will that be all, madam?'

Mrs Dobbs spoke as if to break a spell and my grandmother just waved her hand in dismissal. Mrs Dobbs looked at me and I was sure she was going to say something, but she opened the door and shut it almost silently behind her.

'Are you all right, Grandmother?' I asked anxiously as her whole manner had changed. 'Please have a sandwich and sip your tea. I'm sorry if I have upset you in any way.'

She laid her hand on mine.

'Please do not distress yourself, dear. You haven't upset me but, Jane, please don't believe anything Miss Blackstone says. She is muddled in the head and has been since your mother left. For some reason, she cannot bring herself into the present. If you see her again, don't take anything she says seriously. Now tell me, how are you getting on with Robert?'

I got used to my grandmother changing the topic of conversation but this question brought Robert to my mind and I could feel the colour suffuse my cheeks and I felt transparent under my grandmother's close scrutiny.

To prove the fact she said, 'Ah, Jane, I see you have succumbed to Robert's charm. Not surprising, and to say I am pleased is barely sufficient. I must be honest and say I have high hopes of a match of my lovely granddaughter and Mr Thornton. He is a good match for you, Jane, and you for him as you have spirit, the Pendenna spirit.'

I just sat and listened nonplussed at her words and when I left her some time later I was walking on air to think my grandmother would give her blessing to a match between Robert and myself. My heart sang with joy.

* * *

Three weeks passed without incident since that eventful day when Robert kissed me and I had met Nora Blackstone. October turned to November, the trees laid bare, their branches and the sky and sea merged into one, a dull uninteresting grey. Gone was the sun sparkling on the blue sea and in place of small waves chasing each other to shore the sea now crashed on to the shingle.

I'd seen Robert most days but never alone. I'd noticed that gone was the mocking smile and in its place had appeared an almost gentle, disarming one which melted my heart. It was Sunday and I awoke to the sound of Molly drawing back the curtains to reveal a watery sun and I realised that the incessant rain of the past weeks had at last stopped.

'Good morning, miss,' Molly said in her cheery voice. 'Looks like being a nice day, sun and all.'

As she spoke, she placed a lump or two of coal on the fire which was already burning in the grate. How cheerful it all looked. It was then I decided to accompany Grandmother to church. To Molly's amazement I got quickly out of bed.

'You haven't had your breakfast, miss.'

'Leave it on the table, please, Molly, and I shall sit by the fire to eat it. What is the time?'

I glanced at the small, tortoiseshell clock on the mantle.

'Nine o'clock! I shall have to be swift as I intend to go to church.'

'Right, miss, I shall lay out your clothes if you tell me what you'd like to wear.'

I got to my feet and looked through my wardrobe.

'I think the royal blue skirt and jacket with the fur trim.'

It was wool and I knew it would keep me warm. For prudence sake I would wear my black bonnet and gloves which were trimmed with blue to match my outfit.

I sat back at the table and poured myself a cup of strong tea and buttered toast. It had always been a ritual for Molly to bring me breakfast on a Sunday unless Grandmother requested my presence in the dining-room.

'Miss?' Molly's eager voice cut into my thoughts. 'I've got something to tell you, miss, which is really important and I can contain myself no longer.'

'Why, Molly,' I began and turned to look at her smiling face. 'Please, do tell me.'

‘It’s Jack, miss. He says he wants us to get wed and I am so happy to but won’t give him an answer until I have your blessing.’

Molly looked at me expectantly and I stood and gathered her in my arms. I could sense the joy she felt and tried to feel how I would react if Robert asked me to marry him. I looked down at her as I released her, smiling at her obvious happiness.

‘Molly, did you doubt that you would have my blessing? I am overjoyed for you and Jack. You must give him your answer today.’

Had I lost her, I wondered. Dear Molly, who had been the biggest part of my life since Mamma and Papa had died. As if in answer to my silent question Molly took my hand.

‘I won’t leave you, miss, but I cannot go back to London.’

She looked at me now, anxiety on her pretty face.

‘I have grown to love it here, miss, and if Jack and I are blessed with children, the countryside is so much nicer than the city to bring them up.’

‘Don’t fret, Molly, I understand fully, and anyway I may stay at Pendenna myself. London does not hold much appeal for me anymore except, of course, for dear Amy. I just want you to be happy, Molly, and whatever happens we must not lose touch.’

‘Never, miss, I promise. Now I must help you, for it is nine-fifteen and I believe Mrs Pendenna usually leaves for church at ten, or so my Jack has told me.’

It was a rush but at five minutes to ten, I was stood in the hall attired in my Sunday best, waiting for my grandmother. I knew she would be pleased, as on other occasions I declined to accompany her on a Sunday to Pendenna church, but she had never pressed me. To go on my own volition was good. Since Mamma’s and Papa’s funeral, I had not stepped through a church gate. As I stood with my thoughts Mrs Dobbs interrupted them.

‘There is a letter for you, Miss Jane. It is on the silver plate behind you.’

I looked behind me and picked up the letter she’d mentioned. It was from Amy. I tucked it safely into my black beaded reticule, thanking Mrs Dobbs just as my grandmother reached the bottom of the staircase with Aunt Laura by her side.

‘My dear Jane, how lovely. I assume you are accompanying us?’

As she spoke, she linked her arm through Aunt Laura’s just as Robert made an appearance.

‘Please take Jane’s arm, Robert. We must step into the carriage, for time is pressing.’

So, as the huge doors of Pendenna Reach opened, admitting an icy blast of wind, I found myself being escorted by Robert into the carriage. Aunt Laura sat in silence as she watched Robert and me intently. I glanced at her from time to time, idly taking in the smoothness of her skin and the beige-coloured outfit she wore. On glancing now and then at my grandmother, dressed entirely in black, as usual, I could see her smiling indulgently at us and now and then, she made some observation of the countryside while I kept casting my mind back to Molly.

Until today, I had only seen the church from a distance through the treetops. As we drew up to the lychgate and we stepped out of the carriage, Robert’s hand gently squeezing mine, I could see close up that the tower was tall and very obviously fifteenth-century, but the main body of the church was more recent. I had studied English churches and always felt it was such a pity that I never entered them anymore. Robert took my arm and we walked through the gate up the stone path, strewn with leaves. I listened to the monotonous sound of the bell ringing and tried hard not to look at the many dank grey gravestones which stood upright all around me.

We seated ourselves in a cold pew at the side of the church, very obviously reserved for the Pendenna family. As I cast my eyes over the congregation, it was then I spotted Granny Merriock. She sat near the front of the church not far from me. As I watched her she suddenly glanced in my direction and gave me such a venomous look, I shook and quickly averted by gaze.

The service over and back outside once more, shaking hands with a very tall vicar, I caught sight of Granny Merriock out of the corner of my eye as she walked to the gate.

‘Excuse me,’ I said to a startled vicar, interrupting him mid-sentence as I scurried off after her.

As I reached the gate an arm suddenly caught mine.

‘Where are you going in such a hurry, Jane?’

I looked back to see Aunt Laura almost towering over me. Until now I had not noticed how tall she was.

‘I just want a word with Granny Merriock, if you’ll excuse me.’

So saying, I freed my arm from her grasp.

‘I’ll come with you, Jane, for this I must see.’

She then hurried after me, past the carriage, in the direction of the village but it was to no avail. There was no sight of the old woman. I stood looking around me with exasperation, Aunt Laura at my side.

'What a pity,' she offered with obvious sarcasm in her voice.

'I would have caught up with her if you had not detained me, and what did you mean when you said, this I must see? What sort of spectacle were you expecting?'

As I spoke I hastened back to the carriage, Aunt Laura keeping up beside me.

'I was curious to see what reception you would receive.'

'By that, I assume you expect it to be unfavourable.'

We had reached the carriage and I turned to face my aunt.

'Why, yes, Jane, it is what I'd expect under the circumstances.'

'And what do you mean by that?' My voice was becoming louder but I could not help myself.

'Why do you dislike me so much?'

'Whatever gives you that idea, Jane?'

'Because of your whole manner towards me. How could I have ever done anything to you for you to treat me with such disdain?'

'You are your mother's daughter.'

She almost spat the words at me and I was taken aback.

'Ladies, ladies!' Robert's voice interrupted us as Grandmother spoke up.

'Jane, Laura, please settle yourselves in the carriage. You are behaving like a couple of fishwives. I am most displeased and what Reverend Tomlinson thought of your rudeness, Jane, I can only imagine. What you have to quarrel about I don't pretend to understand. Now let us get home and thank goodness only Robert and I had to witness such behaviour.'

I felt quite humbled as Grandmother admonished us and caught the merest of smiles hovering on my aunt's lips and wondered what secret thoughts she had to smile about. Robert's face was expressionless and I prayed silently my behaviour had not spoiled our friendship.

On arriving back at Pendenna, Grandmother said she wished to speak with me before luncheon in her room.

Aunt Laura was to accompany her now. As I watched them climb the stairs, I wondered at my aunt's animosity towards me. I had thought my mother and Aunt Laura to be close.

'What was that all about, Janie?'

Hearing Robert's voice beside me, I realised that for once I had forgotten his presence.

'It was to do with Granny Merriock. Laura seems to think I will not be received well by her but tomorrow I intend to find out as I will visit her cottage and get to the bottom of this.'

'Then I will accompany you, Jane, and that is an order,' saying which he placed a finger gently on my lips preventing a reply.

Who was I to argue with this man? I felt sure his only desire was to protect me, but from what?

9

On reaching my room, I remembered Amy's letter and retrieving it from my reticule, sat by the window to read it feeling quite homesick.

My dear Jane, I read.

How pleased I was to hear all your news at last. I had quite expected to hear from you earlier but guess you and Molly are quite settled in Cornwall even though it must be a completely different way of life to that which you experienced here. I am still never without company or some ball or theatre to attend. I still miss you greatly, dear Jane, and am very afraid now that you may not return to live with me at Grosvenor Square. I do not say this to distress you but I want you to know that I understand for it is wonderful you have at last met with family of your own. Think of me as a selfish woman who loves you but I am prepared to relinquish you, my dear, as long as you are happy.

After all the gallant young men I introduced you to here in London, each one of whom you didn't find the least bit interesting, I now find you have met your match and have lost your heart to a man in the remotest part of Cornwall. I hope all fares well with this Robert Thornton and knowing you so well, I'm safe in the knowledge you are a good judge of character and will, hopefully, not let your heart rule your head. Please write soon, Jane, with your news. In the meantime you are ever in my thoughts and heart.

Yours, as always, Amy.

I clutched the letter to me. Dear Amy, how I could use her advice now and was I, quite contrary to her opinion, letting my heart rule my head over Robert? Only time would tell. I tucked the letter in a drawer and quickly prepared myself for luncheon and to face my grandmother.

Standing outside her bedroom door, I straightened the skirts of my day dress and touched my mother's amethyst brooch, which I treasured so much, hoping to gain some sort of courage from it. I need not have worried, for Grandmother was not as angry as I had expected. She sat by the fire and indicated for me to sit opposite her. I watched the large ring on her hand flash in the firelight.

'Jane, I am not going to admonish you further over today's unpleasant incident, but I wish you to tell me what has caused this strife between you and your aunt.'

She leaned back in her chair awaiting my answer.

‘To be truthful with you, Grandmother, I am as perplexed as you except to say that today Aunt Laura intimated it was to do with my mother. This I cannot understand, as reading Mama’s diaries she and Aunt Laura always seemed to be close except...’

I hesitated. Should I tell Grandmother what Mama had written in her diary before she left Pendenna?

‘Except what, Jane?’

She leaned forward in her chair.

‘Tell me, child, for I wish to know. You have not had the happiest of beginnings in life and my heart grieves for your mother for I should have helped her more. Now it is too late, but it is not too late to do the right thing for you. So tell me the truth, please, Jane.’

‘Except for what Mama wrote in her diary,’ I went on. ‘She said Laura had no sympathy for the position she found herself in. It was as if Laura hated her. Why should this be, Grandmother? And why should Aunt Laura dislike me so?’

‘I suspected at the time all was not well between my two daughters and wonder often if it could have been jealousy on Laura’s part although Laura was engaged to be married to Andrew. Your mama was always loved by everyone, including Andrew Trehaine. Laura was always possessive and domineering and Felicity went along with it because she was not of a quarrelsome nature. I can imagine that Laura could have despised your mama for getting herself with child and in some way escaping Laura’s hold over her.’

‘As we are being honest, Grandmother, is it possible that Aunt Laura is jealous of Robert and myself?’

‘Oh, yes, dear, I do. She has had designs on him since the day he stepped through the doors of Pendenna Reach. I know Robert does not reciprocate Laura’s desire for he has told me so, and Laura, too, but Robert is a gentleman and is polite and attentive to her for my sake and for the sake of peace, but your aunt now has you as competition for Robert’s affections and if the affections towards you are realised she would undoubtedly resent you for it.’

‘It would explain much and I must confess to not knowing how to deal with it.’

I sighed and Grandmother leaned forward and took my hand in hers.

‘Tell me, Jane, for I need to know. Is there some affection between you and Robert?’

I did not know how to answer but the old lady coaxed it from me.

‘Come, child, your mother was honest with me, though I could do nothing about the situation. I wish that I had, but for you, dear, I would do anything to further your happiness.’

‘Yes, there is affection, and I believe it to be more than that on my part, for I am sure I love him.’

Grandmother let go of my hand and both her hands flew to her mouth.

‘Jane, Jane, how happy you have made me but the question is, does Robert love you?’

She looked at me with expectation. ‘I cannot say in all honesty for neither of us has declared a love for each other, but I am ever hopeful.’

‘You must tell me, child, how this progresses for I had every hope of this as I have told you before.’

So saying she leaned back in her chair breathlessly.

‘There has been enough excitement for one day and it must be time to go down for lunch.’

‘And what am I to do about Aunt Laura for it worries me so?’

She again leaned forward and patted my hand.

‘Ignore her unpleasantness, Jane, as I do. It is a pity she is this way but Laura has never been a happy girl. Ignore her.’

As we went down to lunch I thought how this advice was easier said than done.

Next morning, Robert, as good as his word, sought me out at breakfast to escort me to Granny Merriock’s cottage. Why he thought I needed him I didn’t know except I remembered my mother’s words — *Granny Merriock came to the house today and told me to leave her grandson alone*. Was she hostile towards me, too, because my mother eloped with one of her own? Perhaps I did need Robert after all.

At my insistence, we walked. It was a dry, sunny day although the ground was waterlogged from weeks of rain. The ruts in the lane made by the carriage wheels made walking quite a trial and by the time we had arrived at the cottage my boots were covered in mud as were Robert’s and my skirt was also mud-stained. We had spoken of everything from London to Pendenna, anything except that night alone together in the library. He steadied me several times on the way and his strong arm had encircled my

waist, sending my pulse racing. As I made to step up the cottage path, Robert took my arm and drew me back to face him.

'Don't expect too much of this visit, Janie. I wouldn't want you to be hurt and distressed.'

So he thought as Aunt Laura. What did they know that I didn't but intended soon to find out?

'Thank you for your concern and support,' I said and squeezed the hand on my arm. 'This is something I have to do. She is my kinswoman.'

It was Robert who knocked on the door and it seemed for ever before it slowly opened to reveal Granny Merriock. Close to, she looked much older than I thought at first. Deep lines etched her cheeks and eyes, but her violet-coloured eyes were still sharp.

'Yes?' she questioned in a voice far stronger than she looked.

I glanced at Robert before I spoke.

'Mrs Merriock, I believe I am your great-granddaughter, Jane Merriock, your John's daughter.'

For what seemed like minutes, she looked me up and down.

'You are no great-granddaughter of mine. Please close the gate as you leave or the hens will escape.'

She spoke the words quietly but with such underlying venom I felt weak at the knees and tears sprung to my eyes.

Robert again took my arm and gently steered me towards the gate where I collapsed sobbing in his arms. Granny Merriock's words were so final I knew I could not argue with her. They had both told me, both Robert and Aunt Laura, but why? I vowed to find an answer.

The following morning, my eyes still red from weeping, I felt I needed to escape and have time to think so I decided to go for a ride on my own. After declining Molly's attempt to arrange my hair, I sent her down to Jack to ask him to saddle Amber for me. Before she left Molly turned at the door.

'It ain't my place to say, miss,' she said, 'but I see you've been crying. It ain't right you should be sad while I am so happy.'

'It's nothing, Molly. Now please run along while I get into my riding habit.'

When she had gone, I dressed myself in my riding clothes. Looking in the mirror, I tossed my long hair behind me, hardly recognising myself. Tapping my riding crop gently on my palm I made my way down the staircase and to my dismay Robert was walking across the hall with, of all

people, Alan Lester. He stopped to look up at me, an unfathomable expression on his face, while Mr Lester gazed at me in what appeared disbelief, however Robert found his tongue.

'Where are you off to, Jane? And your hair...'

For once he was lost for words.

'I'm going riding, Mr Thornton. Jack is saddling Amber as we speak.'

'Allow us to come with you, Jane, for I can see you are distressed and it will only take us a moment to change.'

'No, thank you, but I wish to go alone. Good-day, gentlemen.'

I walked past them without a backward glance, heading for the stables. As I walked through the door I heard Robert call after me.

'But, Jane!'

I carried on walking, smiling to myself. For once I had gone against his wishes and I felt quite pleased with myself.

As I rode towards Polgent, Amber picking her way expertly across the moorland, my hair blowing in gay abandon behind me, I had a momentary feeling that I was being followed but dismissed the thought, until I saw a man on horseback heading towards me. As he reined in his mount close to me, I could see with some pleasure that it was Jason Trehaine.

'Good morning, Miss Merriock. I hardly recognised you from a distance. May I hasten to add I don't mean to sound rude when I say that, for you do, in fact, look quite lovely and so much like your mother that for a moment I believed it was indeed her. You look sad, if I may say so. Is there anything I can do to help?'

'You are right, Mr Trehaine, I am sad and spent most of last night weeping. As to if you can help I do feel that I can confide in you but don't wish to burden you with my troubles.'

I smiled at him and when I looked at him again I thought how familiar he looked.

'Apart from my visit to your home some weeks ago, have we ever met before, Mr Trehaine? I thought when I first saw you that we had.'

'Indeed not,' he said most emphatically, then changed the subject rather quickly. 'Please, come back with me to Mannamead where we can talk and you can tell me what has upset you so.'

'Why, thank you, I would like that.'

So we spurred our mounts forward, riding along in a companionable silence. I felt so at ease with this man and trusted him implicitly.

Arriving at Mannamead, a stable-hand led Amber away but not before I fed her a sugar lump and caressed her face. The house looked so tranquil in the morning sun and the windows did indeed sparkle. Simms greeted us in the hall, relieving me of my riding cape and crop. We went again to the drawing-room where a cheery fire was already burning in the grate.

Now, Jane, if I may be so presumptuous as to call you by your Christian name, tell me what troubles you that you weep all night.'

'It was Granny Merriock,' I said, plunging straight into the problem and I noticed Jason Trehaine was taken aback.

'Granny Merriock.'

He repeated the name as if he was in a trance.

'You have met with her, I take it?'

His voice was now back to normal but he still looked, for want of a better word, stunned. Why did this woman have such an effect on people? I set to wondering what Grandmother's reaction would be for I had not mentioned the name to her yet.

'Yes, I went to see her at her cottage yesterday afternoon. After introducing myself to her, she denied I was her relation and told me to close the gate as I left, but I know that she is my father's grandmother so why would she disown me in such a manner? I could not discuss it with her because I knew by her voice and the look in her eyes that was all she had to say.'

Jason Trehaine had listened to me and I could now see concern for me in his eyes. He stood up and looked out of the window for several minutes and then came back and sat down.

'Jane, there is much I could tell you but I feel this is not the right moment. Believe me when I say it is not Granny Merriock's fault. Trust me when I say that one day soon you will know the truth behind all this but I have to consult someone first before I dare lay bare to you all I know.'

His voice was steady and his words so sincere that I didn't doubt him but I was even more perplexed.

'And Aunt Laura?' I said, for maybe he could throw light on this also even though my grandmother had tried to enlighten me only yesterday. 'Why does she resent me so? Is it because of my mother? We had a confrontation yesterday outside the church and to say I am baffled by all this is very true. I'm beginning to feel unwanted here and I am seriously contemplating going back to London.'

‘Your Aunt Laura is, and always has been, a very unhappy woman as I have told you before. She was always jealous of your mother.’

‘Grandmother has told me this also, but I do not understand it. There is more to this whole problem than anyone is prepared to tell me but I trust you when you say you will enlighten me one day soon. Will it be here at Mannamead? Shall I call to see you one afternoon next week?’

‘Yes, dear, it will be arranged, I give you my promise. Now let us have some lunch and weep no more, for we all love you and have your best interests at heart, no-one more so than myself.’

The next couple of hours I spent with Jason Trehaine were a tonic for me. His amusing conversation cheered me greatly and later that afternoon, when he escorted me back to Pendenna, the events of yesterday were firmly pushed to the back of my mind and I had every trust that this man had freed me from any doubt and puzzlement that I had in my mind.

While walking back from the stables after leaving Amber in Jack’s capable hands, I encountered Robert with Alan Lester.

‘Ah, Jane,’ Robert said as he walked swiftly towards me, ‘where have you been? Your grandmother missed you at luncheon but I did not tell her you were out riding alone.’

‘So what did you tell her?’ I asked. ‘Only that you had gone riding.’

‘Well, if you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I will go and find my grandmother.’

I made to walk on but Robert’s strong hand caught my arm.

As I looked at him, his eyes looking into mine, he said, ‘If the weather is kind tomorrow please ride with me to the Dancing Damsels. I wish you to look on them with happy thoughts. I have spoken with your grandmother and she has given her permission for us to ride alone.’

Tut I vowed never to go there again. The whole visit filled me with foreboding and unpleasant thoughts.’

‘You’ll come with me, Jane, for I have something to say to you, something of great importance.’

As he spoke, he squeezed my arm gently, such a small gesture but it sent my pulses racing and I knew there was no going against his wishes.

‘Very well, Mr Thornton, I will meet you here at eleven on the morrow.’

‘Thank you, Jane,’ he almost breathed a sigh. ‘Till tomorrow then.’

So saying, he released his grip on my arm.

‘Good afternoon, Miss Merriock,’ Alan Lester said as they walked away towards the stables.

On reaching my room, I quickly changed from my riding habit to a day dress. Molly had lit a fire so it was fairly warm after the chill of the November day and the flames danced, casting their light across the walls, creating eerie orange shadows. As I pinned my mother’s brooch to the pleated frill of my dress I thought of Robert’s words and was more than curious to know what he wanted to say to me, but that would have to wait until tomorrow, for now I must seek out my grandmother. I guessed she would take me to task for missing luncheon.

I found her in the drawing-room, sat by the fire, looking very alert and full of expectation.

‘Why, Jane, dear, sit opposite me so I can talk to you.’

Doing as I was bid, I seated myself.

‘Apologies for my missing lunch.’

‘Never mind about that,’ Grandmother interrupted. ‘I’ve far more important things to talk about. I must tell you, dear, I have invited Mr Trehaine to dinner tomorrow evening and he has graciously accepted.’

My first thought at this news was that Jason Trehaine had not mentioned this to me and idly thought this must be a surprise, which indeed it was.

‘It is many years since a Trehaine has entered this house, let alone dine here, so we must make him welcome, Jane.’

‘It will be a pleasure to do so, for I like Mr Trehaine very much, and how does Aunt Laura feel about this?’

‘She doesn’t know yet, but I will tell her later. I’m hoping it may lay to rest some of the ghosts which are haunting my daughter. Now, Jane, that brings me to something else which I wish to say, regarding that unfortunate incident outside the church.’

‘Apologies for that, too, but I am quite perplexed as to why Aunt Laura should have been so spiteful to me.’

‘I want you to tell me what the argument was over, Jane, and the truth, please, for the truth will come out in the end, dear, and you would not want to lie to your grandmother.’

As she spoke, she looked me in the eyes. Hers were shining and held mine with determination and I knew I could only tell her the truth.

‘It was over Granny Merriock,’ I said quite boldly, at which her whole expression changed to one of fear and the eye contact was lost.

‘Jane, I want you to tell me what you know of Granny Merriock.’

Her voice was strong.

‘I only know that she is my paternal grandmother and for some reason disowns the fact, for I have visited her cottage and she practically closed the door in my face. Robert was with me.’

‘What has this to do with Laura?’

‘I saw Granny Merriock in the congregation on Sunday and tried to catch up with her as she left the church. Aunt Laura followed me, anxious to see the spectacle our meeting would cause. And as I told you, quite truthfully on Sunday, Aunt Laura was so spiteful to me and said she disliked me because I am my mother’s daughter. To be honest, Grandmother, I can understand none of this. Granny Merriock disowns me, Aunt Laura seems to hate my mother and now me because I am her daughter. I spoke with Jason Trehaine today and he has promised me he will enlighten me very soon. There, now you have the truth of the situation. I am sorry but none of this is my doing and yet it seems somehow to have something to do with me. The question is, what?’

I bowed my head in my hands and started to cry quietly. I felt my grandmother pull me towards her, her arms around me. For some minutes I rested against the black taffeta and then drew back. Grandmother handed me a white lace handkerchief.

‘Dry your eyes, Jane, and weep no more. You are indeed the innocent party in this situation which amounts to a charade and I will see that the whole unpleasant situation is brought to an end but I have to speak to someone first.’

At these words, I looked with surprise at her.

‘But that is what Jason Trehaine said to me only today. It is you and he who have to speak together, isn’t it?’

She did not answer me.

‘Isn’t it, Grandmother?’

In a weary voice she answered, ‘Yes, my child. Jason Trehaine and I have to speak together.’

So saying, she laid her hand across mine, her ring sparkling in the firelight.

10

To say I spent a restless night is true. Thoughts of what Jason Trehaine and Grandmother had to speak of whirled around in my head and I came to many conclusions, probably none of them the correct one.

As I lay in bed I could see by the light on the curtains that it was a pleasant morning. I lay there, waiting for Molly to bring my breakfast while I thought of this morning's ride with Robert and wondered what it was he was so keen to say to me.

As usual, Molly was her cheerful self and busied herself preparing my bath and clearing the grate to light a fire. This morning I felt in a sombre mood and chose my dark riding attire. I let Molly arrange my hair, not wishing to displease or outrage Robert today. At this thought I smiled to myself. Had I really outraged the unconventional Robert Thornton yesterday? With some amusement I realised I had. Suddenly I felt better and now looked forward to my ride with Robert, alone. Grandmother had not mentioned it yesterday but I took it to be true that she had given her approval. Robert was many things but not a liar.

As I pinned my mother's brooch to the high neck of my white blouse, Molly draped the riding cape around my shoulders. Putting the finishing touches to my attire with my silk top hat, which I loathed, I was ready to face Mr Robert Thornton. As I approached the stables I could see he was already there. I could see Jack held Amber ready for me to mount.

'Good morning, Jane,' Robert said as I neared the stables. 'The weather is in our favour for November. It is a lovely day. How lucky we are.'

He was smiling and obviously in good humour.

'Indeed it is a nice morning. Even the sea is calmer and not thundering on the shore.'

As I spoke, Robert's hands encircled my waist as he lifted me expertly into the saddle. His eyes met mine and I felt the colour rising in my cheeks and looked away quickly, thanking Jack, to cover my confusion. As we set off little did I know what confusion I would be faced with that day.

Robert rode beside me, reining his horse to keep pace with Amber and myself. As we passed Granny Merriock's cottage, Robert leaned across and gently laid a hand over mine.

'Think nothing of it, Jane, for today at least.'

I smiled wistfully back at him. Seeing the church tower in the distance brought to mind the unpleasant incident with Aunt Laura on Sunday and the conversation with my grandmother yesterday. Robert must have observed the solemn look on my face as he reined in our mounts.

'I want you to be happy today, Jane. Clear all other thoughts from your mind for today is for you and me,' he said.

These words cheered me for wasn't this what I wanted, to be alone with this man whom I loved? Thoughts of him had filled my days since meeting him and our secret time in the library was the sun in my heart. Each time I recalled it I could still feel his lips on mine.

As we reached the field and the Dancing Damsels, Robert lifted me down from Amber. Instead of letting me go he pulled me to him and I could feel his heart beating fast. As he looked down at me I could feel myself trembling. I was alone with him, far from any other being and yet I trusted him.

'Janie, I love you,' he said in a burst. The words came so suddenly from him I was taken aback.

'Why, Robert I...'

'Don't say anything for the moment, let me speak. I love you and please believe me when I say I have never said this before to anyone. I believe I have loved you since the moment I saw you at the railway station. I want to be with you always, to look after you and protect you. Janie, I want you to be my wife and I pray you can love me, too.'

As he released me, his words rang in my ears. His words had stunned me for I had thought of everything but this and yet it was what I desired. But what of Laura? Grandmother had assured me there was nothing between them but I had witnessed the scene in the woods that day, both of them close together somewhat intimately to my keen eyes. All these thoughts ran through my mind in seconds.

'Speak to me, Janie. Was I wrong in thinking this is what you wanted? Was I wrong to assume you felt about me as I feel about you?'

I turned away from him and stroked Amber's nose, catching sight of the ring of tall grey stones.

'Speak to me, my only love.'

His voice was full of urgency and imploring. I had to find the right words. To say the wrong thing at this moment could jeopardise any future I might have with this man, the man of my dreams. I turned to face him once more.

‘You assume right that this is what I’d hoped for and that my feelings for you are different to anything I’ve experienced but...’

‘But what, Janie?’ he interrupted. ‘What of Laura?’ I asked softly.

‘What about Laura? What has this got to do with your aunt? It is you I love and wish to marry. How could this in any way have anything to do with Laura?’

I could see he was exasperated.

‘Have you forgotten the day I saw you together in the woods? Your hands were holding her arms and you were both so close you couldn’t have got a taper between you. What have you got to say about that? Before I can think of marrying you I have to know what happened that day.’

Robert took my arm.

‘Come, Jane, let us walk to the stone circle. Calm yourself while we walk and I will offer you an explanation. Put your arm through mine.’

I did as I was bid and we walked across the muddy ground. Robert was right, the stones did not hold me with such foreboding today. Robert leaned against one of the age-old stones, the sun falling on his face.

‘I’ve been here a few times with my friend, Alan, and vowed I would propose to you here. It’s an earthy place, far away from balconies and drawing-rooms and I wanted you to remember it always, but it hasn’t gone as planned, no indeed not. I had hoped after our encounter in the library you had forgotten that day in the woods.’

Tut how could I, especially on such a momentous occasion as you pledging your love for me?’

‘I want you to trust and believe in me, Jane, that there is no attachment, or ever has been, between your aunt and myself. Please believe me, it was purely innocent the day you saw us in the woods but at this moment I cannot tell you why we were together.’

‘Why not when you have asked me to become your wife?’

‘Trust me on this, Jane.’ His voice was firm. ‘All I can say is that until I find the priest’s hole I cannot tell you.’

‘The priest’s hole?’ I uttered in astonishment.

‘Yes. That small part of Pendenna Reach is very important to this conversation we are having now.’

‘I think I may know where it is,’ I offered.

Robert was suddenly very alert.

‘You think you know, when Alan and I have scoured the house from top to bottom?’

‘Did you try the nursery?’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘It was something Nora Blackstone said to me one day, that there was such horror to be found in these walls and that it was in the nursery.’

‘We have to get back to Pendenna, Janie. This is important. Not so important as my proposal to you today but we will keep that in abeyance for a day or two. It will give you a chance to think it over. I realise it must have been a shock to you.’

‘It was that, to say the least. I will think it over and I trust you also.’

Now smile and let us hope you have opened the door to an age-old mystery.’ He dropped a kiss on my brow.

On reaching Pendenna, I made my way to my room to prepare for luncheon. I realised I was trembling and my legs felt weak. The events of the morning had been so unexpected I could hardly believe my good fortune. As I stood by the fire in my room, warming my hands, I reached idly to my mother’s brooch at my throat and unclasped it. My hands were trembling so much that I dropped it and it fell to the grate. To my dismay, I saw that the gold backing had come apart from the stone. Gently I picked it up and looked at the opening in the back, behind the stone. To my utter amazement, Jason Trehaine’s image was staring back at me!

I sank back in the chair by the fire clasping the brooch in my hand. Again I looked at the picture to ensure I was not mistaken. It was definitely Jason Trehaine as a young man. His age had not really altered him. Then I read the inscription on the back of the brooch.

I adore you forever.

So it had been Jason Trehaine who had given my mother the brooch which she wore every day from as far back as I could remember. But why?

A dozen questions tumbled through my mind. I thought of Mamma’s diaries and I stood up, an astonishing thought coming to me. He looked familiar because I was like him. At this thought, I ran to the mirror and stared at my reflection in the glass. I always thought I looked like my mother and had nothing of John Merriock’s fair looks, now I knew why. Realisation dawned on me, and I truly believed that Jason Trehaine, of Mannamead, was my father.

A medley of thoughts ran through my head — my mother and father not sharing a room; Mamma's sadness each time she spoke of Pendenna, which was often; the love she mentioned in her diaries was not for John but for Jason. I recalled her words, my beloved will know what to do, and what did they do? How did I come to be brought up believing John Merriock was my father? I had seen their marriage certificate.

I had to have some answers. Then I thought of Granny Merriock saying, 'You are no great granddaughter of mine.'

She knew I wasn't her kin. Who else knew apart from my true father? My thoughts flew to my grandmother. She, too, must know the truth. I was so desperate to hear the truth but I must think about this, mull it over in my mind and not be hasty. I knew in my heart I was right. It explained so much.

I looked once more at Jason Trehaine's picture and gently closed the back of the brooch. To my relief it was not broken and I could see now how the back opened. How many times over the years had my mother opened this and gazed with longing at my father, my real father. I must be Jason Trehaine's only child. Recalling the day I first visited Mannamead, the picture of his wife came to my mind, and he had said she had died of consumption. And the paintings by John Merriock.

What were they doing at Mannamead? He said he bought them as John Merriock was a good friend. Had they really been friends? I had to know what happened in the year of my birth and believed it was my true father who had all the answers.

It suddenly dawned on me that this evening he would be a guest at the Pendenna dinner table. Could I face him with composure, knowing the truth? I could do it, I had to, but for now I must keep silent until the time was right. Molly appeared while I was mulling these thoughts over in my mind.

'Have you had lunch yet, miss? Your grandmother is asking after you according to Cook,' Molly chatted.

'No, I haven't been down to lunch. I've decided to rest until dinner. The ride to the Dancing Damsels has tired me and I didn't sleep well last night.'

'No matter, miss, I'll bring you up some cold chicken and a nice pot of tea.'

Everything seemed so normal with Molly there but in truth everything was different. I picked at my lunch, drank my hot tea and then fell asleep,

exhausted by the day's events. As I drifted off, I asked another question. Did Robert also know the truth?

I entered the drawing-room that evening purposely ten minutes late. As I stood at the door, I regained my composure and smoothed the skirts of my dress. I felt behind me to ensure the stiff silk bow was straight and then glanced down at the square, lace-trimmed bodice to which was pinned my mother's brooch. I took a deep breath to be ready to face both Robert and Jason Trehaine.

They were all assembled when I entered, as I hoped they would be. Robert stood out. I had not even thought of his proposal since finding the picture in the brooch. I instinctively touched it to make sure it was securely in place. Robert and Jason had obviously been in conversation and I wondered again if Robert knew the truth. I felt as if I was looking at a play being performed. Everything and everyone felt unreal this evening.

'Miss Merriock, how nice to see you again.'

Jason Trehaine crossed the room and I studied his features carefully, trying not to make it obvious and smiling as he came towards me. There was no doubt about it, I looked like him. Grandmother was silent as she watched the scene enacted before her. What was she thinking? And Laura, did she know? She sat in silence, next to her mother, with a scowl on her face. What was the real reason she hated me so much?

All the while these thoughts were going through my head I tried to smile and act normally, accepting a drink from Robert as he looked in my eyes, conveying the secret of his love to me alone. I suddenly found myself tongue-tied.

'Where is Alan Lester?' I stammered.

'He left this afternoon bound for Somerset and more stone circles,' Robert enlightened me.

Then I set to wondering about Aunt Laura and the priest's hole. Why had she denied its existence when my mother had noted in her diary that they had found it? Had Robert looked for it that afternoon? As if in answer to my thoughts, Robert took me to one side, much to Aunt Laura's displeasure.

'Meet me at breakfast. I want you to come to the nursery with me in the morning,' he said quietly.

I glanced around. No-one had heard.

The whole evening was a strain. How I got through it without screaming out that I knew the truth I don't know, but little did I know that the whole

truth was to be revealed next day when the secret of Pendenna would well and truly be out in the open.

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Robert was seated at the table when I entered the dining-room next morning, quite an unusual occurrence as he normally took breakfast early and then went riding out on the estate visiting tenant farmers. He looked up as I walked in and I prayed he wouldn't mention the proposal of marriage today for I had other things on my mind, but I needn't have worried for he, too, had more immediate matters to attend to.

'Good morning, Janie. I hope you slept well.'

As I helped myself to bacon and scrambled eggs and poured myself some coffee, I thought briefly of the night I had just spent tossing and turning, my mind full of the events of the past few weeks, but I wasn't going to admit this to Robert.

'I slept well, thank you,' I lied admirably as I seated myself opposite him and sipped the strong hot coffee with some relish for I thought it may go toward making me feel more alert.

'So, you are ready to face our exploration of the nursery?' He paused. 'Or maybe you have changed your mind.'

'Not at all. I am looking forward to it as I haven't yet visited this room.'

'Are you not a little afraid of what you may find?'

Robert smiled at me, such an engaging smile I could not help but answer truthfully.

'With you, I would not feel afraid anywhere.'

It was the truth but as soon as I had uttered the words, I regretted it for fear he might misconstrue them and conclude the truth that I was jelly in his hands. Robert didn't answer but neither did he mock me. Instead he placed a strong hand over mine, the look in his deep brown eyes warm and sincere. In that moment I knew we forged an unspoken understanding between us.

'Have you told my grandmother of our plan to visit the nursery?' I asked.

'No, I would not want to worry her. In any event, we may not locate the priest's hole. I have looked at many books and found no mention of it.'

'My mother mentions it,' I offered, 'in her diary.'

He sat looking at me for seconds which in truth seemed like minutes.

'Does she say in this diary where it can be found?'

'No, only that she and Laura discovered it when they were younger.'

‘So, you only have Nora Blackstone’s word that it is in the nursery, which makes sense. It is a place no-one would think to look.’

Robert sat back in his chair and I knew he was anxious to start our search.

‘No matter, Janie, we will go ahead as planned although we have little to go on. More coffee?’

‘No, I am refreshed, thank you.’

So saying we both left the room. As we made our way through the hall and up the staircase I saw everything in a different light. With Robert at my side, things did not seem so dark and although the eyes of my ancestors followed our progress, even the portraits took on a new meaning and I realised till now I’d never taken the time to look at them with much interest. At the top of the stairs was a large portrait of a young woman and I realised it could be my grandmother.

I lingered to look a little more closely but Robert was going on ahead so I quickly caught up with him. We passed the schoolroom. I then caught the strong scent of lavender as we passed Nora Blackstone’s room, consequently my thoughts were of her as we opened the door of the nursery. We stepped inside and, looking around, I gasped in surprise. Everything looked as if the room was still lived in. The two beds on opposite walls to each other were made up and covered in pink bedspreads. On one bed was a china doll similar to the one I had found in the schoolroom but not so well cared for and I assumed it to be Laura’s.

The floor was of wood and highly-polished and in the centre, a large pink and white rug lay as if new. I recalled Nora Blackstone’s words that the nursery was in readiness. I thought with some hint of pity that she must have tended this room for twenty years and my heart went out to her when I thought of how her Felicity would never come back nor sleep again in one of these beds. In one corner beneath the window was a large wooden dolls’ house, the small figures and furniture still placed where my mother may herself have placed them all those years ago when she was young and carefree. Then I thought of Aunt Laura. At some time in her childhood she must have been gay and happy, too, and I set to wondering again what had changed her to the unhappy, uncivil, discourteous person she had become.

While I kneeled on the floor to look closer at the dolls’ house Robert was tapping the light wood panelling with which the walls were covered. Would he find the secret chamber where Roman Catholic priests hid in the seventeenth century? Half of me hoped our search would be fruitless in

view of the governess's words and I felt a little afraid until I looked at Robert's tall, dependable figure and knew he would take care of me.

I joined him at some panelling on the outer wall by the high window. He was obviously interested in one particular partition.

'See, Janie, the outer wall is five foot thick here, or thereabouts. Tap this panelling here.'

I did as I was bid.

Now tap this panelling on the other side of the window.'

I moved across and indeed it made a different sound.

'Would you not agree the sound is somewhat more hollow on the right than on the left? And look, here the seam is thicker.'

I could sense the excitement in Robert's voice. It was as he said and I started to tremble involuntarily as I wondered what we might find. Robert carried on tapping and deduced the panelling sounded different to a height of five feet.

'But if this is it, how does one open it?'

I could tell frustration was creeping into his voice and manner.

'There must be a catch somewhere, but where?'

'What of the window recess?' I suggested, more out of desperation to please him than anything else.

'The window, yes, Janie, the window. Why didn't I think of it?'

He set to feeling the stone recess carefully. A cry escaped him.

'I think I've found it. Please, get me that stool Janie.'

I dragged the heavy, wooden stool over to him and he stood on it better able to see what he had discovered. Anxiously I watched him and waited.

'This is very rusty and will not give easily, but before I try to pull it I wonder which way the panelling will go. It won't slide, but swing, I think.'

He got down off the stool, pushing it to one side.

'Are you ready, my love?'

I murmured my agreement as he pulled and pushed the metal lever which I could now see was hidden in a crevice in the wall. After what seemed an eternity, there was a creaking sound and we could see the panelling swinging back slowly and we both stood together in front of it, watching it with disbelief. The hidden room which was revealed was small with only space for a man to sit. In the stone behind was a small slit which provided air. I heard the piercing scream before I realised it was I who screamed. Slumped against the wall was a skeleton! The clothes, although

deteriorated, hung loosely on the frame and a man's pocket watch dazzled my horrified eyes as the light from the window opposite danced on the gold casing.

Robert pulled me to him and I laid my head on his shoulder, the comfort of his arms around me. All too soon he turned my face up to his, away from the horror.

'Come away, Janie, come away. We will have to inform the authorities.'

He gently coaxed me from where I felt transfixed.

'But who is he, Robert?' I managed to ask quietly, my sluggish mind suddenly springing back into action.

'I have a good idea, a very good idea,' he said quietly.

As he led me to the door, we both stopped in our tracks. Nora Blackstone stood in the doorway.

'So you've found him then? I saw her coax him in, you know, and shut the door on him. She's evil, that one.'

So saying, she ran from the room. Robert and I followed, his arm gently around me.

In a daze, I was led to the drawing-room. I was trembling from head to foot. Robert thrust a glass of brandy into my hand and ordered me to drink it. I did so under his watchful gaze and then he rang the bell. Fortunately it was Mrs Dobbs who answered.

'My, whatever is wrong, miss? You look as white as my sheets and you are quivering like one of Cook's jellies,' she said, aghast at how I seemed.

'She's had a terrible shock. I want you to stay with her while I send for the police and Jason Trehaine,' Robert said.

'The police, sir? My, whatever is amiss?'

'I'll tell you all too soon, Mrs Dobbs, but for the moment keep Miss Merriock calm.'

'Why, yes, sir.'

By the time Robert returned, I had almost stopped shaking and felt somewhat calmer. The brandy had obviously worked. Robert ordered Mrs Dobbs to fetch my grandmother and Aunt Laura.

While we waited for them to join us, I asked Robert the question burning in my mind, as the scene we had witnessed in the nursery swam before my eyes.

'Who do you think it was, Robert?' There was a long silence before Robert spoke.

‘I think, my love, it is Andrew Trehaine, but that theory can only be verified when Jason Trehaine arrives.’

My hands flew to my mouth, the whole horror of it all dawning on me.

‘And when Nora Blackstone said she saw her coax him in and close the door she meant...’

I could hardly utter the next words. ‘Aunt Laura! Oh, my goodness! But why?’

‘Don’t distress yourself, dear, but it does look rather that way.’

Jason Trehaine arrived before the police and Robert took him up to the nursery. I wanted to join them but Robert wouldn’t hear of it. My grandmother and Aunt Laura joined me in the drawing-room in the meantime, but I was sworn to secrecy not to say anything. Robert wanted to tell them himself.

‘What is the matter?’ Aunt Laura complained as she sat opposite me. ‘I hate being disturbed while I’m reading in the library. What is the matter with you, Jane? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘Maybe I have,’ I couldn’t help uttering as she looked at me with such contempt.

‘Don’t start, you two,’ Grandmother interrupted. ‘My morning nap has been disturbed but I’m not complaining, nor should you, Laura. Robert wouldn’t send for us for anything other than for a good reason.’

We sat in silence, waiting for Robert and Jason Trehaine. I still felt very confused about thinking of him as my father. My thoughts kept returning to the scene in the nursery and I realised with some sense of horror and disbelief that the poor man, whoever he was, had probably been incarcerated all my life.

When Robert and Jason entered the room we all turned to look at them, all of us in expectation, for different reasons. Jason Trehaine was looking shaken and Robert poured him a brandy, telling him to sit down. He sat in a high chair by a small, polished table, quite distant from the rest of us.

‘What is this all about, Robert, and why is Mr Trehaine here? I need to get back to my nap, not that I will get back to sleep now,’ my grandmother said, leaning back in her chair and yawning.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Pendenna, but I have some news which will shock you.’

Robert sat next to me as he spoke, opposite Grandmother and Aunt Laura.

‘There is no easy way to say this, so I will come straight to the matter in question. Jane and I found the priest’s hole this morning, in the nursery.’

Robert's eyes shifted from my grandmother to Aunt Laura who had suddenly sat up straight.

'I'm afraid to have to tell you that in the priest's hole, we found human remains. Mr Trehaine has identified a pocket watch as that of his brother, Andrew Trehaine.'

Aunt Laura stood up and went to the window, wailing. My grandmother, suddenly alert, had paled visibly but with great dignity said, 'Thank you, Robert.'

Robert went to pour another glass of brandy which he handed to my grandmother. She sipped at it, not looking at anyone.

'And do we know how poor Andrew came to be shut in a priest's hole?' she asked quietly.

'I have an idea but would like Mrs Dobbs to fetch Nora Blackstone.'

'You don't think it was Miss Blackstone? Surely not.'

My grandmother found strength in her voice and she glanced around at Laura who was still stood looking out on to the terrace.

'Laura, have you anything to say about this? Come here and talk to me.'

Aunt Laura walked slowly towards us, her face expressionless but her eyes glittered with some emotion I could not identify. When she spoke she seemed in control of herself.

'There is no need to fetch Nora Blackstone. It was I who lured Andrew to the priest's hole and shut the door on him for what I thought was forever.'

Her voice was rising and a sob escaped her lips. Although my grandmother must have been distraught at this revelation, she spoke quite calmly as if speaking to a child.

'And why did you do this, Laura?' 'Because he was to marry me but he loved her, Felicity, my own sister.'

Laura was now losing control as she faced me.

'She was pregnant with his child. Yes, Jane, Andrew Trehaine was your father!'

She screamed the words at me with such venom and hatred that I shrunk back in my seat.

'This is not true, Laura,' Grandmother said with a firm voice. 'Why should you think this?'

Laura turned to her mother.

'Because I saw them in the woods together. They were walking close and were laughing, laughing at me no doubt, and when she told me she was

with child, I knew it was Andrew's. How I hated her, and him, but she would never have him. I saw to that. But no-one will punish me for it for I have been punished enough over twenty years. I thought I could find love again with Robert, until she came on the scene!'

She looked at me once more.

'You are no better than your mother, stealing my man. I have never had any happiness and never will.'

I felt almost sorry for her, but her next action took us all by surprise. She suddenly ran to the door and before Robert or I could catch up with her, she had picked up the skirts of her green dress and was halfway up the staircase.

Robert shouted after her and I followed him. To my amazement, she fled to my room and as Robert and I reached the door it was too late. She had already reached the balcony and jumped.

My heart was pounding but while Robert sped back downstairs, I stepped out on to the balcony. I could see Aunt Laura's crumpled body lying on the ground below, her skirts spread around her. Even as I looked, Robert appeared and bent over her poor, broken body. As he looked up at me, I knew she was dead.

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Aunt Laura and Andrew Trehaine were both buried in the family crypt in Pendenna church. It was a sad day, especially for my grandmother who had now lost both her daughters.

'But I have you, Jane,' she said to me after the funeral, hugging me to her.

The police were told the whole story and there were enough witnesses to verify that Aunt Laura had admitted to shutting her betrothed in the priest's hole. How sad, I kept thinking, that she was such a jealous woman to the extent that she would murder the man she loved, and no wonder Nora Blackstone was so deranged after what she had witnessed.

She had loved her two girls, Laura and Felicity, enough to keep silent all those years. Grandmother had spoken with Nora and now coaxed her to come downstairs more. Daisy Dobbs had kindly taken the governess under her wing and they took tea together every day. When the days were warmer, it was hoped that Nora would walk in the grounds of Pendenna again, but only time would tell.

The day after the funeral, two weeks before Christmas, in no mood for riding, I asked Jack to take me in the pony and trap to Mannamead. It was time I talked to Jason Trehaine. Simms opened the door to me and offered his sincere condolences. I was dressed in black out of respect for Aunt Laura. Grandmother had told me I only need wear it until Christmas Eve.

As I stood in the drawing-room waiting for Jason Trehaine I could feel the butterflies in my stomach and I was still wondering how I was going to broach the subject, but there was no need.

As he walked through the door and looked at me he said, 'You know, don't you, Jane?'

'That you are my father? Yes, I do, but how...'

'It was your manner the evening I dined at Pendenna. You kept touching your mother's brooch as you looked at me.'

I touched it now, for it was pinned to the neck of my dress.

'Seat yourself, Jane, and tell me how you found out.'

'I dropped the brooch that very day you came to dinner and I saw your picture. Everything suddenly fitted together, but I need you to tell me why my mother married John Merriock even though she was carrying your child.'

‘It is a long story, Jane, but I will try to simplify it for you. Your mother and I fell very much in love but I was engaged to be married to Charlotte Trevellyan. It was a long-standing engagement, a match secured by my parents and one just didn’t thwart one’s parents in those days. When your mother found out she was with child, we both panicked. John Merriock was a good friend of mine and had always secretly loved your mother.

‘I confided in him and he agreed to go away and marry Felicity, bringing up my child as his own. We hoped that when the child was born, your grandparents would welcome them back to Pendenna but Morgan Pendenna refused to have anything to do with his daughter, grandchild or the penniless artist she had married. I was at my wits’ end for I knew that I would probably never see my beloved or my little daughter.’

He paused, his voice breaking a little. ‘And what of the brooch which my mother wore each day?’ I queried.

‘On our last meeting, the night before your mother left Cornwall, I gave her the brooch with my image inside it so she would never forget me or the fact that I adored her.’

‘And the paintings?’

‘To make John feel better, I bought them to pay for their house and your schooling. I vowed you would be brought up in the manner I envisaged and that you and your mother would want for nothing. Jane, believe me when I say that I have lived in torment the past twenty years and when I heard your mother and John were dead, my first thought was to come and fetch you but at that time you would not have understood. I pray you understand now.’

He leaned across and took my hand.

‘Yes, I do understand. In the past couple of weeks, despite all that has been happening, I have given it all much thought and you have now made clear to me the whole story. You were going to tell me anyway, weren’t you?’

‘I was but I had to speak with your grandmother first and I never got the chance, what with Andrew being found in such a shocking way and your aunt’s death, but now you have come to me for which I am so thankful.’

‘It was because of Granny Merriock you were going to tell me, wasn’t it?’

‘Partly that and I knew you would eventually fit things together, as indeed you have done.’

‘And what of Granny Merriock?’

‘She knew. John had told her and she never forgave him for what he did. I knew that if you ever met her something would be said. Can we now forget all this and work on forming a relationship?’

‘We won’t have to work very hard at it. I liked you the very first day I met you and I feel I know you so well.’

As I spoke, he pulled me to my feet and drew me to him.

‘Ah, Jane, I thank God that I can at last call you daughter. And Jane,’ he said as he put me at arm’s length, ‘promise me that when you fall in love, you will never let him go.’

‘I promise,’ and my thoughts turned to Robert.

No, I would not let him go, and after Aunt Laura’s supposition when seeing Andrew and my mother in the woods, I realised how wrong she had been and how wrong I must be also. I knew I could not jeopardise a relationship for such a supposition.

As I made my way from Mannamead, my heart was light and I knew that I must seek out Robert and tie up the last loose ends. He was in the library when I found him and my thoughts turned back to the other occasion when I found him there. It seemed so long ago now. He looked up as I closed the door behind me.

‘Jane, what a pleasure.’

‘Ask me again, Robert,’ I said and he looked perplexed. ‘Remember the day at the Dancing Damsels? Ask me again.’

He stood up and came towards me. Gently, he took my hands in his hand, bending towards me, his lips touched mine gently. What joy I felt.

‘Will you marry me, Jane?’

‘Yes, oh, yes, I will marry you. I love you with all my heart and will never let you go. I will adore you, forever.’

THE END

BOOK 4:
WHERE LOVE TAKES YOU

Chapter One

It was the second time I'd seen the apparition while brushing my hair in front of the dressing table mirror, preparing for the evening meal, and when I turned around there was nothing there. The grey lady, as I called her, was a flimsy vision of a young woman in a grey morning dress, so unlike the style of clothes we wore now that I imagined it had been a fashion from the past. The young woman had blonde hair, drawn back off her face and she had on both occasions looked me in the eye seeming anxious about something. As on the first occasion I had seen her, not long after arriving at Middlepark, I shrugged my shoulders and put the incident down to an over active imagination, but surely I thought, if it was my imagination I would not have seen her twice. But for now I must concentrate on getting dressed for the evening meal for Miss Lina would be tapping on my door at any moment to seek my advice on what she was wearing.

I'd obtained a post at Middlepark, a lovely house in the Devon countryside close to the sea as companion to Miss Lina Roseby, the seventeen year old daughter of a Mr Richard Roseby a widower who had interviewed me for the position here at Middlepark one fine June morning in 1883. I recalled the interview now,

"And do you think you could bring to heel my daughter and teach her the ways of a lady Miss Trent?" The dark handsome Richard Roseby had asked me as we sat in his office on the second floor of Middlepark House. I had been somewhat distracted by the view over the beautiful gardens so had not answered straight away and when I looked at him, Mr Roseby had been looking at me thoughtfully with an amused expression on his face, his hands met together in front of his perfect mouth.

"Why, yes sir." I had replied somewhat stupidly, thinking all the while that any chance of gaining the position had now evaded me.

"I also think you could Miss Trent." The handsome Richard Roseby had said without further ado. "Could you start next Monday?"

"I could indeed sir." I'd replied somewhat overcome as I really thought the interview had not fared well.

"All I ask Miss Trent, is that while you are with my daughter that you refrain from daydreaming." Any other person would have spoken these words harshly but there was a mischievous gleam in Mr Roseby's eyes and I could see he was amused.

“I promise I’ll try to do so, sir.” I said lightly once more looking out over the large green lawns where, even as I looked, I could see four people playing croquet.

“Would you like to join them?” asked my employer.

“No indeed not.” I had said.

“I’d like you to,” had been his answer, “so you can meet your charge.” As he spoke he walked over to the window, beckoning me to join him. As I stood next to him I realised how tall Richard Roseby was, he appeared to tower over me and at the proximity of his nearness I felt my heart skip a beat for he was indeed a very attractive man. “The young woman in the lemon dress is Georgina Moor, a vain person who is intent on marrying me, and that young man about to hit the ball is her brother Jonathon. They live at Redcliffe Manor which is a short distance from here and they spend more time here than they do in their own home.” I was to learn over the coming weeks that this was indeed true and how I would come to loathe Georgina and she, me.

“And who is the elderly gentleman?” I asked for, from this distance, he looked to be a pleasant kindly man.

“He is my father George, and he will wish you to call him such.”

“So I take it the young woman in pink with the parasol is Lina.”

“You are correct in that assumption Miss Trent, I’d like you to meet her now,” he said seriously. “For it remains to be seen if you will take to each other.” So Mr Roseby and I walked back down the staircase together, the thick gold-coloured carpet soft beneath my feet, me hardly believing that I had secured the post. As I left in the Roseby’s brougham some time later, looking back at the three storey building basking in the afternoon sun, the long windows gleaming, I realised how fortunate I was.

My parents had died in a storm on a crossing back from France in late February and since then I had been sewing day and night for Mrs Forester to earn a living, but I loathed it and now I would stitch no more except for pleasure. There was a light knock on my door and Lina walked in, interrupting my revelry of those important moments a few weeks ago.

“How do I look Charlotte?” said Lina. She was a pretty young woman who lacked confidence in herself but with my help and persistence I hoped to change things, so that eventually she would marry well which was her father’s intention. She stood before me now looking still very much the child, ringlets fell each side of her face and a soft fringe fell over her

forehead which was very much the fashion of the day. The pink dress she wore was over decorated with flounces at the v-neckline, the sleeves and the skirt both at the back and front. Fortunately we were to have a visit from the dressmaker in a day or two when I hoped Lina would be happy to accept my suggestions of more sleek lines to accentuate her lovely figure, with round necklines for evening. The young woman had come to readily accept me as her mentor for which I was thankful and had insisted on including me in all the activities of the household.

"You look charming," I told her kindly. "But when Mrs Rivers arrives we will need to make a few changes to prepare you for your coming out ball in Exeter in September." While Lina looked out of the window watching the arrival of the Moors I quickly looked back in the mirror wishing to look my best for my employer who I'd fallen madly in love with. I knew that I never dared expect that love to be reciprocated but I lived in hope. The soft yellows of the room reflected in the mirror and once again I thought momentarily of the grey lady and wondered if I should mention it to someone, but Richard Roseby already knew I was a daydreamer and would no doubt dismiss me if he had the notion that I was not only dreaming but seeing things as well. I decided to remove it from my mind.

The pale blue cotton dress I wore was quite pleasing to the eye, complimenting my lustrous light brown hair which, like Lina's, fell softly over my forehead. The bulk of it was drawn back into a bun at the back of my head, allowing my curling dark lashes and my grey eyes to be my most prominent feature.

"Are you wearing the pearls your father gave you," I asked Lina as she walked back across the small cosy room which was on the third floor.

"Yes I am," said Lina showing me the creamy pearls which adorned her slender neck. Although I was only five years older than Lina, being just twenty-two years of age, I appeared to be much older and wiser, but then Lina had led a sheltered life here at Budleigh Salterton while I had traversed the high seas with my parents since I was a child. It had only been because of illness that I had fortuitously not accompanied them on their last trip to France.

Lina and I walked together down the two staircases to the dining room below, my A-line skirts clinging softly to my slender legs and brushing the carpet beneath my feet. We were a trifle late and all were assembled in the

long dining room, the silver gleaming where a ray of sunlight fell across the white damask cloth onto the richly laid table.

"I apologise for being late," I said to Richard Roseby who was waiting to seat himself at the head of the table.

"It is but a couple of minutes Miss Trent," he replied amiably. "Please be seated." I did as I was bid and sat next to Georgina Moor. Her brother was sat opposite us next to George who, on his left, had Lina between him and her father. For the umpteenth time I thought how young Richard Roseby looked and wished, as I had done all these weeks, that he would call me Charlotte, but there were many things I daydreamed about which hadn't a chance of coming true. I looked at the wine-coloured wallpaper and wondered idly if it was Richard's wife who had chosen it. I'd learned that she had died of a fever when Lina was just two days old, how sad I felt for both of them; he to lose a wife and she a mother.

"I said, how are you coping with this heat?" Georgina's harsh voice drifted across to me. She was sat next to my employer and I saw him smile at my lack of interest at what was going on around me.

"I find it quite bearable as long as we stay indoors," I told Miss Moor. "I like to walk along the front after dinner when it is a trifle cooler." I helped myself to the potatoes George offered to me in a china serving dish.

"And do you walk with Miss Trent Lina?" Georgina asked of her.

"No. I am usually too tired to accompany Charlotte, I don't know how she does it," replied Lina politely.

"But this evening, we shall accompany Miss Trent on her walk, if that pleases you," said Richard to me. My fork stopped half way to my mouth and I looked at him. "Well?" He said, obviously noting the bemused expression on my face.

"I would be honoured Mr Roseby for you and Lina to accompany me." I stumbled over the words for Richard Roseby was looking at me in a way he had never looked at me before, or was I imagining this also, as I was sure I was imagining the grey lady in my room.

"We'll all go, shan't we Jonathon," said Georgina to her brother and I realised that at no cost would she allow me to walk with Richard without her.

"I'd prefer that the three of use went alone," said Richard, quite unperturbed by Georgina's request to join us.

“Very well,” said Miss Moor, with more than a hint of disappointment in her voice. I smiled secretly to myself, and looked at Georgina. She was pretty in a faded sort of way and I guessed her to be a lot older than myself. Her hair which was brown never shone, and her beige-coloured silk dress although becoming looked as if it had seen better days, as did most of her clothes. I chided myself at such an uncharitable thought but I disliked her and she me, so her next words surprised me somewhat.

“I’d like you to call for tea at Redcliffe Manor one day this week Charlotte, with Lina of course. Shall we say Thursday? And of course the invitation extends to you dear Richard.” As she spoke she looked sweetly at the object of her affection and I thought of what Richard Roseby had said the first time I had set foot in Middlepark House — “A vain person who is intent on marrying me.”

He wouldn’t marry her surely, and I waited with baited breath for his answer. “Apologies Georgina, but I have business to attend to this week. Another occasion perhaps.” As he spoke quite politely, I could see that Georgina was crestfallen.

“Well, you and Lina will have to come alone I suppose,” she said to me and I realised that her only intention had been to lure poor Richard to Redcliffe Manor and that she hadn’t wanted to invite me at all. Well, her plan had failed to have the desired effect I thought.

The meal over and goodnights said, Lina, her father and I set off down the lane towards the seafront. It was a glorious evening made all the more pleasant by my companions. Seagulls squawked in the distance and I could see them swooping in unison obviously following some fishing boat laden with fish. Lina went on in front of us pulling at the grass in the hedgerows. “No Lina,” I called, “that is not seemly for a young lady. Please walk with us.”

“Quite right,” said Richard, “I can see you are doing a grand job with my daughter for which I thank you.”

“Thank you for your kind words sir,” I said.

“It is nothing more than you deserve young woman, would you…” Here his voice petered off and I realised Richard Roseby was about to ask me something but I would never know what as Lina joined us.

“Is it alright for me to pick the wild flowers?” she asked.

“It is, but it would be more seemly in the daytime. Maybe we could walk this way tomorrow if the weather holds,” I told her for the weather had been

beautiful since I arrived — sunny, balmy summer days which I would never forget and wondered with some misgiving what would become of me when Lina found a suitable beau. My despair at the thought of leaving Middlepark was too dire to contemplate.

"Miss Trent," Richard's voice drifted across, "daydreaming again?" Shall we ask her what she was dreaming about Lina?" And he laughed.

"Would that I could tell you sir." I said coyly and his face changed to one of seriousness.

"Would that you could Miss Trent," he said quietly. "Here we are, the sea in all its glory."

How I loved the sea, I thought, and I stood still and took a deep breath inward, breathing in the tangy, salty sea air into my lungs.

"Surely that is unseemly Charlotte," said Lina with a smile hovering at her mouth. I realised for the first time that she had the same wicked sense of fun as her father and I flung my head back and laughed quietly, my straw bonnet nearly falling off in the process.

"Take my arm both of you," said Richard unexpectedly, and so we walked along the three of us, Lina and I each side of her father. My hand trembled as I felt the smoothness of his sleeve and the strength of his forearm and I silently prayed he would not notice, but as he looked down at me I realised he had. Our eyes met and for a brief instance my dreams had come true, but the moment was gone and I looked out over the pebbled beach and sparkling sea, with small fishing boats drawn up on the edge unloading their catch. The large ball of fire which was the sun was starting to fall on the horizon ahead of us and I wondered if my dreams would ever come true. Only time would tell. The walk was invigorating and we returned to Middlepark with a spring in our step. Lina was tired and asked to be excused so she could go to her room which was next to mine on the third floor. Apparently it had been the nursery in times past and Lina had slept there since she was a child. As we watched her walk up the staircase I thought that I had best leave my employer to his own devices as much as I wished to stay with him for I was happier in his company than I had ever been in my life.

"Is it alright if I sit in the library for a while sir?" I asked him.

"I will join you if I may," he said, "for I wish to find another novel to read," So we walked together to the library. It was a small cosy room, the walls lined with books of all shapes and sizes; the wall which held the

fireplace was decorated in red. When we walked in lamps were already lit on four tables which were scattered about the room along with comfortable brown leather armchairs which had been used lovingly. I sat in one of them, picking up a volume of poetry which lay on the table by my chair. I glanced through it while Richard perused the shelves silently for a suitable book. As I watched him, looking at his broad dependable shoulders, I then glanced down at the book I held in my hand and read the words, “It seems to me, to myself, that no man was ever before to any woman what you are to me.” The words had been written by Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning and how true it was, just like my feeling for Richard Roseby but he must never know, unless there came a time when he declared his love for me. But I was daydreaming again, and I knew in my heart that this would never be. He came and sat in a chair opposite mine and started reading the book which he opened, his hand strong on the cover. We sat in a companionable silence, me reading the love sonnets and every now and then glancing at Richard. Sometimes he would raise his head from the book he was reading and smile at me; and so we sat until I suddenly felt weary and bid him goodnight.

“Sleep well Charlotte,” he uttered, more absorbed in his book than me, but my heart sang for he had called me by my Christian name and I practically danced up the stairs, the sound of his voice uttering my name ringing in my ears and by the time I reached my room the sound of it became a caress. But my joy was to be short lived.

Before going to my own room I looked in on Lina, tapping gently at her door in case she was asleep. I opened the door quietly and peeped into the modest sized room, everything was pink and white with a red carpet covering the floor. Lina sat propped up in bed against the pillows, her golden-coloured wavy hair loose about her shoulders, cascading down her back. She looked so young and vulnerable in a white cotton nightdress stitched with lace at the round, high neckline.

“How I enjoyed our walk this evening Charlotte,” she said quietly. “I’d like the three of us to walk like that every evening after dinner. It was just like being a family.” I realised then how much she must have missed not having a mother.

“We will do it again soon Lina. Now settle down for it is eleven o’clock and tomorrow we will go and collect some wild flowers from the lane.”

“I’d like that.” I helped her arrange her snowy white pillows. By the time I crept from the room the young woman was already asleep.

Entering my room I could see the lamp had been lit, no doubt by Ruby the young maid who I had taken to and she to me. The light fell onto the mirror as I went to remove my string of pearls, and what I saw made me almost scream aloud, but I clapped my hand to my mouth not wishing any sound to escape my lips. Written on the mirror in large letters in rouge from my pot were the words, “Help me.”

Chapter Two

It couldn't have been a ghostly hand that had written the words, so who had done it? One of the servants maybe, but why would they do it? To frighten me perhaps? Or was there someone else in the house at Middlepark who wished to alarm me? But who? Surely not Richard or Lina; this was a preposterous thought. But my next notion seemed quite feasible, Georgina? I rubbed hard on the mirror with my facecloth, erasing the two words completely. Leaving my white flannel red as with blood and I quickly dropped it in the wastepaper bin. Going over and pouring cold water from the jug into the washbasin I washed my hands thoroughly with the soap. Erasing all of the dreaded words completely. But were they dreaded or did someone need help? This thought hadn't until now occurred to me and I lay awake for some time mulling it over in my mind. Before I fell into a restless slumber I concluded that whoever it was and for whatever reason that wouldn't be an end of it; little did I know that I would be proved to be correct in this assumption.

The next morning Lina and I were sat partaking of our toast at breakfast when to my delight Richard Roseby walked into the dining room but it appeared he wasn't to join us.

"We have a visitor arriving today Lina, so you may take the day off Miss Trent." He directed his smile at me.

"Thank you Mr Roseby," I uttered, all the while wondering who the illustrious visitor could be and why I wasn't invited to be part of the day.

"Enjoy your day Miss Trent, and Lina, please hurry with your breakfast for I wish to speak with you in my study." With these words he left the room and as I watched his tall figure disappear through the doorway I mused as to what exactly I would wish to do with myself, as it was the first time I had been left to my own devices since arriving at Middlepark.

I went to my room and donned my straw hat and gathered together a small sketch pad and pencils and a small rug for I had thought to walk alongside the river Otter and sketch whatever took my fancy; contemplating all the while what my employer and his daughter were doing.

I stepped out of the house and walked down the short driveway, observing as I did so the glorious colours of the roses which adorned the whole of the front garden. The wrought iron gates were open as usual and I stepped out

onto the path we had walked on yesterday evening to the beach and I thought with some pleasure of my walk with Richard and Lina, and Richard using my Christian name in the library. At these pleasant thoughts I practically skipped along looking at the blue sky, across which small, fluffy white clouds scudded. There will be a change in the weather soon I thought to myself as I turned to the left and walked along by the river. It was quiet and still with no one else in sight, which surprised me on such a glorious day but I was thankful that it was quiet for I was glad of the solitude. I marvelled at the way some boughs of the trees lent towards the still grey water, their tips almost touching the river, the path was clear but overgrown with grass on one side and my royal blue skirt swished against it as I walked. To my delight I spotted a kingfisher sat on the branch of a tree on the opposite bank, his dagger-like beak straight and majestic. As quietly as I could I spread the small rug on the riverbank and as decorously as I could settled down with my skirts surrounding me. Picking up my pencil and sketchbook I set to capturing on paper the beautifully coloured kingfisher with his bright blue-coloured back and orange breast; he looked dressed for a ball. I sat for some time sketching and praying the beautiful bird would not fly or dip towards the water in search of a fish, but he was still and I thought how fortunate I was to be sat on this lovely bank surrounded by nature with the blue sky above me and the sun warm on my back. So engrossed was I with my drawing that I failed to hear the step of a stranger on the path.

"You look enrapt in your sketching Miss Trent." The voice startled me, as well as the kingfisher who flew towards the sky. Turning around I could see it was Jonathon Moor, I made to scramble to my feet for I was in a most inappropriate position to talk to him. His hand reached out to me and willingly I took it as Jonathon helped me to my feet.

"Good day Mr Moor, forgive me I did not hear you approach," I apologised. I had not seen Jonathon many times before but realised in this moment that while I'd seen him I'd not really taken notice of him. The eyes which looked down on me from a tanned face were a sparkling deep blue, his fair hair curled appealingly on his wine-coloured frock coat which covered his broad shoulders, and I had not realised before how tall he was, somewhat taller than Richard I concluded.

"I didn't mean to startle you Miss Trent, and my wish was not to disturb you either but I felt I must speak to you for I never see you alone and I

thought how pleasant it would be to talk to you."

"Indeed," I agreed, suddenly feeling very vulnerable and alone with this young man who was barely a stranger and yet at the same time I trusted him. "Would you do me the honour of walking with me Miss Trent?" he asked courteously.

"Why yes, I would deem it an honour." I told him graciously.

"May I suggest that we walk the way I have just come from?" Jonathon enquired.

"Yes that would be agreeable," I said, starting to close my sketchbook but Jonathon's hand fell over mine.

"Let me see," he said quietly taking the book from me and looking at the kingfisher I had almost completed drawing.

"I have not quite finished it," I explained stupidly for he could very obviously see that this was the case.

"It would appear I startled your subject as much as you," He said smiling down at me. What a beautiful smile he has I thought and then gathered myself together.

"You did indeed," I agreed, laughing quietly, "but I can finish it later and then colour it." Jonathon handed me back my sketchbook and we proceeded to walk together along the path. Every now and then a strong hand steadied me as we reached a twig or a broken bough which lay across the path in front of us. We walked for some time in a companionable silence. Every now and then I looked up at the man at my side and he smiled as he looked down at me, for he was a lot taller than I.

"Do you live far from here?" I asked of him, more as an opening for conversation than a desire to know, except that I suddenly remembered that Lina and I were to call for tea at Redcliffe Manor on the morrow. The thought sent my mind back for an instant to Middlepark and I wondered briefly how things were fairing there and whether the mysterious visitor had yet arrived.

"We are not far from my home now if you would like to accompany me there, it is but a stones throw away." I heard Jonathon's voice and came back to the present.

"I would very much like to see the Manor for we are to dine there for tea tomorrow afternoon," I answered.

"Very well, we will need to follow this path to the right." I followed him down a short path which came out onto a track in the open once more, away

from the shelter of the overhanging trees and I felt the hot sun on my face. To the right of me I could hear the sea lapping on the shore and I stopped to listen lest I was mistaken.

"It is the sea isn't it?" I asked Jonathon.

"Yes it most certainly is," he told me, "it is but the other side of the meadow."

"So Redcliffe Manor is close to the sea?" I questioned.

"Indeed it is, my ancestors built on the land in the seventeenth century, although many parts of the manor have been added at a later date." He told me with passion and pride in his voice; and I was soon to understand why. We walked for a few more yards along the track, the sun beating down on us. We then reached tall gates set into a high wall which were open as if in greeting and walked together up a long path which was sheltered from the sun by poplar trees which lined each side of the driveway. Suddenly without warning we stepped into the open once more and I was dazzled by the scene which lay before me. A lake of green water decorated with pink and white water lilies lay to our right and ahead of me was the most magnificent building I had ever or had ever hoped to see. The house was vast and hauntingly beautiful, its cream-coloured walls were basking in the sunlight, the building looked so still and peaceful, slumbering almost in the warmth of the sun. I could not begin to count the windows as there were so many, the sunlight playing on each and every one. I turned to Jonathon for we had been silent while I took in the view before me.

"It is beautiful," I said quietly and felt how a woman must feel when she instantly falls in love with a man.

"I'm more than pleased you like it so much for I can see that you are captivated by it," he said. "Would you like to come and see Georgina for she is at home today?" At the mention of his sister's name a cloud momentarily passed over the sun and I realised that she overshadowed her handsome brother with her domineering presence.

"If you don't mind sir, I'd rather not today," I told him gently.

"Then let us walk by the lake together," He seemed almost pleased that I decided not to see his sister and I could understand why. So we walked together by the lake where I could see beautifully coloured dragonflies skimming across the water above the lilies. This place is a paradise I thought to myself and wondered why Georgina spent so much time at Middlepark when she had such a stately home of her own. But then I

mused, the lure of Middlepark was Richard Roseby without a doubt. With each step we took I could see the beautiful building.

"You must have many servants to keep such a vast place going," I observed by way of conversation for I had come to realise that Jonathon Moor was a man of few words.

"No, we have but a cook and two housemaids." His answer surprised me, little did I know then that tomorrow all would be made clear to me. We nearly traversed the lake and I could hear the sea ever closer.

"We must be near the sea now," I commented to my companion.

"It is indeed just a short distance," Jonathon told me. "If we continue walking you will see how the manor got its name." We left the lake a short way behind us and walked across the grass which was starting to turn brown no doubt due to all the hot weather we had experienced in the past weeks. Suddenly without warning I could see the sea before me, the sun shining on it like crystal droplets on a necklace. As I looked back behind me I could see the grass we had walked across was on a steep incline although it had not seemed so as we walked and we were now on a cliff path.

"See," said my companion, taking my elbow and turning me to the right, "there is Budleigh Salterton." And I realised that I could see the promenade in the distance with its row of hotels like dolls houses from where we stood.

"Why," I exclaimed, "so it is."

"And now if you look to your left at the curve in the cliff you will see why our manor is called such." Jonathon was once more passionate of manner and as I looked where he directed I could see the cliffs in question were a deep red in colour so all was revealed. "And if you look back behind you Miss Trent you will see the manor nestling near the curve of the cliff." Doing as I was bid I could see that he was right, the scene was such a beautiful one I was aware of my sketchpad in my hand and wished to sit and capture the beauty of it all with my pencil but to have done so would have been unseemly and once more I thought of Middlepark and wondered again what was happening there.

Looking at my fob watch that was pinned to the bodice of my day dress I could see that it was already three o'clock.

"My goodness," I exclaimed to Jonathon. "I must start to retrace my steps."

“Then I shall walk with you,” he offered and I was pleased to accept as I was sure I would not find my way. Before heading back to Middlepark I glanced once more at Redcliffe Manor, savouring the moment and holding the magical scene in my mind.

“You are very lucky to reside here Mr Moor,” I said more to myself than to him. “Very lucky indeed.”

It didn’t seem to take us so long to walk back, our steps were swifter and in no time at all we were walking back along by the river. We walked in silence, what Jonathon’s thoughts were I had little idea, but mine were very mixed, the river, my sketch of the kingfisher, Redcliffe Manor and the occupants of Middlepark. These thoughts were all jumbled in my head but given time they would all be unravelled and I would be able to make some sense of my mixed emotions. One thing that I have to concede this instance was that Jonathon was a very attractive young man and from now on I would see him for himself as a person and would never let Georgina overshadow him.

When we reached the gates of Middlepark, Jonathon took my hand and kissed the back of it with the gentlest of kisses as if a butterfly had brushed over it and my heart skipped a beat.

“I shall look forward to seeing you on the morrow Miss Trent,” he said, “for I have very much enjoyed your company today.”

“And I yours,” I told him truthfully for it had certainly been an eventful day and I watched his tall figure walk back along the lane before entering the house.

As I stepped into the hallway and removed my straw hat I could hear laughter coming from the slightly open door of the drawing room. It was a woman’s soft laughter and I stopped wondering if it were indeed the visitor when the door suddenly opened and Lina started to run across the hallway towards me.

“Walk, don’t run,” I admonished her gently and she did as she was bid.

“Charlotte, please come and see what Miss Verity has brought me back from Paris!” She excitedly took hold of my arm pulling me toward the drawing room. As I stepped into the lovely green decorated room of modest proportions I could see Richard Roseby standing by the fireplace and seated on the settle was a lovely woman with chestnut-coloured hair, swept up at the back with soft ringlets adorning her brow. I had little time to study her

or to think straight as Lina led me over to a small polished table beneath the long window which was draped with soft green velvet curtains.

"Look Charlotte, Look," urged Lina. I could see why she was so excited, silk ribbons of all hues and colours lay on the table in a profusion of colour along with white and cream lengths of intricately woven lace, together with a colourful round pomander.

"They are lovely," I enthused with Lina. "But do please try to control your excitement, especially in front of others Lina."

"Ever the dutiful companion." I turned to Richard at the sound of his voice. I could scarce believe now that I was back at Middlepark that my day had gone so well, it was now all like a dream.

"I'm sorry Mr Roseby, I should perhaps allow Lina some excitement for today as it is obviously very special," I said demurely.

"Miss Trent, I would have you no other way," Richard said smiling.

"Let me introduce you to Verity Hawksworth." At his words the young woman rose from the settle, smoothing her pale violet-coloured skirts as she stood to greet me.

"I am most pleased to meet you Miss Trent," she spoke softly, "for I have heard so much about you today."

"Good things I hope," I said rather foolishly, as for once the cat seemed to have got my tongue.

"All good indeed; I assure you," the young woman said. "And Lina very obviously adores you." The young woman's words held no hint of jealously or sarcasm and I warmed to her straight away, at the same time thinking as I looked at smiling Richard Roseby that my daydreaming days were finally over and I wondered idly if he adored the lovely Verity.

Chapter Three

I wouldn't have found the letters if a half crown had not slipped from my hand and rolled under the bed. I had been assessing my finances with a view to buying a new gown when it had happened. It was the day after I had met Verity Hawksworth and the day Lina and I were to take tea with Georgina at Redcliffe Manor, which I was now looking forward to as I wished to see the manor close up. I got down on my knees and looked under the bed. I could see the elusive coin wedged in the corner between the floorboards, now what was I to do I mused, for the bed would be heavy to move but I had to retrieve the coin as I couldn't afford to lose it. Getting to my feet I lifted the top bed head and with all my strength moved the bed toward me so I could just squeeze behind it and rescue the half crown. I got my breath back from the exertion and then pushed myself between the bed and the wall. Struggling to kneel down, my skirts hampering me, but with grim determination I found myself on my knees. The coin was hard to budge from its resting place, I pulled really hard, the coin grasped between my fingers and to my dismay as I released the half-crown the floorboard came with it and I was staring into a small gap beneath.

It was a rogue piece of floorboard which had been cut into a small square and I was just about to place it back when something in the cavity arrested my attention, now my eyes had adjusted to the light in the corner. Reaching into the hole, my hand surrounded paper, quite a think bundle of it. Gently I removed the wad and still kneeling in the restricted corner of my room I looked down at that I'd retrieved. It was a bundle of letters, carefully tied together with a length of red silk ribbon. I carefully laid them on the floor beside me while I looked back into the gaping cavity to see if there was anything else there. A glint of guilt twinkled up at me and once more I placed my hand down to retrieve the item, and could see on bringing it out into the light that it was a small miniature of a young man. Laying it together with the letters before ensuring there was nothing else hidden beneath the floorboards, I placed the piece of polished wood back into position and swiftly got to my feet with the treasure I had uncovered, intent now on looking at my find before I was disturbed. I pushed my bed back into place with a little effort and sat down on the bedcover looking at the bundle of letters and the miniature which were now in my hand.

My first thought was how long had they been lying in secret beneath the floorboards? My second question was, who did they belong to? And my third and most important question was why had they been hidden? My second question was answered as I pushed back the ribbon a little on the top envelope and could see written in a bold masculine hand the name Madeline. So who was she? Obviously a young woman who had occupied this room, but when? Should I pass them to Richard Roseby was my next dilemma? But a voice inside my head said an emphatic, “no”. Looking at the miniature I could see it was of a blonde haired young man dressed in a blue jacket with a white ruffled shirt. He was handsome in a gentle way, his blond eyelashes curled over his eyes and his jaw line held no determination. The small lips were parted in a half smile, his eyes looking directly at me as if he were indeed in the room. I made a sudden decision as I looked at my fob watch pinned to my grey day dress and could see it was nearly half past eight and I knew that Lina would soon enter the room. Quickly I hid the letters and miniature in my dressing table drawer underneath my neatly laid underwear. Just in time I thought as the door burst open to reveal Lina, dressed in a green muslin dress, a ribbon to match in her blonde hair.

“How do I look Charlotte?” she said excitedly. “I’m so looking forward to our outing to the Manor today, for I’ve not been there before.”

“I also look forward to it Lina,” I told her, going over to the dressing table mirror to check that I was tidy enough for breakfast, and thinking, as I looked into the mirror, of the apparition I’d thought I seen, wondering at the same time if it had been Madeline. This thought made me restless for I knew that I would not be able to look through the letters until much later in the day.

“You look thoughtful Charlotte,” Lina observed.

“Goodness me Lina, I was only deliberating as to whether to purchase a new gown for myself,” I told her lightly.

“Oh yes,” Lina enthused, “when the dressmaker comes tomorrow you will be able to choose the material and be measured as I will.”

“I do not think that will be possible Lina,” I said dampening her enthusiasm. “I will probably need to take a trip to Exeter.”

“I’m sure it will be permissible for you to be measured tomorrow, in fact, I insist on it and I intend to put the matter to Papa,” she said boldly, and I realised that at last Lina was beginning to think for herself which was a sign of progress and also a sign of her becoming a young lady in her own right. I

secretly hoped that this was in some way down to my tuition over the past weeks.

"We shall see," was all I said. "What is the weather like today?" I asked, changing the subject, "for I have not had much chance to look from the window today."

"Come and see," urged Lina taking hold of my hand. We looked from the window together; the sky was a brilliant blue but today light grey clouds moved slowly across it. I realised that we were nearing the beginning of September and the weather was bound to change from the glorious summer I'd experienced since arriving here.

"Come Lina, we had best go down to breakfast for we are late already."

On entering the dining room I could see Verity sat at the table sipping coffee from a white bone china cup, she looked up and smiled at us.

"Good morning Lina and Miss Trent," she said in her soft voice. "I apologise that I have finished breakfast, but Richard and I are to go on a jaunt to Exeter today for I have an appointment."

"Do not apologise Miss Hawksworth, for I am very lucky that a young woman in my position can breakfast with her employers," I admitted, a slight tremor in my voice for Verity looked beautiful in a simple white cotton blouse with a frill at the neck and cuffs; a cameo brooch pinned sedately at her lovely throat. How I could ever have thought that my employer would fall for my charms, which were few against the lovely Verity's I could not imagine.

"I'm sure dear Richard is an admirable employer and very pleased for you to join them at their table Miss Trent." At these words she got to her feet smoothing her black silk skirts. "I will see you some time later then, do enjoy your trip to Redcliffe; I have not seen Georgina for some time."

"Thank you Verity," Lina said as she helped herself to toast and butter. As she went to leave Verity Hawksworth turned to me and said as an afterthought, "It is Mrs Miss Trent, but no matter." With which words she smiled her beautiful smile and departed leaving me with a shocked expression on my face for I would have put a wager on it that Richard Roseby had introduced the lovely Verity to me as Miss Hawksworth. This put a whole new perspective on the situation and as Lina and I travelled in the open carriage to Redcliffe Manor I mulled this over and my spirits lifted.

It was chillier today and I half wished I had covered my shoulder with a shawl as Lina had had the sense to do.

"What do you think of Verity?" Lina asked me unexpectedly as we bowled along the country lane.

"She is a very lovely young woman and very much a gentlewoman." I had been caught unawares, but at the same time realised that my words were indeed true.

"It is such a pity that her husband died so young," said Lina in a very grown up way of talking.

"Her husband died?" I said somewhat stupidly, my heart sinking once more.

"Yes, he died of consumption," Lina told me willingly.

"And how long ago was this?" I asked with interest, trying at the same time to appear nonchalant.

"A year ago," Lina told me. "Verity has been in Paris for some time staying with her friend."

"I see," I answered slowly, "and how did your Father come to know Mrs Hawksworth?"

"She was a friend of the family or so I believe. So both she and Papa are on their own now, who knows what may happen." Indeed, I thought to myself and my spirits flagged again until we turned into the drive of the manor. It still held the same beauty for me but as we drew nearer to the front of the building I could see with some astonishment that the building was in a sad state of disrepair. Paint was flaking from the walls and the many windows were shrouded with cobwebs and, now closer, I could see that shutters on the inside were closed against the daylight. I was even more astonished when instead of the carriage stopping at the front entrance we went on round to the side of the building where Georgina waited for us outside a small arched doorway which was set at the side of the vast building.

"Welcome to Redcliffe Manor."

"Thank you for inviting us," I replied amiably. "The manor is vast."

"It most certainly is," agreed our hostess, seeming not at all perturbed by the shabbiness of her home.

Lina and I followed Georgina along a narrow passageway which was covered with a green-coloured almost threadbare carpet; the corridor smelt musty and little used. We were led into a huge room at the back of the

house, the musty smell continued in here also in spite of a large fire which, although summertime, burnt in the marble grate. There were two long maroon-coloured settles arranged around the fireplace with a beautifully carved walnut coffee table standing before them. A huge glass chandelier hung from the centre of the ceiling which was big enough to take at least a hundred candles. Two large windows with cream-coloured shutters and shabby maroon curtains were set in the wall opposite the doorway and looking to my right I could see a long polished dining table with ten high-backed chairs arranged around it. I took all this in in seconds and felt some sympathy for Jonathon and Georgina for the place had obviously been opulent at some time in the past, and I set to wondering what could have happened to it.

"Please be seated," Georgina said, indicating the settle by the fire. Lina and I did as we were bid. "I will just summon the maid." As she spoke Miss Moor went over to the bell pull by the fireplace and I watched her. Georgina had an hourglass figure and today she wore a light brown-coloured day gown which suited her fair colouring admirably, and as she turned towards me, looking at her face I realised it wasn't age etched there but worry and I could see why she had her sights set on Richard Roseby.

The turn of conversation substantiated this.

"You will have noted," began Georgina as she settled herself on the other settle near the fire, "that our home is falling down around our ears."

"It is nonetheless a beautiful place," I offered, trying to be honest and comforting at the same time.

"Our Father gambled his fortune away," she continued wistfully, as much to herself as to us. "He was a very unhappy man, but he has left us with very little. I had hoped that Jonathon would marry well, but he seems disinterested in restoring our family fortunes."

"I'm sure one day some good luck will be yours," I pacified her, for I could see Georgina was in an unhappy frame of mind as she twisted her handkerchief between her hands, now and then dabbing her eye with it, We were interrupted by two maids who brought in a tray with delicately cut sandwiches and fruitcake on china plates with a pot of tea. The bone china was beautiful, a rose pink in colour with a large tea pot to match and I realised that there were obviously very lovely things in this house but little money for the upkeep, and as Lina and I left some time later I felt

differently about Georgina, a thing that in time I was to regret but little did I know it then.

As we travelled back in the carriage and watched the now slate grey clouds moving in over the sea I wondered idly where Jonathon had been whilst we had visited Redcliffe.

"Can we walk down the lane and pick some wild flowers please Charlotte?" Lina asked so enthusiastically as we arrived back at the house that I could not deny her. I went to my room first to collect my shawl as the sun today was now and then hidden by grey clouds and the air felt chilly when for many weeks it had been pleasantly hot. I glanced briefly at the dressing table mirror, almost expecting to see another message scrawled across it but today the glass was gleaming, showing only my reflection. I went back down the two flights of steps to join Lina in the hall.

"There is a letter for you Charlotte," Lina told me, bringing it across. I took it gently from her wondering who could possibly be writing to me, I looked at the envelope in my hand, it was cream-coloured and of good quality. The address on the front with my name had been written in a business like way in black ink.

"Aren't you going to read it?" asked Lina with expectation.

"I'm sure it will keep until our return," I told her, placing the letter in my reticule. "Let us go then and see what wild flowers we can see and collect," I said brightly all the while idly wondering who the letter was from.

We walked down the lane towards the sea; Lina today walking beside me which was a good sign as usually she ran on ahead, her childlike ways were vanishing which caused me to think that I may not be needed much longer at Middlepark. This thought saddened me and I set to thinking what I would do when I had to leave. I knew Richard Roseby would give me a good recommendation; forget it for the moment I told myself and then I thought of the lovely Verity and set to wondering how her and Richard's day was fairing in Exeter.

"What is this?" Lina's question interrupted my dismal thoughts and I looked at the long stalked pink flower she was pointing to.

"It is Cranes bill," I told her for I had a substantial knowledge of wildflowers. As I spoke Lina picked two or three and then moved onto the cowslips. While she was picking a bunch of flowers I spotted the beautiful blue of the cornflower, their blue bonnet-type flowers upturned as if worshipping the sun. At that moment my thought was that I would like my

new gown to be of this colour blue, it would always remind me of my happy days at Middlepark with Lina and her father.

"I'll pick some of those," Lina said, reaching across me and my thoughts. By now she had quite a colourful bunch of flowers; they would look lovely in a vase on the hall table. Lina and I walked on to the promenade. I wrapped my shawl tightly around my shoulders as there was a cool breeze blowing off the sea. Today the water was a murky brown and lots of brown frothy waves chased each other to the shore. How different the scene was to the evening we had walked here with Lina's father. I could suddenly see a large black cloud hovering ever nearer to us.

"We had best get home Lina for I think that, for the first time since my arrival here, it is going to rain." At my words we headed back to Middlepark, walking quite swiftly and as we walked through the gates, the first large drops of rain started to fall. By the time I reached my room the rain was blowing on my windowpane and I stood looking out over the back of the house at the large oak tree which dominated this part of the garden. Its many branches were swaying in the wind, which had suddenly got up since we entered the house. Was this an omen? I mused, that things were to change and my thoughts flew to Richard. I knew that there was little hope of him ever wanting me, but surely there was no wrong in dreaming. At this thought I smiled to myself, mamma had always said that I was a daydreamer and I acknowledged that she was right, which led me to believe that I had imagined the young woman I had seen reflected in my mirror. But there were the letters nestling in my drawer, and the letter! I suddenly remembered the letter which had arrived for me today. Swiftly I went over to my reticule which I'd lain on my bed, picking it up I retrieved the letter and looked at it once more. There was only one way to find out who had sent it, and with trembling hands I undid the envelope, slowly I unfolded the sheet of paper which was enclosed. As I looked at the headed paper I could see that it had come from Foster, Foster and Farrant, a firm of solicitors, at their offices in Cathedral Green Exeter. My hand trembled even more as I read the short letter. "Miss Charlotte Trent," it read, "if you would please call to see the undersigned at your earliest convenience, I have some news which will be to your advantage. I look forward to meeting you, yours faithfully, Matthew Farrant." I reread the letter several times hardly believing its content.

That night I lay in bed for some time mulling this over in my mind, Madeline's letters were quite forgotten, could this be the change I had thought might occur I mused and before I fell asleep I knew that I couldn't wait to visit Mr Farrant of Foster, Foster and Farrant, hopefully on the morrow.

Chapter Four

Next morning I rose early and dressed myself in my royal blue dress with the cream lace collar, which had sleeves to the wrist adorned with lace which fell into a point over the back of my hand. I then looked in the side drawer of the dressing table where I kept what little jewellery I possessed, in search of a suitable brooch to wear at the neck of my dress. Finding the oval shaped sapphire surrounded by silver filigree which had belonged to my mother I thought this would do admirably and set to pinning it to the neckline of my dress. Always particular with my appearance, today I wished to look my best. After drawing my hair back into a chignon, leaving curls on my forehead and tendrils of hair either side of my face, I then dabbed a small amount of rouge on my cheeks to give me some colour, which served to remind me of the message left for me on the glass a few days ago. Looking in the mirror I was pleased with the finished result and felt ready to face the day and Mr Roseby.

Picking up the letter from the solicitor Matthew Farrant, I walked swiftly along to Lina's room. It was seven forty-five and I hoped with all my heart to see Mr Roseby before he went about his business, no doubt with Verity Hawksworth. Gently I tapped on Lina's door and entered to see Ruby the under maid helping my charge into a white dress printed with tiny violet flowers which was charming.

"Charlotte!" Lina exclaimed as she wriggled through the neck of the dress which then cascaded to the floor, leaving Lina's hair all awry.

"I need to speak with your Father before breakfast," I told her, "if I am not back by eight thirty, please wait for me in the dining room."

"There's nothing wrong Miss?" Lina asked, concern in her voice.

"Nothing I assure you," I told her honestly, for indeed there wasn't. "Now let Ruby tidy your hair while I attend to my business." I left Lina looking quite perplexed, but not as perplexed as I regarding the letter I clutched in my hand.

I ventured first to my employer's study and started to descend the flight of stairs only fortuitously to run headlong into Richard at the bottom of the flight.

"Apologies Miss Trent, I was walking far too quickly, I trust I didn't startle you," he enquired solicitously.

“No indeed not,” I assured him, “I was on my way to seek you out, if you could please spare me but a moment of your time.”

“But of course Miss Trent, I will make time for you always,” Richard spoke softly, commencing to walk in the direction of his study when he stopped and looked back at me. “This sounds a serious matter for you have not sought me out before. I trust and fervently hope you aren’t planning to leave us?” It was a question.

“I promise you that it is not the case, sir.” I assured him.

“Splendid, now let us talk in my study.” So saying he led the way and as I entered the familiar room which held the aroma of beeswax. I thought momentarily of the day Richard Roseby had interviewed me in this very room. The sun had been shining in all its glory on that day, but now rain splattered the window panes and the view out over the croquet lawn looked dark and dismal. Richard sat in his chair behind the huge desk and bade me to sit on the high-backed chair opposite him.

“Now what can I do to help you my dear? For I sense you are a damsel in distress.” His hands were together near his strong chin and I couldn’t help but notice his perfect mouth. How I longed to kiss it and, at the thought, I blushed and to cover my confusion I handed my employer the letter.

“I can read it Miss Trent?” he asked of me.

“Yes indeed. It arrived yesterday afternoon and I wish to seek your advice on the matter,” I told him, feeling much calmer now, my heart had stopped racing and my cheeks were no longer hot. I prayed that he had not noticed as I watched him unfold the letter, studying for some time its contents.

“This seems quite straightforward,” my employer said placing the letter on the desk before him. “It would seem you have come into some sort of inheritance, I’ll be bound. How can I help?”

“I need some conveyance to take me to Exeter at the earliest convenience,” I said stumbling over the words, “and would like to ask if you could possibly spare me the carriage for a few hours please.”

“I’ll do better than that Miss Trent, I shall accompany you if this would please you.” As he spoke the words, little did he know that this pleased me very much, to spend some time with him would be heaven,

“That is very kind of you Mr Roseby. May I be so bold as to encroach on your kindness further please?” I asked quietly.

“Do proceed Miss Trent, ask anything of me and if it is within my power to assist you I will do so willingly.” Our eyes met across the desk as he

spoke.

"Would you please do me the kindness of joining me in Mr Farrant's office?" I began, "for I have never entered a solicitors domain before and find the whole prospect quite daunting." I would like to have said to him that I would feel safe wherever he was but I knew I could not be so bold, but one day in the near future I was to remember that thought.

"Of course, I would be glad to," he replied smiling at me. "Shall we say one thirty for I believe you and Lina have the dressmaker coming today?"

"Apologies Mr Roseby, I had quite forgotten," I said suddenly realising that I was so wrapped up with my own affairs that I had had little thought for Lina. "Lina has told me that you have a fancy for a new gown," Richard said unexpectedly and I felt the colour rushing to my cheeks once more.

"This is true," I confirmed.

"Then you have my total permission to be measured for one today," he told me.

"Thank you so much Mr Roseby. I shall of course ensure that Lina is fitted before myself." As I spoke I rose from my seat and Richard rose also and handed me my letter. As I opened the door to leave Richard said,

"You look charming today Miss Trent, the colour blue suits you admirably."

"Thank you sir," I said turning to see him watching me, an unfathomable expression on his handsome face.

We were interrupted by Verity who arrived at exactly the wrong moment. "Good morning Miss Trent," she said as she entered the room wearing a violet-coloured dress. Before I closed the door I heard her say, "Dear Richard, you've not breakfasted yet." And I heard no more.

As I made my way to the dining room my thoughts were in disarray, surely I had not imagined the look on my employers face as he had told me I looked charming? No, I told myself, I did not imagine it and as I went in search of Lina my heart sang.

After breakfast, Lina and I made our way back upstairs as Mrs Rivers, the dressmaker and her young red-haired assistant Rose had arrived promptly at nine-thirty am. As we stepped into Lina's room, we could see half a dozen bales of material in lovely soft colours arranged on top of the four-poster bed. My eyes were drawn to a cornflower blue and I knew this is what I would choose.

Mrs Rivers stood by the fireplace, her hands folded in front of her over her black gown, a tape measure around her neck; the timid Rose at her side.

"Shall I measure first, or would you care to look at the materials?" She addressed the question to Lina.

"May I look at the materials first please?" said Lina, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Please do," Mrs Rivers acknowledged, her hand indicating the bed.

"I think the pale pink and lemon silk, do you agree Charlotte?" she asked me.

"I do indeed, it is a wise choice," I told her, and while Lina was measured and discussing the style of her gowns with Mrs Rivers, I ran my hand gently over the cornflower blue poplin.

"Not too many frills," I told Lina as I went across to see how things were progressing. "Remember what I have said."

"I have heeded your advice haven't I Mrs. Rivers?" As Lina spoke, I could see Rose writing down measurements with her left hand. Duly Lina and I both selected our materials and style of gowns, me all the while thinking of Richard and I knew I was doing this for him and him alone.

Walking through the hallway after seeing Mrs Rivers and Rose together with their trappings safely in their hired carriage, Ruby the maid stopped me.

"There is something for you on the silver salver Miss," she told me in her broad Devonshire dialect. Although from Topsham a few miles from here I had no accent at all so Ruby's fascinated me. As she had indicated I went across to see what had been left for me. Picking it up I could see it was a calling card from Jonathon Moor, which brought to mind my walking with him by the river on that lovely sunny day, which although only two days ago seemed far longer. He'd written a message on the back of the card, "Please do me the honour of calling to see me on Monday next at two pm. I wish to give you a tour of Redcliffe." And it was signed with the initial 'J'. At this moment I had things more pressing on my mind and swiftly I went up the two flights of stairs to my room to ensure my hair was tidy and to collect my cream-coloured shawl and bonnet, together with my reticule containing Matthew Farrant's letter. Before I left my room something caused me to look in the drawer of the dressing table to ensure Madeline's letters were safe. They were indeed there, where I had placed them together

with the miniature. “I may get a chance to read you later,” I strangely said aloud, my voice seeming to echo around the otherwise silent room.

It was still raining steadily as Richard and I stepped into the carriage, Lina was with Verity doing some much needed mending of sheets and as I glanced at the drawing room window, I could see Lina waving at us. She had seemed almost pleased that her father and I were going on an outing together. As we travelled along the narrow country lanes, Richard asked me about my parents and the tragedy which had befallen them, he also asked where I had spent most of my life, and as we arrived at the built up area of Exeter and halted by the beautiful cathedral, Richard laid a hand across mine and said, “things will fare well for you now Charlotte, I promise.” And as he spoke the words he gently squeezed my hand. Oh, how I loved him. The thought came unbidden and I was quite shocked by it but knew it to be true, although in truth I doubted I could ever declare it.

Richard helped me alight from the carriage and indicated that I should put my arm through his as I had done once before along the promenade. Thankfully the rain had ceased and I experienced a contentment I had never felt before.

“Shall we step into the cathedral for a moment Miss Trent?” Richard asked looking down at me.

“That would be pleasant,” I agreed for I had never been inside the cathedral before. We walked together along a path, each side of which a lawn was laid, the rain still glinting on the blades of grass. We stood for some time looking at the magnificent front with all its carved statues, one above the other. When we stepped through the huge oak door onto the flagstones beneath our feet it seemed very dark until my eyes adjusted to the light. Many candles were lit on various altars and as we walked our footsteps resounded around the high spacious building.

Richard and I sat for a few moments on one of the pews, I knew not what he was thinking but I said a prayer for my parents and silently prayed also that this man beside me could grow to love me as I loved him and I knew I would never forget this moment.

Stepping outside into the daylight once more, a watery sun greeted us and a patch of blue sky above hung over us. We looked at each other and smiled and Richard squeezed the hand which lay in the crook of his arm as we set off to find Foster, Foster and Farrant. Their offices were overlooking the

cathedral green and we were ushered by a young man into a room on the first floor.

Matthew Farrant stood as we entered, he was young, tall, broad shouldered and fair skinned, exuding an aura of friendliness and calm.

“Please be seated Miss Trent, and yourself sir.” He told us, indicating two chairs opposite his desk, from where, outside of the window behind Mr Farrant I could see the tower of the cathedral. “You received my letter Miss Trent and are no doubt wondering about the matter on which I wish to speak with you?”

“Indeed, sir.” I agreed nervously.

“Would you like some refreshment?” he asked. “Tea perhaps?”

“That would be most welcome,” I told the young solicitor as my mouth was parched, due with little doubt to my apprehension.

Tea was duly brought in on a tray and as I held the cup and saucer in my hand, sipping at the hot amber liquid I felt remarkably calm. So much so that I said to Matthew Farrant, “I’m sure you are a busy man sir; I’m ready now to hear what you have to say to me.”

“Very well Miss Trent. You had an uncle, your Father’s brother?” he queried.

“Yes, indeed I did, Uncle Jack, a seafaring man, so we saw very little of him,” I divulged.

“Well,” continued the solicitor, looking down at the papers in front of him, “your uncle has died and, as he had no issue, all his worldly goods pass to you, being the grand sum of five thousand pounds.” At these words I nearly dropped the green cup and saucer.

Some time later when I recovered from the shock and we had dealt with all the legal aspects, I thanked Matthew Farrant as he handed me a large, blue, velvet pouch.

“What is this?” I asked, and pulling the draw string to open the pouch. I retrieved the contents and looked at it in astonishment for it was my uncle’s engraved gold watch. “Why thank you.” I said, quite overawed by the afternoon’s events.

On settling ourselves in the carriage, Richard sitting opposite me on the brown leather seat watched me intently while I thought about the events of the past couple of hours which would indeed change my life as I was now a woman of means, thanks to Uncle Jack, who I had hardly known. I remembered his infrequent visits and the way he always took his gold

pocket watch out of his jacket and said it was time he was gone, for the tide would wait for no man.

"Congratulations are in order Miss Trent," Richard said suddenly as the rain started to patter gently on the glass. "Is it to be a secret?"

"Indeed not," I replied laughing, "I have no secrets." Except one, I mused, thinking how much I loved my employer.

"This turn of fortune will surely mean you leaving us at Middlepark," Richard said tentatively, at the same time leaning forward in his seat and catching hold of my gloved hand.

"I have no intention of leaving," I assured him, "for I have grown very fond of Lina and Middlepark."

"It pleases me to hear you say that Miss Trent." As Richard spoke he breathed what seemed a sigh of relief and, releasing my hand, he sat back and leant against the seat once more. It warmed my heart to know that my employer did not wish me to leave.

As we travelled back to Middlepark I thought how I could now buy a thousand cornflower blue dresses, but above this wealth I would always choose Richard.

That evening as I sat in my room on the small armchair, I mulled it all over in my mind and could scarcely believe my good fortune wondering where this luck would take me; but I didn't want to go anywhere for fear of losing any chance I may have with Richard. Suddenly I stopped daydreaming and telling myself to be sensible, I went over to the drawer and took out Madeline's letters. Sitting back down on the chair once more, I slowly untied the red ribbon and as I picked up the first letter I wondered what else could possibly be revealed to me today.

Chapter Five

Small particles of dust flew around me as I unfolded the first short missive written in a firm bold hand with black ink.

"*Meet me*, *dear heart*, *under the oak tree at midnight*."

Going swiftly across to the window and looking out across the garden, I could see the huge oak silhouetted against the blackness of the sky and imagined Madeline and her beau, whoever he might be, meeting in the dead of night and embracing under the magnificent branches.

I was keen to see the second letter and returned quickly to my chair to open it and read:

"*What joy fills my heart and my waking hours since I found you Madeline*. *Your name itself is a caress which will tumble from my lips when next we meet*. *I have prior engagements which irks me somewhat*, *for I wish to be with you*, *but Saturday*, *as arranged*, *my beautiful girl*, *when the house is silent*."

I unfolded the third letter, anxious to see how the relationship progressed, noting no date or day headed the love note so far and hesitated momentarily, suddenly feeling intrusive, but curiosity and a romantic nature pressed me to continue:

"*I have at last returned from London with my father*. *These past two weeks have dragged by like two years away from you and of my own choosing*, *I would not have gone*, *for to be distant from you*, *even for a day*, *breaks my heart*. *How glad I was for the scented handkerchief you gave me sweetheart*, *for without it*, *I would have been bereft*. *I implore you to meet me this very night*, *for I can barely wait longer to hold you in my arms*."

As I read the words, I sensed the urgency with which they had been written, and the utmost feeling which lay behind them. I held this letter for some time in my hand, marvelling at the manner of man who could write such words, and wishing that a certain young man would just once implore of me the same.

I placed the three letters I had read back in the drawer and counted the others. There were four left and I knew that I had to continue this very night, for I was bound up now in these clandestine meetings, and desperate to know the outcome. Letter four read:

"*Now that I have declared my love for you and you for me*, *I feel suddenly free like a bird soaring above our oak tree against the blue of the sky*. *My heart feels light and my step more sure footed*. *How I pray you feel the same*. *To know you are not far from me and breath the same air is comfort to me*. *No longer can I keep our love a secret and at our next meeting*, *we must discuss in earnest what we are to do*. *We have visitors staying tonight*, *but tomorrow*, *when all is still*, *our hearts will beat together as if we are one*."

Before I continued, I laid down the letters on the arm of the chair and reached for the miniature portrait. Studying the features carefully and looking at the eyes and mouth of the young man portrayed before me I knew instinctively that this young man was not Madeline's lover. That he had some special part in her life, that I had no doubt, a brother or father maybe, but this young man had not written the words I had been reading, of this I was certain. Picking up the letters again, I read the next one which was more sombre in its content and as I read the words my heart ached:

"*My beloved*, *I have spoken to my family and it seems they would thwart us*. *I will not give up*. *It appears that our only ally is my nurse*, *Anna*, *who pledges her devotion to the woman I love*, *whereas my family would have you gone and no longer have you remain my sister Joanna's governess*, *but I will speak up for you*, *dear heart*, *never fear*, *all will be well*. *It may no longer be possible to meet beneath the oak tree and embrace beneath the moon's silvery light*, *but trust me*, *I shall think of some way that we can meet*. *I will write again tomorrow*. *I love you and the way your golden hair gleams in the moonlight and the silver glow bathes your face*, *giving you the appearance of an angel*, *which you are without doubt*. *Sweet dreams Madeline*, *my darling*, *and do not despair*.

I read the letter a second time and felt so much compassion for these two people I did not know. I desired to know what the outcome would be and swiftly moved on to the next folded letter which was brief:

"*If it is to your liking, dear heart, I have arranged a room for us at an Inn not far from here where we can talk over our future. Anna will look after you and bring you to me tomorrow evening at eleven. Be sure to wear your hooded cloak, for I would not want your name brought into ill repute on my account. Trust Anna and no one else.*"

Did Madeline keep her tryst with her nameless beau I mused, as I refolded the letters and the final one lay in my hand? What would it reveal, that the writer of the letters was the son of this household I was in no doubt, but who and when? No dates accompanied the love note. No initial of the writer. My only clues were Madeline, Joanna and Anna the nurse, plus the magnificent oak tree which dominated the garden, it's trunk so wide in girth that anyone could hide behind it from the prying eyes of anyone this side of the house. I got to my feet once more and looked down again at Madeline's trysting place. How often I wondered had she looked down at the oak tree and thought of her love for I was sure Madeline, as a governess, had occupied this room, else why had the letters been hidden under the floorboards.

My ears suddenly caught the sound of footsteps heading towards my room. Quickly I picked up the letters and the miniature concealing them under my garments in the drawer, just in time, as the door burst open to reveal Lina.

Lina looked flustered. "Father wants to see you in the drawing room," she said breathlessly, her eyes sparkling.

"Then we shall go." As I spoke, Lina took hold of my hand and led me from my bedroom.

"Lina, what is amiss," I said as my young charge practically pulled me along the corridor. As we entered the drawing room I could see Richard and Verity sat on the settle together by a roaring fire. The night had gone cold and they looked so cosy together, my spirits sank.

"Lina says you wish to see me sir," I spoke quietly, my eyes averted from Verity's gaze.

"Yes, Charlotte," Richard began. "I wish to talk with you of the ball." At these words, Lina clapped her hands together and danced around the room. So this was why she was so excited, they had been discussing the coming out ball.

“It is only a week away,” continued Richard. “Did Mrs Rivers give any indication of when your dresses would arrive.” The fact that my employer had included me in this question made my heart sing.

“On Tuesday, sir,” I replied, my face flushed.

“Excellent,” exclaimed Richard, “and please be seated, Charlotte, for we are not on ceremony here.” As he spoke, I settled myself on the settle opposite as he had indicated.

“The four of us will travel to Exeter late afternoon,” he continued.

“Am I to go as well then sir?” I interrupted him. A bemused expression must have crossed my face.

“Indeed you are, Miss Trent.” As he spoke I looked him straight in the eye, not believing my good fortune.

“Now if you will excuse us, Lina and Verity, I wish to speak with Miss Trent alone.”

At Richard’s words I was speechless and embarrassed. What could my employer wish to speak to me about alone, but I was soon to find out.

“Have you thought anything of your good fortune today?” Richard began when Lina and Verity had left us.

“To be truthful, Mr Roseby, no I haven’t.” I answered honestly, not able to explain that Madeline’s letters had been foremost on my mind and wondered once more if I should hand the letters over to my employer. Little did I know of the feeling it would cause were I to do this.

“You could buy a property, Charlotte, indeed you would be able to buy this one,” he said seriously.

“But you are surely not leaving here, sir,” I said, aghast at the very thought. Richard must have sensed my reaction for he laughed.

“Indeed not, Miss Trent.” But did I believe that he was joking, maybe I would never know the answer to this.

“I have not given the matter any thought, sir, but if I may, I shall ask your valued advice when I do,” I assured him.

“Does this mean you are not intending to leave us, Charlotte?”

As he asked the question, Richard leant forward on the settle, his hands clasped before him. As he looked seriously into my eyes, I didn’t know what to make of his manner. Was he succumbing to my charms I asked myself, or was he not wishing to lose me as companion to his daughter.

“No, sir, I have no intention of leaving Middlepark in the immediate future at least,” I answered, quite perplexed.

“I am pleased to hear it, Charlotte,” he said taking my hand and kissing the back of it in a gallant manner as I trembled with emotion at the unexpectedness of it all.

Some time later, back in my room, after goodnights had been said by all and I had settled Lina for the night, I mulled it all over in my mind and relived the conversation between myself and my employer. Had it really happened I mused, or was it another daydream, but I knew I had not imagined it and wondered if Richard was being a gentleman when he kissed my hand, or chivalrous. Maybe I would never know. The thought of love and romance which invaded my mind at that moment led me to think of the last letter to Madeline. Quickly I went over and retrieved the bundle from my drawer and sat again in the armchair in the light of the lamp. What would the final letter reveal and should I read it or pass the whole package to my employer? The answer was that I had to know the content of the final letter or I would not rest. Taking the letter out of the envelope, which was far more bulky than the others had been, I realised there were two letters. Swiftly I parted them and could see that the one was in a now familiar hand, the other in a hand I had not seen before. With trembling fingers I unfolded it. The missive was brief and written in a feminine hand. Looking swiftly at the bottom of the page I saw the name, Madeline. Once more I went over to the window and drawing the curtain to one side, looked down once more on the black outline of the oak tree. I dropped the curtain back in place and sitting down once more, read Madeline’s words:

“*You know I am with child yet choose to ignore my plight*. *How could you when you so loved me*. *I have your letters and the flowery words you wrote only recently to remind me of it*. *I beseech you to help me*. *I am this day to move from here and stay with your nurse at her invitation*. *If it were not for her*, *what would I do*. *My pillow is wet with tears*; *my hand trembles as I write this and my heart is heavy*. *I cannot and I will not believe that you do not want this child*. *What is to become of me*. *Never again will I believe a man’s loving words as I believed yours*.

You are a coward, *Sir*,

Madeline.”

A tear trickled down my cheek, the words so unbearably poignant and sad. The letter was obviously never sent to her beloved. Had she thought better of it not wishing to enrage him, or had the situation resolved itself

happily. Now to the letter from the man who had professed his love for Madeline. I opened it and read:

"*Madeline*, *I can do nothing to help you*, *my family forbid it*."

He was a coward, indeed. My heart bled for Madeline and I guess the situation did not resolve itself.

My sleep was restless that night. As I tossed and turned, Madeline's words and my employer's attentiveness all turning, whirling around in my head, but finally, at daybreak, I fell into a sound sleep with the thought in mind that I would now pass the letters into Richard's hands.

Chapter Six

Monday morning came with the incessant rain of the last few days continuing. I'd not seen Richard since our discussion in the drawing room a few evenings ago. He hadn't joined us for dinner either and this morning Lina had informed me that she and Verity, with her father, were going out for the day, so I had been left to my own devices. I was left wondering how I was going to get to Redcliffe Manor in this awful weather. In the meantime, I reached for Madeline's letters in my drawer and re-tied them with the red ribbon. Keeping them in my hand, I walked over to the window looking down on the oak tree, it's branches now dripping with rain, leaves falling around the trunk's massive girth. Looking down at the bundle of letters in my hand, I recalled Madeline's words, "You are a coward, Sir." As much as I didn't want to relinquish the letters, I knew I must pass them to Richard. With that thought in mind, I replaced them in the drawer thinking that, with regards to Jonathon's invitation, if he wished me to visit, then he would have to call for me for I did not intend to get soaking wet.

Making my way to the library to find a book to amuse me, while I waited, I encountered an elderly woman on the stairs, making her way up while I descended. I don't know who was more surprised, me or the sprightly old lady, the front of her skirts bunched up in one hand while she clutched the polished banister with her other. I made to ascend back to the landing but she stopped me.

"You must be Miss Trent, Lina's companion," she enquired in a quiet manner.

"Indeed I am," I answered "and you must be?" Here I stopped, a questioning note in my voice. For some seconds she did not answer me and avoiding my question, she said, "Is Lina in her room?"

"No, I am sorry to say, she has gone out with her father," I replied, somewhat haughtily, for who was she to ignore my question?

"You were on your way down," she continued.

"Yes," I answered, feeling at a positive disadvantage as the old lady's eyes regarded me.

"I was making for the library."

"Then I shall join you," she demanded "and will ask the cook to send us in some tea."

I found myself sat in an armchair in the library with this feisty old lady, her black skirts delicately arranged around her. For once, I was at a loss for words.

"I am Miss Curtis." She spoke so suddenly, I almost jumped with alarm and watched her pour tea for us from a turquoise coloured china teapot, decorated with pink flowers into matching cups which stood on a silver tray.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," she apologised "and also that I didn't answer your question before, but the staircase was hardly the place for introductions or a conversation."

"Indeed this is true," I conceded, as Miss Curtis handed me a cup and saucer.

"I was Lina's nurse for some years. Since she was a babe in arms in fact, but I could no longer look after her; my age prevented it. I visit Miss Lina from time to time," she continued.

"Thank you for enlightening me," I answered graciously, sipping at my tea. "I apologise if I appeared rude, but I was startled to see you as I have been here all summer and not encountered you before."

"I take it Miss Lina has not mentioned me." As she spoke the words, Miss Curtis laughed, more to herself than to me. "Secretive, that one, just like her father," she observed.

I was somewhat startled at these words, for I had thought Richard Roseby to be very open and honest.

"I don't wish to undermine Lina's image, for I love her," Miss Curtis defended the words she had spoken. "But it is true none the less."

"And do you wish me to keep our meeting secret?" I asked of her.

"Bless me no child, if you wish to say we have met, so be it. It isn't to be kept a secret." As she spoke, the old lady laid her cup and saucer back on the tray. "Well, I must be going," she said looking at the fob watch pinned to the bodice of her dress. "My nephew will be waiting for me in the pony and trap, a covered one I might add." She laughed again and I felt that I had quite taken to this nurse of Lina's. As she went to leave, Miss Curtis turned in the doorway of the library and said, "I hope to meet with you again, my dear." Here she hesitated then said quietly, "Nothing is as it seems in this household, child, remember it," with which words she was gone, leaving me somewhat perplexed at her words and a half a cup of tea in my hand.

At two o'clock a maid informed me, as I was finishing lunch alone, that Mr Moor had called for me and he was waiting in the drawing room. I finished my coffee and dabbed a napkin to my lips. On the way from the dining room, I looked in the large mirror on the sideboard to check my appearance before making my way to the drawing room, smoothing my dove grey skirts as I went.

Jonathon was seated warming his hands at the fire which now burned in the large fireplace. He stood up as I entered the room. How tall he is, I thought as I looked at him. He looked immaculate in a brown frock coat, his hair slightly damp from the rain no doubt.

"Miss Trent," he commenced, "I could not let you make your way to the manor in this terrible weather, nor could I not see you either so here I am."

"Indeed you are, sir," I said moving towards him, "and I thank you for your thoughtfulness. I had wondered how I would manage to accept your invitation on such a day."

"I have a covered pony and trap," he continued causing me once more to think of Miss Curtis' visit this morning and her mysterious words.

"Then if you can give me five minutes to collect my coat and reticule, I will accompany you, sir," I told him.

Ten minutes later, with me suitably attired and sat in the pony and trap, a blanket around my legs which Jonathon had solicitously placed there, we were bowling along to Redcliffe Manor, the rain pattering on the roof above us, every now and then a drop falling on my straw bonnet, which caused me much amusement and my companion concern. As we turned into the drive and I saw Redcliffe Manor once more I took hold of Jonathon's arm.

"Please stop one moment," I implored him.

Bringing the pony to a halt, Jonathon looked across at me while I studied the beautiful building, the rain had not diminished it's appeal. How sad, I thought, that the whole place was in such state of disrepair.

"You are really smitten by our home aren't you, Miss Trent," Jonathon's voice drifted across to me interrupting my thoughts.

"I am indeed, sir. To say it is a place of beauty is an understatement. One day I shall find the correct word to describe it and I shall draw a picture of it just for you," I said passionately, looking the handsome young man in the eye. To my amazement, Jonathon pulled the pony and trap to a halt at the main entrance. As he helped me alight, a young man of no more than sixteen years old appeared from nowhere and led the pony away. Jonathon

took my arm at the elbow and steered me towards the wide curved steps which we ascended side by side and then he opened the huge oak door and let me pass through in front of him.

We had stepped into a huge hall, flagged with black and white tiles. White sheets covered articles of furniture and I looked up at the large splendid crystal chandelier which hung majestically from the centre of the ornate ceiling. I suddenly shivered for it was cold and damp in here.

"I apologise," Jonathon said taking hold of my arm once more, "you are cold and I should not have brought you here on a day such as this."

"Do not apologise, sir," I assured him, "for I would not miss seeing your lovely home, whether it be snowing, raining or sunny." I looked at him and smiled and he smiled in return, a smile which lit up his otherwise serious countenance and then he moved me forward gently toward one of the many lovingly carved doors which led off the hall.

Before we entered the room which lay behind the first door, I stopped and looked up the wide staircase. Threadbare patterned carpet covered the treads of the stairs, but the curved banister still shone as if someone had recently polished it. Room after room on the ground floor was the same as the one before, large long windows which desperately cried out for a clean, furniture of all shapes and sizes covered with yellowing dustsheets, cobwebs forming everywhere and a chillness which distressed me as I thought what a tragedy it was. Each step I took served to cause me to feel more at home in this place, though why I couldn't say. Upstairs corridors led to the right and left which we walked down, opening each door as we went along to peep into rooms which mirrored the neglect downstairs. As we walked, rain splattered the many windows where curtains hung full of dust and smelling of must. Threadbare carpet matching the one on the staircase lay beneath our feet. We hardly spoke except for Jonathon to explain which part of the house we were in and at one point he urged me to look from the window.

"Can you see where you are, Miss Trent?" he asked of me.

"Indeed I can," I replied as I looked down over the lake we had walked past on that glorious summers day. Today it looked forlorn and a slight mist hung over the water where the rain continued to fall.

"It is a far different outlook to when we walked together that day," I observed as I turned to Jonathon.

“You are so right, but one day soon the sun will shine again and remind us of that perfect day which now seems so long ago.”

He spoke as if to himself and then, taking my arm, we walked back along the deserted corridor and down the stairway. Instead of leading me to the main doorway, we passed through a door and I found myself in the room where Lina and I had taken tea with Georgina, but today, Jonathon’s sister was nowhere in sight, although a fire burned weakly in the hearth, emitting a little warmth. By now I was chilled to the bone and as if reading my thoughts, Jonathon urged me to be seated by the fire. I removed my bonnet while he rang the bell and, when the maid arrived, ordered us a hot drink and cake.

“Would that I could revert this house to what it was in my childhood,” Jonathon said unexpectedly, as I held the hot cup in my hands to warm my numb fingers.

He continued, “The whole house was alive with warmth and gaiety then, fires blazing in the hall and every room. I used to run from room to room and along the corridors stealing into the warm kitchen for a slice of freshly baked bread and creamy butter.”

As he spoke, my companion seemed almost in a trance and unaware that I was there, but the memories of long ago must have seemed very painful to him.

As we rode back to Middlepark in the pony and trap, Jonathon kept turning to me and smiling.

“Have you enjoyed your trip to our stately home?” he asked with pride in his voice and I felt compassion for him, or was it something else I felt which I couldn’t quite put my finger on. I looked at him while his face was averted from me and marvelled at his strong determined jaw line and his strong hands on the reins. As I looked he turned to me and said, “I shall live for our next meeting, Miss Trent.”

These words burned in my head as I entered the house. I was met by Lina, who was excitable, and today it irked me for I wanted to be alone with my thoughts. As I entered the drawing room with Lina, I could see Richard and Verity sat together sipping what appeared to be champagne.

“Look at what we’ve bought,” said Lina with an enthusiasm I didn’t feel. Scattered on the floor I could see various packages in disarray.

“See,” said Lina, “father has bought me gloves and a pair for you as well.”

I looked down at the white silk gloves in her hands which would fit to the elbow and realised it was the first pair I’d ever owned. I suddenly felt ungracious.

“They are exquisite, Mr Roseby, thank you so much,” I said truthfully, looking at him and Verity.

“Verity chose them,” he revealed, “but I am pleased you like them so much. They will look very fetching, I am sure, with your new gown.”

“Try them on, please Charlotte,” Lina urged me and I did with much laughter as they were hard to pull up my arm and suddenly I felt light hearted again as both Lina and Verity helped me.

“And tomorrow,” Lina said with gusto, “our dresses will arrive.”

As she spoke, I looked over Lina’s shoulder at Richard who raised his glass to me and silently watched us. I realised that I had not seen him for a few days and that I had missed him. Redcliffe Manor seemed to cast a spell over me and I realised I had not been the same since entering its doors. I smiled at my employer just as the gloves reached my elbow and I realised that Verity had intercepted our glances.

I was surprised that evening to see Jonathon and Georgina at the dining table. Jonathon was quiet as he acknowledged me whereas Georgina in her overbearing manner greeted me with the words, “Darling, how lovely to see you. I was at the dressmakers when you called by today. My dress is ready for the coming out ball.”

Georgina’s words surprised me as I had not thought she was attending the ball this week, but I kept my surprise a secret and showed an interest I did not feel.

“May I ask what you are to wear?” I enquired kindly.

“You may indeed, Charlotte,” proceeded Georgina. “I am to wear a green gown of silk with flounces of lace on the bodice and skirt and, of all things, a tiara.”

“You will look delightful, I am sure.” Richard’s words surprised me for normally he would not enlist himself in Georgina’s conversations. In fact, all at the table looked at him with disbelief and he proceeded, “But none will match my daughter Lina’s beauty on Friday.”

“Thank you, Papa,” said Lina proudly.

“I agree with your Father, Lina,” added George who rarely spoke unless spoken to. A silence ensued for a couple of minutes when Richard suddenly said out of the blue, “Charlotte had a stroke of good fortune last week,” he said, raising his glass of red wine to his lips. My cheeks grew hot at his words. Although I had said it wasn’t a secret, I wished heartily that Richard hadn’t mentioned my inheritance at the dining table.

“Come, tell us your news,” Georgina said loudly and all eyes looked at me waiting expectantly.

“I have had the good fortune to gain a small inheritance,” I said meekly, looking at Jonathon for support.

“Hardly small, Charlotte, come on, tell them, my dear.” Richard’s words were like a dagger through my heart.

“Say nothing if you don’t wish to,” Jonathon uttered quietly and I looked at him gratefully.

“That is true, my dear, keep quiet for it is no-one’s business but yours,” agreed George.

“For goodness sake tell us, Charlotte,” laughed Georgina, “or none of us will sleep in our beds this night. Have you inherited some trinket which will pay for your gown?” Georgina’s words enraged me and I wished to wipe the smile off her face. I disliked her so much before, but now I loathed her. I got to my feet.

“If you must know, I have inherited a gold watch…”

“What did I tell you?” sneered Georgina interrupting me…

“…*and* the princely sum of five thousand pounds.” There was suddenly a deathly silence but Richard broke it. Richard, who I’d admired all these months from afar.

“So, she’s a good catch eh Jonathon?” he said looking at Georgina’s brother. “Well, let the best man win”. After these words, Richard staggered to his feet as he raised a toast to me and I realised with some disdain and disappointment that my employer was drunk.

That night, lying in my bed in the dark, tears trickling down my cheeks, I thought of the eventful day’s happenings. Miss Curtis, and her parting words were not such a mystery now, for things in this household weren’t as I thought. Redcliffe Manor came to mind, as did Jonathon’s words: “I shall live for our next meeting”. But above all, I could not forget Richard Roseby’s drunken words at the dining table when I’d wished the ground would swallow me up; I prayed this wasn’t the state of things to come.

Suddenly I realised that Verity Hawksworth had said absolutely nothing, which led me to believe that she already knew of my good fortune and only one person could have told her.

Chapter Seven

The following morning, I drew back the curtains and, to my delight, I could see sunshine instead of rain. I dressed in my most becoming pale blue day dress with a high neckline which was adorned by a pretty cream lace collar. Feeling well dressed would give me the confidence to face Richard and show him how displeased I was, even though he was my employer. As things were to turn out, I need not have worried.

Lina and I were making our way down to breakfast and on the first landing we met Richard.

"Good morning, daughter," he said to Lina, planting a kiss on her cheek, "and good good morning to you, Miss Trent," he uttered quietly, hardly able to look me in the eye. "Would you kindly come to my study for a moment, for there is something I wish to say to you."

"I don't know that I have time, Mr Roseby," I replied, for the last thing I wanted was to be alone with him when only yesterday morning it would have been everything I wanted.

"Please, Miss Trent, I will only keep you for a moment or two," he pleaded.

"Will you be alright, Lina, to go on down to breakfast without me?" I asked my charge who was silently watching the scene between her father and I and I set to wondering what she had made of last night's charade.

"It is alright, Charlotte," Lina agreed in a very grown up fashion, "You take as long as you like, I'll go on ahead of you."

"Don't forget Mrs Rivers is due at ten," I reminded her, as she started walking down the stairs. I followed Richard into his study and sat down on the chair he indicated which reminded me of how all this began. Richard, however, did not sit down. He paced backwards and forwards from my chair to the window, his hands clenched behind his back. He eventually stopped his pacing and stood before me.

"I would like to apologise profusely for my behaviour at the dinner table last night," he began, "and I trust, Miss Trent, that you can forgive me."

So, I thought, we are back on formal terms. I really didn't know if I could forgive him. "Lina is continuing her dancing lessons today," he said walking over to the widow. At his words, I realised that the apology was forgotten and obviously of little consequence for I had not even spoken of it, nor had the chance. He must have assumed that I was ready to forgive his

behaviour so I chose to ignore it as well saying, “If this is the case, could I please have the rest of the day off after Mrs Rivers has gone? I desire to purchase a couple of items in town, Mr Roseby and I may not get another chance before the ball?” I spoke with a tremble in my voice for I could not believe that the rapport we had built up over the past few months had trickled away overnight.

“Do you dance, Miss Trent?” His question took me by surprise.

“Yes, I do,” I answered quietly, “although not expertly, but I can get by.”

“Splendid,” Richard replied coming back to his desk and seating himself on the chair behind it. “You may take the afternoon off, Miss Trent and I trust you will find the articles you need in town.” At which words he perused a letter in front of him and I guessed the meeting was over.

I greeted Mrs Rivers and her two seamstresses who arrived promptly at ten o’clock. As they laid the completed gowns on Lina’s bed, she practically jumped up and down with excitement, but I did not reprimand her on this occasion, as I felt an anticipation myself at seeing my completed gown. I wasn’t to be disappointed at the finished result as I tried it on, the blue skirt swirling around my ankles as I turned to look in the mirror.

“I am more than delighted at the finished result,” I told Mrs Rivers honestly. I glanced across to see Lina twirling around in her ball gown and I smiled for she looked every inch the young lady in a pink silk gown of sophisticated lines with little to adorn it other than deep pink flowers at the hem line, waist and shoulder.

“You look charming, Lina,” I enthused, my own dress forgotten as I walked across to stand before my charge, feeling quite elated at the change in her since I had arrived at Middlepark. Lina’s eyes sparkled and she clapped her hands together.

“Oh, Charlotte,” she whispered, “I can hardly believe it is me and I can’t wait to show father.”

“Your father will be very proud of you.”

“If you are happy with your gowns, Miss Trent, could we please be excused as I have another establishment to visit this morning before lunch?” Mrs Rivers’ words cut across our revelry.

“Why of course, Mrs Rivers, we must not delay you, but before you go, there is something I would like to ask you.” As I spoke, I turned away from Lina and steered Mrs Rivers towards the dressing table, where on my

arrival I had placed my sketch pad. I could see Lina and one of Mrs Rivers' assistants divesting Lina of her beautiful gown, so I picked up my sketch pad and continued.

"I know there are only a few days, but would it be possible, please, to make me a gown for the ball?"

"I don't know if that will be possible in the time allotted to me," the dressmaker began.

"I will pay you well, Mrs Rivers; it is a simple style." I showed her the sketch I had drawn.

"Well, I could do my best, Miss Trent, but you will need to try it on and collect the gown from my premises in town for I shall not have the time to come here again."

"Thank you so much. If it is not ready, I will understand for I realise you are very busy." My words were true for I had been told that she was very much in demand by the gentry here about.

"What colour would you like the gown to be stitched in, Miss, bearing in mind you will have to rely on my judgement?" As she spoke Mrs Rivers took the sketch from me.

"A pale green silk with a cream inset please, Mrs Rivers, and may I say that I trust you completely," I assured her.

"Very well, Miss Trent, I shall do my best. If you could call by Thursday afternoon, that would suit me and hopefully give me time. It is fortunate I have your measurements. If there is nothing else, I really must be on my way." As she spoke, Mrs Rivers beckoned to her girls and, as they made their way from Lina's room, the dressmaker turned to me and said, "Your sketch is very informative. You have a rare talent for drawing." With these words she closed the door behind her, leaving Lina and I in a state of happy confusion.

Lina ran across to me and hugged me. "I can hardly wait for the ball, Charlotte," she said with enthusiasm, twirling me around the room in the steps of a waltz.

"I can understand your impatience, Lina," I said laughing breathlessly, as I brought her to a halt, and led her by the hand over to the wardrobe to admire the beautiful pink ball gown. The silk shimmered in the light and small pearls sewn painstakingly to the bodice and edges of the short puffed sleeves, set the gown off perfectly. Small dark pink roses, which looked as if they had just been picked from the garden, adorned the full hemline, one

side of the tiny waistline and one shoulder. Gently, I ran my hands across the material and marvelled at its perfection.

"You will be the belle of the ball," I said gently to Lina, "and imagine the long white silk gloves and your pretty white slippers. You will captivate all the young men there."

"You will too, dear Charlotte. I guess Mrs Rivers is to make you a gown too?" Lina queried quietly.

"You are correct in that assumption, but please don't tell anyone. Not that it's a secret," I assured her, "more a surprise."

"I shall speak of it to no one, all I ask is that I can accompany you on Thursday." As she spoke, Lina giggled quietly and took my hand. So the minx had overheard my conversation with Mrs Rivers, but what did it matter.

"There is no other person I would wish to see my new gown with than you," I assured her.

"Then so be it," Lina said with a sigh and I once again realised that this lovely girl had become a young woman overnight.

I set off for the town of Budleigh Salterton just after one thirty that afternoon. I wore my light brown serge suit to keep me warm. The skirts around my ankles were warm as I walked, and my beige bonnet decorated with red flowers bobbed up and down as I went on my way, enjoying the freedom and fresh air and thinking of recent events. I didn't know how I felt about my employer after yesterday evening's scene at the dining table. He had certainly gone down in my estimation and yet I still felt a warm glow when I thought of him and realised that his rudeness yesterday could be an isolated incident.

I stepped onto the path which led along by the sea, stopping for a few minutes to breathe in the salty air. The sun still shone casting a pale golden light across the water. Lobster pots lay in the sunshine across parts of the pebbled beach and young boys sat on pieces of wood listening to an old mariner's stories. I walked on along the path watching the waves gently lapping the shoreline, causing the large grey pebbles to glint in the sunlight as the water splashed upon them. I observed the large hotel on my right, the beautifully landscaped lawns stretching nearly down to the road with pink walls bathed in watery sunlight. Stepping across the small white wooden bridge which spanned a gurgling brook beneath, I marvelled at the beauty of it all and wished at that moment in time to never leave either Middlepark

or this area, but I knew that Lina would not need me much longer, except maybe for friendship. I knew in my heart I was daydreaming again having no notion then, what the not too distant future had in store for me.

I left the seashore behind me and stepped into the small town. Its main street was dominated on one side by the brook which ran on its merry way, with small paths spanning it here and there leading to various establishments. I passed a Silversmiths, its gleaming window displaying it's sparkling wares of watches and tankards. The next shop was a large Drapers which took up at least three premises and next door to it was the Millinery and Clothing shop which was the place I had been heading for. As I pressed down the brass handle and stepped through the door, a bell jangled shrilly through the large interior. It appeared I was the only customer. The shop held a certain pleasant aroma of bee's wax and I could see why as I saw the gleaming wooden counter behind which stood a short middle aged woman in a dove grey dress, the bodice buttoned to the high neckline which was adorned with a black collar.

"Can I help you, Miss?" the assistant uttered, her blue eyes appraising me as she spoke. Her grey hair was pulled back into a knot at the back of her head, tendrils of white escaping each side of her plump cheery face.

"Indeed, I hope you can," I replied, casting my eyes around the goods for sale, when my eyes came to rest on what I was seeking. "I would like to purchase some fans for a ball please, and I see you have a splendid assortment on the shelf."

"We have all colours, Miss, if you would like to take a closer look." As she spoke, the assistant moved over to a shelf further along behind the counter and I followed.

"What colour have you in mind, Miss?" I was asked whilst being shown a beautiful pale blue fan decorated with tiny blue flowers.

"It is lovely," I enthused, "but not a suitable colour. I have my eye on the pink one which will suit a young lady and her gown admirably." As I spoke, I was handed the said fan. It was very delicate, made of pink silk and decorated at the edges with light beige intricately stitched lace. I could imagine Lina fanning herself with it at the ball, while peeping over the top of it secretly, at a suitable young man.

"Can I show you another, Miss…?" This time the woman's voice held a querying tone.

“Miss Trent,” I accommodated her. “I shall purchase this one, please, but I would like to see another.” As I spoke, I cast my eye over the remaining selection of fans. My eyes caught a cream coloured one, totally made of fine lace and on indicating it, the assistant handed it to me. I placed the pink one for Lina on the counter and held the cream lace one offered to me in my gloved hand. It was exquisite in its simplicity and I had never owned such a beautiful object before. My mind was made up and on telling the woman this, she took two long boxes from under the counter, expertly placing both fans in them and deftly wrapping them in brown paper tied with string. While she did this I looked through the glass front of the counter at what the deep wooden drawers held on display. There were pantaloons, chemises and nightgowns and then my eyes rested on a drawer full of lovely handkerchiefs in pretty pastel colours edged with lace.

“Is there something else I can help you with, Miss Trent?” the woman asked in a respectful tone, something else I was unaccustomed to.

“Yes please, I will take two of those pretty pink hankies and I think that will be all, thank you,” I said in a satisfied manner, for I was sure Lina would be delighted with my gifts to her and I was very happy with my own purchase. Having paid the woman with coins from my reticule, I left the shop with my two small parcels and bumped headlong into a gentleman. My parcels scattered themselves across the road and as I bent to pick them up at the same time as the young man, our eyes met and I realised with some pleasure it was Jonathon.

“Miss Trent, I am so sorry,” he apologised gathering up my parcels in his strong hands and handing them to me.

“It is nothing I assure you, in fact it was my fault for not looking where I was going.” I smiled at him wishing to break into laughter but he looked so contrite.

“Please say you will come with me to the Tea Rooms across the street and take a cup of afternoon tea with me and maybe a pastry,” he implored earnestly, and how could I resist such a request.

“I would be happy to,” I agreed taking his arm as he led me across the street and we stepped over the tiny bridge which spanned the brook to the Tea Rooms. It was quite a small interior with tables for three scattered around which were covered with pristine white tablecloths. About half a dozen people were enjoying their fare and, for a ghostly second or two, it went very quiet as we walked in and seated ourselves by the window.

Jonathon pulling the black varnished chair out for me, the conversation resumed. Almost immediately, a waitress placed a cake stand on the table which boasted various small cakes decorated in icing sugar and marzipan of different colours.

"Would you like to order tea, Sir?" the woman asked. I was fascinated by her white lace mop cap which covered her curly, ginger-coloured hair, matched by a starched white apron which reached nearly to the bottom of her black dress.

"Would you care for tea?" Jonathon asked of me.

"That would be very enjoyable, thank you," I said looking at him and then at the young woman who had taken our order. While we waited for our tea to be brought, Jonathon and I engaged in a pleasant conversation about the forthcoming ball.

"Are you looking forward to it?" he asked of me.

"I am indeed, sir. It will be a new experience for me," I told him, "For I have never attended such an occasion before."

"Dare I ask that you would do me the honour of dancing with me?"

Jonathon was serious as he spoke, his lovely eyes looking into mine and for a second I was spellbound by his good looks, his gentle voice and his question.

"Yes, Mr Moore," I said finding my voice, "I promise I will dance with you."

"Your promise is sweet to my ears, Miss Trent, and I thank you for it." The waitress arrived at our table with a large tray laden with cups, saucers, plates, a milk jug, a sugar basin and a large tea pot, all matching in beautifully decorated porcelain of green with tiny pink rosebuds. I removed my gloves and poured the tea for both of us, thinking of Jonathon's request for a dance and the sweet words he had spoken.

"Would you care for a cake?" This lovely young man's words cut across my thoughts of him and I picked a tiny square sponge cake decorated with pink fondant. As I bit delicately into it, I noticed Jonathon was looking into his cup of amber liquid, twiddling the teaspoon in his saucer and as I watched him he suddenly looked at me and said quietly, "It is a delicate subject, Miss Trent, but I wish to know if Richard Roseby has apologised for his ungallant behaviour of yesterday evening." He spoke more passionately than normal and I could see anger in his eyes.

“He has, indeed,” I began laying the remains of my cake on the tiny plate in front of me, “but whether I could accept that apology is another matter, Mr Moore.”

“You must know I did not condone the man’s behaviour, Miss Trent and I certainly would not look upon you as a challenge or a prize to be bandied around between two men.” As he spoke the words, Jonathon covered my hand gently with his and took it away just as quickly. “I am sorry, Miss Trent, but I am angry.”

“Then please be angry no longer and know that I believe what you say,” I murmured. “Now please join me in partaking of one of these delicious little cakes.” We both laughed and the serious moment was gone. We sat sipping our tea in happy companionship.

As the bell jingled, we both looked up and I saw, to my amazement, that it was Miss Curtis, Lina’s nurse, who had stepped into the Tea Room. She came across to us.

“How nice to see you, Miss Trent and you, Mr Moore. It is getting chilly outside and I thought to warm myself with a hot drink,” said Miss Curtis with gusto.

“Please join us, Miss Curtis, if that pleases Miss Trent.” As Jonathon spoke, he looked enquiringly at me.

“Yes, please do,” I agreed. “Far better to sit with us than on your own.” Lina’s nurse pulled up a chair and joined us for afternoon tea, the three of us chatting quietly. I arrived at the conclusion that Miss Curtis was in fact a very pleasant woman.

Some time later, as the three of us stepped outside onto the street, Jonathon turned to pass the time of day with a gentleman who was passing by and Miss Curtis took hold of my arm gently and said quietly, “I need to speak with you alone, Miss Trent.” As she spoke, she glanced at Jonathon and continued. “It is important, but please tell no one.”

“Very well, Miss Curtis, for you have intrigued me, but where and when?” I asked of her quickly for Jonathon was already saying his farewell to the gentleman.

“I live at Holly Cottage. Anyone will tell you where it is,” the nurse said just as Jonathon turned back to us.

“Well ladies, can I escort you home?” he asked of us, a pleasant smile on his handsome face.

“As for me, I have a couple of things to purchase, but thank you for your kind offer,” said Miss Curtis and turning to me she said, “I hope to see you before too long, Miss Trent. Now I’ll bid you both good day and thank you for the tea and enjoyable company,” at which words, she headed off across the street leaving me quite perplexed. I took the arm Jonathon offered and accepted his company for the walk home, my brown paper parcels clutched in my hand. The watery sun was dropping in the sky and left little reflection now on the sea which looked murky and grey. The children were gone as was the mariner they had been talking to, but lobster pots were still strewn here and there, waiting no doubt for tomorrow’s fishing trip.

“You’ve never told me anything of your life, Miss Trent,” said Jonathon so suddenly it made me jump.

“There is little to tell, except I was born in Topsham and both of my parents are dead,” I said rather woefully.

“I am sorry to hear about your parents, ours died long ago too. Georgina has looked after me for as long as I can remember, although I do have memories of my mother at Redcliffe, but let us not dwell on the past, it is the future which is important, and Miss Trent...” Jonathon stopped walking and turned me towards him, “…lovely Miss Trent, I confess I would like you to be part of my future.” At his words I turned away from him and he misconstrued my action. “I apologise, Miss Trent, I have upset you, I shouldn’t have spoken such words,” he apologised.

“No, no, you misunderstand, Mr Moore, I am flattered by your words, but at this moment in time, have no ready answer for them. Please do not be apologetic. Come now, let us walk on and I will think of what you have said,” I assured him and I took his arm once more, smiling at him. He smiled in return which warmed my heart. Little more was said as we walked until we reached the gates of Middlepark.

“I shall not see you now until the ball no doubt,” Jonathon said turning me towards him. “It was fortuitous that I bumped into you in town, for I have enjoyed our afternoon together.”

“I have enjoyed it as much,” I told him honestly, for I had, but I was unsure of my feelings for him or my employer. As I looked across to the door of Middlepark, I could see that the door was open and Richard Roseby stood on the step watching us.

“I shall have to go, Jonathon. Thank you for your company and I will see you at the ball,” I said not wishing Jonathon to see my employer standing

there. Thankfully, he did not. Jonathon raised my hand to his lips and looking into my eyes said, “Farewell pretty maiden and please do not forget your promise to me.” With which words he walked away, not looking back for which I was thankful. As I walked up the path, Richard had disappeared through the front door leaving it ajar for me, but as I stepped into the small hallway he was waiting for me. My heart skipped a beat for I was sure that in some way he was going to admonish me but he said curtly, “I shall be away for a couple of days, Miss Trent. I have hired a large carriage to take us to Kilkenny Hall. I will be grateful if you and Lina could be ready and waiting at six o’clock, please. I bid you goodnight, Miss Trent.” So saying he made his way to the drawing room without waiting for an answer. To say I was a trifle upset by this interlude was an understatement. As I made my way up to my room I could feel a hot tear stinging at my eyes, but as I entered my room it was forgotten because across my mirror, scrawled in red rouge, was the word ANNA. I was as perplexed at this as much as Miss Curtis’ words earlier and I lay awake for some time in bed that night mulling everything over in my mind: Miss Curtis, Anna, Jonathon, Richard Roseby and Madeline. I really didn’t know who or what mattered most.

Chapter Eight

Thursday arrived. I had been awoken in the early hours by a thunderstorm and by seven o'clock was washed and dressed in my new blue gown, ready with anticipation for our visit to Mrs Rivers' establishment in town. Richard was indeed absent from Middlepark and I had not seen any sight of Verity Hawksworth either. I set to wondering if they were at some place unknown together. I was also still mulling over the name which had been etched on my dressing table mirror two evenings ago.

While I was waiting for Lina to go down to breakfast with her, I went to my drawer and uncovered the small bundle of letters which had been written to Madeline. Taking them from the drawer and looking down at the red ribbon, which bound them together, I walked over to the window and drawing back the curtains looked down at the oak tree. Its branches were still laden with leaves which were slowly starting to change colour. Raindrops glistened on the branches and although it had been raining earlier on, I could see that hopefully, we were to enjoy some pleasant weather today, for which I was thankful. Looking at the letters once more, clutched in my hand, I thought of the words "*Trust no one but Anna*", but who was Anna? Did she still live, or had she died long ago taking Madeline's secret with her to the grave? And what of Madeline and the child? These were questions which may never be answered. Someone within these walls was keeping the story alive, but who? My employer? Lina? No, she was far too young to know of this story of Madeline. And what of the sister, Joanna, who was mentioned? At this thought, I felt quite elated for it would be a start if I could find out about Joanna. Maybe there was a family Bible. I decided that after the ball I would make it my quest to find out more about the Roseby family. I knew that I must hand the letters over to Richard, for after all it was his home, but it was also my mystery now and I intended to pursue it. With this thought in mind, I placed the bundle of missives back in the drawer and vowed to hand them over to him the day after the ball.

"Charlotte!" Lina greeted me with excitement in her voice. "It is today we go to see your gown."

"It is indeed, Lina and I am as full of expectancy as you, but I have encountered a problem," I told her.

"What problem could there possibly be?" asked Lina solemnly.

“With your father not here,” I began, “we will have no way of bringing the gown back with us, that is of course, if Mrs Rivers has had time to make it.”

“I am sure that knowing the circumstances, Mrs Rivers will deliver the gown,” said Lina, quite sure of herself. “And if there is no gown, what will you wear, Charlotte?” This question was one I had been asking myself while the thunder rumbled earlier.

“That I will decide on after we have visited Mrs Rivers,” I told her, with more conviction than I actually felt.

Over breakfast, Lina and I talked of the coming ball for it was uppermost in both our minds.

“I am told by my dancing tutor that we are to curtsey as our partner bows before each dance,” said Lina, nibbling at her bread and butter. “Did you know this, Charlotte?”

“Yes I have read about it, but never actually curtseyed before,” I answered.

“Then we shall practice this morning after breakfast, for I have mastered it to perfection, or so Mrs Knowles, my dance instructor told me only yesterday afternoon.” As she was speaking, I looked at Lina. She wore one of her new day gowns of a pale blue heavy cotton, the long sleeves tapering to her wrists edged with white lace. She looked beautiful in a gentle way and with her lovely blond hair shining in the daylight, which filtered through the large dining room window, she also looked very serene.

“Yes of course, Lina, I would dearly love some tuition in the niceties of dancing,” I told her as I sipped my coffee.

“It will be great fun,” Lina continued, “and did you know that all the gentlemen will wear white gloves so as to not cause their sweaty palms to touch ours and a gentleman can only ask us to bestow on him one dance. Oh I am so looking forward it.” Lina sighed, a dreamy expression on her face.

After breakfast we made our way to my room.

“I have something for you, Lina, a present from me to mark your coming out ball,” I told her as we entered the room.

“I adore surprises. Whatever it is, I know I shall love it.” Lina clapped her hands as she spoke while I went to a drawer and retrieved the box which held the fan. I passed it to her and she took the long box from me and sat

upon my bed to open it. As she removed the lid, and peeled back the tissue paper, a cry of delight escaped her lips as she looked at me.

"My dear Charlotte, a fan and a truly lovely one which will match my gown. Oh thank you so much, but... I have no knowledge of how to use one. What shall I do?"

"We will learn together for I have bought myself one and have little idea either." At my words, we both laughed and sped to Lina's room to practice with the fans and curtseying. We both got the idea of using the fans very easily. It was a question of opening them and closing them with one hand, which we practiced over and over. It required a certain flourish of the wrist and eventually, we both mastered the art at the same time. Then Lina went across to the large wardrobe to look at her gown and squealed with delight as the colour matched her gown perfectly, for which I was thankful.

"Now," said Lina, "I have to give you some instruction in the art of the curtsey." Lina's curtsey flowed with her, but it was harder to accomplish than I had anticipated and, on more than one occasion, I nearly fell over amongst shrieks of laughter. By the time lunchtime came, my curtsey was passable and we went down to lunch in a very happy, companionable frame of mind. It was then I realised that Lina would not need me much longer and would no doubt be a married woman within the year. This realisation troubled me for what would I do when I left Middlepark, but as it happened, my future was already planned out and it was only I who knew nothing about it yet.

I did not let this thought trouble me as Lina and I set off for the town and Mrs Rivers' dressmaking establishment. We walked in silence, side by side, until we stepped onto the path which ran alongside the sea.

"Lina, I hope you don't mind me asking," I ventured, "but is there a family Bible belonging to the Roseby family?" I had been wanting to ask this all day and had at last plucked up the courage, hoping that Lina would not think my question strange and ask me why I had asked it. I need not have worried.

"Yes, there is one, it is quite large and very heavy, so it is kept in the large church in the next village of East Budleigh," she told me and thankfully, her voice held no suspicion.

"Has Miss Hawksworth gone away as well, Lina?" I asked her, "only I haven't seen her since your father left on Tuesday."

“Yes, she has gone to stay with a friend who lives near Exeter as she needed to collect her new gown,” Lina told me quite readily, “and I think father said she would meet us at Kilkenny Hall and then come home with us. Did you know, Charlotte, that the ball doesn’t start until nine pm and does not end until the early hours of the morning?” I had a vague idea from booklets I have read.

“If this is the case,” I told her, “we must rest all day tomorrow.” She agreed and shortly after we arrived at the dressmakers.

The premises was a small house at the other end of the main street with a door to one side of a large window which gleamed, the net curtains white as snow. This was only to be expected of Mrs Rivers, I thought, as we waited for an answer to our knock. We were ushered, by a young maid with shiny black hair beneath her white mop cap, into the front parlour, which was seemingly quite small due to the small tables against two walls which held an abundance of various trinkets. A large picture of a stern looking man hung over the black leaded grate which looked bleak and forlorn. I guessed that once a fire was lit in its depth the whole room would look far more warm and cosy than now, for it was very dismal. Lina and I sat on high backed chairs awaiting Mrs Rivers. When she walked into the room, Mrs Rivers looked, as always, calm and collected and stern, like the man in the picture I thought.

“Your gown is ready, Miss Trent, if you would like to follow me please,” and as she spoke, Lina and I rose from our seats and followed Mrs Rivers through the door and along a long dark hallway to the back of the house, where we stepped into a light airy room so much in contrast to the parlour we had left, I almost gasped with surprise. There was a curtained area on one side of the spacious room and before me, on a tailor’s dummy, was my gown. Tears sprung to my eyes, for I had expected a lovely gown, but not one so perfect and beautiful as the one I looked at now. Mrs Rivers had followed the sketch I had drawn with accuracy, but it was the material she had used to make this creation which took my breath away. The close fitting off the shoulder bodice and full skirt had been fashioned in a cream silk georgette with pale green flowers embroidered at the neckline which matched perfectly the yards of pale green muslin which fell apart at the front to reveal the cream silk skirt. I went over to look at it more closely.

“You are pleased, Miss Trent?” Mrs Rivers asked.

“I am more than pleased, Mrs Rivers,” I said looking in her direction. “It is a work as such that I had not imagined.”

“Try it on please, Charlotte,” Lina urged and until I heard her voice, I realised I had quite forgotten she was there.

“Yes, Miss Trent, please let us fit it for I need to know if the hemline is the correct length,” said Mrs Rivers in her controlled voice, so I was helped out of my blue gown by one of Mrs Rivers’ seamstresses, Daisy, and an excited Lina. I stepped into the dress which had small cream silk buttons fastened all the way down the back with loops to secure them. It took Daisy and Lina several minutes to secure. It was a perfect fit except for the length by a couple of inches. My heart sank.

“Do not be alarmed, Miss Trent, for my girls will adjust the length and I can bring it to you tomorrow afternoon,” said Mrs Rivers kindly and I breathed a sigh of relief while I looked down on the skirts of cream and pale green, marvelling at my good fortune.

“You look beautiful, Charlotte,” said Lina honestly. “The colour green becomes you. Oh, this has made me long even more for tomorrow for we will both look like princesses.” And I believed that her words were true and longed for tomorrow myself, but the question burned in my mind, did I wish to look captivating and adorable for Richard Roseby or Jonathon Moore?

Dressed back in the clothes that I had arrived in and ready to leave, thanking Mrs Rivers from the bottom of my heart, the dressmaker took hold of my arm gently and took me back into the dressing room.

“Miss Trent,” she began quietly, “I have a proposition for you.”

“And what would that be, Mrs Rivers for I am certainly not a seamstress,” I told her, quite bemused by her words,

“No, Miss Trent, it has nothing to do with stitching, but drawing,” she enlightened me.

“In what way?” I asked of her, quite perplexed now.

“Your sketch, Miss Trent of this beautiful gown I have made you was quite outstanding and I was hoping you may like to sketch styles for me, as fashion decrees, of course, for which I will pay you.” Mrs Rivers told me.

“You wish to employ me is what you are saying?” I asked, quite taken aback at this turn of events.

“That is exactly what I am proposing, Miss Trent, yes,” Mrs Rivers ascertained and I was quite dumbfounded for a moment and unable to

answer her. It was true that I loved sketching, but would I wish to do it for a living, and what of Middlepark and Lina?

"Please let me think about it for a few days," I said, "for this has come as a shock as you can imagine and there is a lot to take into account."

"I quite understand, Miss Trent, and shall look forward to hearing your decision, in shall we say, a couple of weeks?" Mrs Rivers suggested.

"Why, yes thank you. That is a reasonable amount of time to mull something over. I look forward to receiving my gown tomorrow, thank you." With these words, I turned to join Lina, my mind in turmoil.

The day of the ball had finally arrived. After breakfast, Lina and I rested in our rooms, even though Lina was feverish with excitement, which after luncheon could not be contained.

"Oh, Charlotte!" she said bursting into my room while I was resting on my bed, with thoughts of recent events whirling in my mind. Everything was intriguing from Madeline to Miss Curtis' words. I arose from the bed, rest over for the day.

"What time will we need to get ready, Charlotte and shall we get everything together that we need: gloves, slippers, reticule and our gowns," shrieked Lina all in one sentence that I was glad when four o'clock arrived and we were to start getting ready. Mrs Rivers had delivered my gown an hour before and all was well now. Ruby and I helped Lina into her gown and slippers and while Ruby fashioned Lina's hair, I went to my room to get myself attired for the all-important ball. My hands trembled as I stepped into my beautiful gown, knowing that I would need help to do the buttons up, I went bare footed along to Lina's room when I was startled by my employer's voice.

"You are captivating, Miss Trent," he said and I whirled around to see Richard standing there looking at me, a secret smile on his face. I was very much aware that my dress was undone at the back and my hair in disarray.

"Mr Roseby," I stammered. "I had not thought to see you on this landing."

"That much is obvious, Charlotte," he said walking towards me, the smile still on his face which unnerved me somewhat.

"May I do the buttons up for you," he continued, stepping closer.

"Indeed not, sir," I said angrily and hastened away to Lina's room.

At quarter to six we were both ready. Ruby had done wonders with our hair. I stepped back from Lina and was astounded at the total transformation

in her. Her hair was swept up on the top of her head, a pink feather adorning it. She looked every inch the young lady and her gown was exquisite, as she indeed looked herself.

"You look wonderful, Lina," I told her, a tremor in my voice. "Your father will be so proud of you." As I spoke the words, I thought of Richard as I was still smarting from his impudent behaviour earlier.

"Now let me look at you," said Lina. "In fact, let us look in the mirror side by side." The reflection which looked back at me was almost unreal, for I didn't look like me. Never before had I worn, or indeed owned, such a lovely gown. My hair was swept back with small curls dancing each side of my face and a curly fringe resting perfectly on my forehead. I had purchased the cream silk slippers on my way back from my outing with Lina and I could see them now peeping out from below the lovely skirt of my gown. Our long white gloves, which we had more trouble with getting on than anything, set our gowns off perfectly, our skin gleaming in the light. Lina and I both had to walk carefully down the two flights of stairs, gathering our gowns at the front lest we fall. On reaching the small hallway, Lina's father took one look at his daughter and the love and pride on his face was evident.

"You look adorable child and I fear that I may lose you tonight to some fortunate young suitor." As he spoke, Richard walked towards her and gently kissed her cheek. He looked very handsome himself in black with a white starched shirt and white bow at his neck and, as Lina had told me, white gloves.

The large carriage was waiting for us and we settled ourselves in it for the journey to Kilkenny Hall. I drifted into a half slumber, my thoughts of the man who sat opposite me, his eyes appraising me, his daughter at his side, her arm linked through his. I knew that whatever else I thought of Richard Roseby, there was no doubt he adored his lovely daughter.

On arriving at Kilkenny Hall, which boasted a very long driveway, it was dark and light spilled from the large doorway and the downstairs windows. I felt very nervous as Richard helped me from the carriage and Lina and I smoothed our skirts ready for our entrance to this magnificent building. The ballroom was vast with garlands of green festooning the walls. Three large chandeliers hung from the ceiling lit by hundreds of candles, their glow casting a mellow light over the many ladies and gentlemen who moved around the room, the ladies causing a riot of colour. In a large alcove, tables

were laden with food. I was mesmerised by the whole scene and especially the large orchestra congregated at the far end of the hall. Lina's father seated us on red velvet seats and went to get us some refreshment of cool lemonade for the hall was hot. As I watched, Lina flicked her fan open, fanning herself with it while watching the scene before her. Verity arrived looking as lovely and serene as ever in a beige silk gown adorned here and there with silver sequins which sparkled in the light of the candles as she walked gracefully towards us. I was sipping the lemonade when the orchestra struck up to the strains of the Strauss Waltz. Gentlemen were bowing before ladies and leading them to the floor and they did indeed bow and curtsey. Within seconds there was a young man of pleasing appearance with blond hair bowing before Lina who gracefully accepted his polite request for a dance. I watched them as they glided around the floor wondering what they were speaking of when Richard stood before me and my heart lurched, whether it was with pleasure or dismay I honestly could not say. Richard bowed before me.

"May I have the honour of this dance, please, Miss Trent?" he said graciously as I rose from my seat and let him lead me across to the dance floor. Richard gave a slight bow and I a small curtsey as he looked down on me and then his hand was on mine and his other hand resting a little too tightly on my waist.

"I could wait no longer to hold you in my arms, Charlotte," he whispered as we whirled around the floor. Richard expertly avoiding other dancers. His words in one way surprised me after his curtness the other day and I did not quite feel the pleasure at them as I would have done a week ago. My dancing partner said no more but his hand on my waist was firmer as the dance went on and I was quite relieved when the music stopped and he led me back to my seat.

Lina was dancing all evening. She must have been exhausted and, at one time between dancing, she said with bright eyes, "that young man I have just danced with is called Brett and he is heir to the Malverton Estate in North Devon. He has asked that he may call on me. Isn't it exciting, Charlotte?" She was whisked away to dance again. I danced intermittently with young gentlemen and more elderly ones. I was beginning to feel tired and while eating a canapé and small sandwiches, I looked up to see Jonathon standing before me. I had never seen him dressed in black before,

his fair wavy hair swept back off his face, his white gloved hand reaching out to me.

"Will you bestow on me the honour of this next dance, please Miss Trent?" as he bowed slowly before me, his eyes never leaving my face.

"With pleasure, Mr Moore," I replied, trembling with anticipation I let him lead me to the floor as the orchestra struck up another waltz. Jonathon bowed and I gave a perfect curtsey in return and then his hand held mine while he gently held my waist. As we glided around the floor he never took his eyes off my face and I could feel the soft green muslin of my skirt, flowing as one with me.

"You look enchanting, Miss Trent and at this moment in time, I am the luckiest man in the ballroom," he whispered and I felt my cheeks go hot, praying he could not see it.

"Thank you, kind sir," I replied just as the music stopped to my disappointment. Jonathon bowed and led me back to my chair. He walked away and then I saw him glance back at me; our eyes met and for a brief second we were locked together. I sipped at my lemonade and, with a flourish of my wrist, opened my fan for the first time to cool my hot cheeks.

The evening was a success for Lina as she had a suitor to call upon her the next week at Middlepark. As we stood in the entrance hall, awaiting our carriage to pull up at the front of the Hall, I saw Jonathon and Richard standing not far apart from each other. Nonchalantly, I looked from one to the other and I honestly could not say quite where my heart lay, but I was soon to find out.

Chapter Nine

We arrived back at Middlepark at seven o'clock in the morning. Richard bade us goodnight, kissing Lina on the cheek, before we made our way up the stairs. We were both weary, but when we reached her room, Lina fell on to her bed laughing.

"What a wonderful evening," she said, jumping up once more and taking my hand. "Please do the honour of dancing with me, Miss Trent." She whirled me around her bedroom until I felt dizzy and I felt it was time to calm her down. I stopped her with some resistance, for the young woman was over-tired and enraptured by the evening.

"Come now, Lina, we must get you to bed, for sleep is what we both need," I told her. "Now be sensible. We have had a wonderful time and can re-live it later in the day when we have rested. Now let us get you ready for bed." The long gloves were the biggest problem of all, but eventually, both Lina's and mine were strewn across the bed.

"Before I forget," I asked Lina, "please undo the buttons on my gown." She did, far more slowly than they were done up, and when the task was done, she went across and looked at herself in the mirror.

"I don't ever want to take this beautiful gown off," she said petulantly.

"Well you must, young lady," I told her firmly and eventually, the gown stood hanging on the wardrobe. Once her hair was brushed and Lina was in her nightgown, I drew back the covers of her bed and she climbed in, exhausted. I made sure the heavy curtains were pulled to properly so the daylight didn't filter in. Giving Lina a kiss on the cheek, I made to leave when she suddenly said, sleepily, "I saw you dancing with my Father. How I wish that you would marry him." Then she was asleep and I was left feeling quite confused. For now I really didn't know if I would wish to marry him, when in the beginning, it was all I dreamt of. As I undressed, reluctantly stepping out of my gown, I reached the conclusion that I was a daydreamer no longer and, as I slipped between the crisp white sheets, promptly fell asleep.

I knew no more until two o'clock that afternoon when I awoke and drew back the curtains to see the afternoon sun shining through my window, casting a strip of light across the carpet. After I was dressed, I remembered that I had vowed to pass Madeline's letters over to my employer.

First, I went to see if Lina was awake and was surprised to see her bed already empty and no sign of her. I set to thinking that I had failed in my duties and should not have slept so long. Swiftly, I returned to my room when I bumped into Ruby, who carried a large tray laden with tea, toast and a boiled egg.

"Master thought you may be in need of refreshment, Miss," Ruby told me, "and when you be ready, he'd like to see you in the drawing room about three o'clock, but no rush, Miss." While drinking the well needed cup of tea, I tried to ascertain what my employer wished to see me about and wondered also where Lina was. After the well needed refreshment, I smoothed the skirt of my dove grey dress, checked my hair and retrieved Madeline's letters from my drawer. I looked down at them and the miniature for what would probably be the last time. I felt a pang of sadness, but knew it was the right thing to do.

With my hand on the porcelain handle of the drawing room, I hesitated, for I was nervous about handing over the letters, but common sense told me, if I had not chanced upon them, they would still be tucked away beneath the floorboards in my room and would probably never been found. This thought in mind, I stood up straight, held my head high and entered the room. Richard Roseby was standing with his back to the fireplace, in which a cheery fire burned brightly, taking the chill off the room.

"Charlotte!" he exclaimed, using my Christian name once more, "thank you for joining me. Please be seated." He indicated the settle to one side of the fire. I placed the letters and miniature beside me but Richard seemed not to notice; he was intent on looking at my face.

"You looked enchanting at the ball, Charlotte," he began, "and I realised as I held you and danced with you, that I have fallen in love with you." His declaration was indeed a shock, for I had certainly not anticipated it. Two weeks ago I would have been elated by it and fallen into his arms, but now I did not know what I felt for this handsome man and realised that for a while now, he had not pervaded my dreams.

"Please speak to me, Charlotte," he implored.

"I thank you, Mr Roseby, but at this moment in time, I really have no notion as to what to say," I said honestly and then unexpectedly, Richard was on one knee before me.

"I ask you, Charlotte Trent, to do me the very great honour of becoming my wife," he said earnestly as he took hold of my hand and looked into my

eyes, eyes which must have mirrored the confusion I felt, but an answer was necessary to alleviate its obviously strong emotion.

"I thank you for your proposal sir, which, to say the least, is unexpected and I ask that I may be given some time to think about it," I said quietly. At my words, Richard rose to his feet once more and leant his hands on the mantelshelf. He looked for some time at the flames leaping up the chimney, the only sound being the crackle of the logs and my beating heart and then he turned to me.

"I understand that you will need time, Charlotte, but I beg of you that you will give me your answer tomorrow and I pray the answer you give will be, yes," he told me quite calmly.

"Thank you, sir, I shall go away and consider your proposal and declaration of love," I said with far more composure than I felt. I rose from the settle and picked up the precious bundle of letters.

"Before I leave, sir, I would like to give you these," I began, handing them to him along with the miniature. As he looked down at them, Richard's face drained of colour.

"Where did you find these, Miss Trent?" he said looking at me. His eyes were cold and I had noted his formal use of addressing me.

"I found them under the floorboards in my room, sir," I told him honestly.

"And how did you come to be looking under the floorboards?" he asked angrily.

"Half a crown rolled under my bed and got lodged between the floorboards in the corner of my room," I explained, "and when I dislodged it, the floorboard came with it."

"Did it indeed? That will be all, Miss Trent, thank you." I realised that I was dismissed. As I stepped back into the hallway, I had reached one conclusion: that Richard Roseby was a man of changing moods and I certainly had no intention of marrying him.

I made my way to the kitchen in search of Ruby who may know where Lina had gone. I had never entered this domain before and was surprised to find how small the kitchen was, but even so, it boasted a large black cooking range where Ruby sat on a rocking chair, warming her hands by the fire.

"Miss!" Ruby exclaimed, jumping up, causing the chair to rock to and fro on its own.

“I have come to ask if you know where Lina has gone, please Ruby,” I said, half smiling to myself, for Ruby acted like a burglar caught in the act with a silver teapot.

“I think she went out for some fresh air with Miss Verity,” Ruby told me.

“Thank you, Ruby and I am sorry I startled you,” I told her gently.

On my way back across the hall, I decided to go back to the drawing room to speak to Richard of his proposal, for I had made my mind up and I felt it unfair to keep him waiting for an answer. As I reached the door of the drawing room, I could see that it was ajar and I could hear voices, one was certainly Verity, so I eavesdropped.

“So what was her answer?” she said.

“She said she needed time to think about it, but I can wait no longer.”

So, I thought, as I moved away from the door and made my way up the stairs, he cannot wait, well I will keep him dangling a bit longer, I decided, if only to repay him for his bad behaviour at the dining table, which I had not forgotten.

Lina was in her room when I looked in, propped up by a pillow on her bed. She beckoned for me to sit by her and we spent a pleasant hour talking of the ball and all the young men she had danced with. An hour later, Ruby appeared to say the Master wished to see me in the drawing room.

“You go on,” said Lina, “for I could do with a nap, if you could please draw the curtains before you go.” I did as I was bid and made my way once more down the stairs, thinking that Richard could obviously wait no longer, but as I entered the drawing room he said.

“I wish to take you to meet a friend of mine and if you could please wear your best gown, for it is quite a well-to-do household. Would you care for a small glass of wine?” he asked solicitously.

“I will drink a glass of wine with you,” I agreed graciously and on being handed a glass of clear liquid, I sat down on the settle and sipped it slowly while we talked of my time here since I had arrived. Richard was charming again and did not once mention Madeline’s letters. The wine finished, I handed my employer the glass and he said,

“I shall be waiting with the pony and trap in half an hour, Charlotte,” with which words I was dismissed.

Hastening back to my room, I wondered who Richard was taking me to see and I prayed he did not intend to introduce me as his betrothed. Back in my room, I decided to wear my new blue silk gown which should be

appropriate for any visit. I tidied my hair and pinched my cheeks applying a little rouge to my lips for I looked quite pale today. Deciding it could be chilly, I wrapped my black cape around my shoulders and placed a blue bonnet on my head. Picking up my reticule, I was ready. Before I went downstairs, I looked in on Lina, quietly opening the door to her room. I could see she was asleep.

Richard was waiting with the pony and trap. He assisted me into it, wrapping a warm blue blanket around my legs, and we set off. I'd started to feel strange, my brain didn't seem to be functioning properly and I felt as if I was in a dream, but I put it down to tiredness.

"Are you alright, Charlotte?" I heard Richard's voice but it seemed to come from a distance.

"Just tired, sir," I managed to utter, my voice not seeming like my own. The sun had gone down and everything seemed very dark. Trees and hedges passed by us and small cottages with plumes of smoke spiralling from the chimneys and I suddenly wished that I was tucked up cosily in a small cottage and safe. I looked at Richard who appeared to have taken on a look of the Devil himself and suddenly I felt afraid, wondering where my employer was taking me.

"Where are we going, Mr Roseby?" I asked weakly, for I did feel weak, so much so that I leant against him and then shook myself upright once more, wondering what was happening to me.

"Have no fear, Charlotte, we are nearly there." His voice seemed to come from far away and I was struggling to keep myself awake.

"I feel unwell," I told him, my voice shrill as I caught hold of his arm. "We need to go back, sir, back to Middlepark," I pleaded.

"It is probably the evening air, Charlotte, after drinking the wine," he assured me and I realised his words could make sense, so I sat as upright as I could, watching as we entered a small village, cottages built in a cluster either side of the winding street. I noticed that a mist was rising and was sure I was not imagining it. As we drove on, the mist seemed to get deeper, obscuring the cottages and the air was chilled. I shivered and pulled my cape closer around me and then leaned against Richard once more, but this time, I did not have the strength to sit up again. I was half asleep when I felt the pony and trap pull to a halt. Richard moved me away from him and opening my eyes I realised that the mist was now swirling around us, obscuring everything in its path, but I was so pleased we had reached our

destination, for I would feel better once we were in a warm room and I was drinking a hot cup of tea.

"I will come round for you, Charlotte." I heard Richard's voice from far away and didn't care anymore where I was or what was happening to me. The next thing I knew I was being lifted from the trap by my employer who steadied me as I struggled to stand.

"Take my arm, Charlotte," Richard instructed and I did as I was bid, half leaning against him as we walked up a short path, our feet crunching on the gravel. I could not see anything because of the mist, only that a large wooden door lay before us which Richard was now opening. We passed through into a large dimly lit room with a low ceiling which was very cold and I shivered once more. We seemed to be walking through something on the floor and looking down, I could see it was rose petals. My befuddled brain tried to make some sense of it but I could not think straight, as Richard, with me holding on to his arm, came to a halt.

"Where are we?" I asked him quietly, as my brain told me I shouldn't shout, that we were in a place which demanded reverence. Then I heard a woman's voice, one I recognised but could not place.

"You took your time, brother," I heard the words but could not recall where I had heard the voice before and then, through a haze, I saw a man standing before us. He was thin and tall with grey hair and a long grey beard.

"Who is this, Richard?" I whispered, "is it your friend?"

"Yes, my dear, it is. Now listen to what the kind man has to say," he told me gently. My legs felt weak and I knew, that at any second, they would buckle beneath me and indeed they did. I fell to the ground from Richard's grasp and all I could smell was the heady scent of roses as my head fell on what was a concrete floor. I closed my eyes, glad to lie down and sleep, but I felt Richard and the woman, whoever she was, pulling me to my feet. I smoothed my skirt, brushing the rose petals away and I was once more holding on to Richard's arm, but my mind was beginning to feel less hazy and I was starting to feel more aware of what was happening. I looked at the woman, struggling to recall who she was. She was pretty and dressed well and then it dawned on me.

"Verity," I almost shouted, "what are you doing here?" I strived to free myself from Richard's grasp, realising something was dreadfully amiss, but Richard held on to my arm and spoke to the stranger.

“Please carry on.”

“Are you sure, sir?” the man asked, “for I can see the lady is distressed.”

“I am sure and I am paying you well for your services, now please proceed,” Richard ordered.

“Very well, sir,” the stranger said looking at me with sympathy in his eyes. “I will begin. Dearly beloved we are gathered together in the sight of God.” At this point, my befuddled mind came to life and I realised with some dismay, that the man was a priest and this was a marriage ceremony with a reluctant bride.

Chapter Ten

"No!" I shouted, my voice reverberating around what must have been a small chapel.

"Don't fight it, Charlotte, you know you have loved me all these months and marriage to me is what you long for." Richard's voice was menacing.

"I have no desire to marry you," I told him, my voice getting stronger at each word I spoke. "You are correct that at one time I longed for you but that was before I got to know you."

"But I am the same person," Richard argued.

"Sometimes you are and sometimes you are like a completely different man," I shouted at him.

"We will carry on with the ceremony," Richard said to the priest, catching hold of my arm so tightly that it hurt.

"No we will not," I told my employer angrily, "for if we do, then I shall tell Lina that you tried to marry me against my will." At these words, Richard relaxed his hold on me and I freed myself from his grasp.

"Lina." Richard uttered the name gently.

"Yes, Richard Roseby, your lovely daughter who you adore, for that is the only good thing about you. I realised long ago that you love her."

"I do indeed love her with my whole being. It has always been Lina and myself and she has brought me such joy."

"Then think of her, for I would not willingly wish to upset her, or cause her to think ill of you." I spoke to him as to a child. In the pause which followed, the priest spoke.

"If I am no longer needed, then I ask please that I leave," he implored.

"Wait one moment," Richard told him.

"And why did you see fit to drug my wine and bring me to this place to marry me under pretence, what possible motive could you have?" I had to ask the question, which now my head was clear, was the uppermost thought in my mind. There was silence until Verity spoke.

"Richard has gambling debts and could lose Middlepark if it goes on much longer," she said quietly.

"And you," I pointed to her as I spoke, "you, a gentlewoman, are in league with this, that Richard should marry an unwilling bride for money."

"I am ashamed to say I am," said Verity as she lowered her head, unable to look at me.

“Well I hope you’ve both come to your senses and be thankful that I shall say no more about it, but only for Lina’s sake, because I have grown very fond of her.” My words, I realised, were true. I had become very attached to Lina over the past months and would not wish to hurt her or cause her any unhappiness. If she knew of this charade, what would she think of her father, who she adored? All was quiet, except for the priest snapping his Prayer Book shut. My head thumped and then the door burst open. It was Jonathon, the mist swirling in with him. I ran to him and as he enfolded me gently in his arms, at last, I knew where I belonged. It had taken this to make me understand my true feelings.

“What is going on here?” Jonathon asked, as I snuggled closely against him, safe at last.

“How did you come to be here?” asked Richard.

“Ruby told her sister, who works at Redcliffe, that Miss Trent had gone out in this awful weather and I set out to look for her. I saw your pony and trap outside a deserted chapel. I came in to see what was happening,” he explained, “and could you please tell me what a priest is doing here and rose petals?” he said looking down. “If I didn’t know any different, I would think a marriage had taken place,” he observed.

“It very nearly did,” I said looking up at him, “with a reluctant bride.”

“You cad, Roseby!” my beloved said angrily, stepping toward him, but I caught his arm to stop him.

“No, Jonathon, there is Lina to consider and fortuitously, the marriage didn’t take place. Let us go, for I wish to go to bed and sleep, or my head will explode.”

“Very well, dear heart,” said Jonathon, still glaring at Richard, “but be sure, Richard Roseby, that I shall not forget this.”

“Nor I,” I whispered as we all dispersed into the mist, Jonathon taking me, reluctantly, back to Middlepark, but I knew that I would be safe now, for Richard would not wish to upset Lina.

That night, I slept well in spite of my ordeal at the deserted chapel. Next morning I had arranged to meet Jonathon after breakfast at the gates of Middlepark. My head was clear and free of pain, for which I was thankful. I breakfasted with Lina and told her I had the day off, at which, she said she would spend the day with her father and Verity. Jonathon was waiting for me at the gates of Middlepark in his pony and trap. On seeing me, he jumped agilely to the ground and ran toward me, gathering me in his arms.

“Dear Charlotte, I have been so worried about you all night,” he said putting me at arm’s length and looking me up and down.

“Worry no longer, Jonathon, for I am well, just a little tired,” I assured him, “and I have every confidence that I am safe here, for I have been all these months before.”

“But yesterday,” my new found love uttered with passion in his voice, “to be drugged and led to be married against your will, I know it is a crime.”

“But I am unscathed and I am certain that the drug was quite mild, for I came to my senses fairly quickly, but mixed with the wine, it was a little more potent than it should have been,” I told him.

“Now you are making excuses for your employer.”

“Please don’t look at it like that,” I urged him, touching his cheek with my hand. “Mr Roseby is obviously a worried man and in danger of losing all he has, so stupidly, he sought to solve the problem by marrying me and my money. In truth, I am quite worried for him, if only for Lina’s sake.”

“What a charitable young woman I have fallen in love with,” was Jonathon’s answer, “but I still feel that a crime has been committed against the woman I love.”

“Then think of it no longer and let us go for a ride, for I wish to go to East Budleigh Church,” I urged him. When settled in the trap and bowling gently along the country lane, I explained to Jonathon about Madeline’s letters and how I needed to find Joanna in the Family Bible.

“Why do you need to know?” was his question, but I found it hard to explain that I was now tangled up, inexplicably, in the mystery of Madeline and had to see it through to the end. There was also something niggling in my brain which I couldn’t quite recall, something which was said in the chapel last night while my mind was hazy. Try as I might, I couldn’t recall it.

“Can you stop here please, Jonathon?” I told him suddenly and he pulled the brown pony to a halt.

“Do you feel unwell?” he asked, concern in his voice.

“No,” I said smiling at him, “I think we’ve just passed Holly Cottage.”

“Yes, indeed we have,” confirmed Jonathon, “it is where Miss Curtis resides.”

“Then I need to see her, if she is in, please, for I feel the nurse could solve a lot of the mystery.” Jonathon who jumped down from the trap and assisted me to the ground, his hands lingering gently on my waist.

“I love you,” he said suddenly.

“And I you, but I have to solve this mystery before I can move forward,” I explained gently, the words of love bringing a tear to my eye, which Jonathon observed. He took a white handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed the tear away.

“Thank you,” I said, my heart bursting with love for him. “Now let us see if Miss Curtis is home.” The nurse was indeed at home. She ushered us into her living room. My first thought was how clean everything was, from the white walls to the scrubbed floor and woollen mats which were scattered around. There was a smell of baking drifting through the cottage and everything was so homely, I could have lived here myself.

“You’ve come here at last,” said Miss Curtis when we were all seated on comfortable chairs with silk cushions of a deep red.

“I need to ask you, Miss Curtis, do you know who Madeline was?” I began.

“Indeed I do, Miss Trent, for I am Anna,” she said softly.

“Then it was you who wrote messages on my mirror in my room,” I gasped.

“Yes, I am the culprit, as I wanted Madeline’s story to be told,” the nurse revealed. “But that doesn’t answer how you know about Madeline, Miss Trent. I just thought that being young, you would have pursued the two messages I left, especially my name, and I knew that we were bound to meet one day when I visited Lina, but alas you never asked any questions, so I had to ask you to come to me.” At the nurse’s admission, I told her how I had found Madeline’s letters. As I related the story, Miss Curtis’ eyes filled with tears. “Poor Madeline, she loved him so,” Miss Curtis said.

“But who, Miss Curtis? Please tell me who it was she was in love with for I have tried to work it out for many weeks.” I pleaded an answer to my question.

“You haven’t worked it out, Miss Trent?” the nurse said. “Well, it is young master Richard.”

“Richard Roseby.” I breathed a sigh of relief that at last I knew. “So Lina is Madeline’s daughter,” I said slowly, at last understanding dawning on me.

“Yes, Lina is Madeline and Richard’s daughter.” As she spoke, Miss Curtis went across and looked from the window as she continued. “Lina was born in this very cottage and her poor mother died two days later. I pleaded with Richard’s father to allow Lina to be brought up in her rightful

home. Master Richard wanted it too, for he was beside himself that he did not marry Madeline. His parents, especially his mother, would not hear of it. I said they should have eloped if Richard had an ounce of loyalty in him, but he would not thwart his mother. I have to say, he has looked after Lina and brought her up on his own and above all, he loves her." Here the nurse stopped, wrapped up, no doubt, in memories of the past, which had indeed, come to the fore many years later.

"And where is Joanna?" I asked her, "for you used to be her nurse."

"Yes, indeed and Madeline her governess," Miss Curtis said, turning back from the window to look at me. "It is Miss Verity, who is now at Middlepark." The niggling thought of something said last night while at the chapel came to me. As she spoke to Richard last night, Verity had called him 'brother'.

"But why Verity, and not Joanna?" was my next question to Miss Curtis, who had now sat back down.

"Joanna was named Joanna Verity. When she was young, about eighteen, or so, she was accused of pushing her mother down the stairs at Middlepark, not long after Lina was born. Her mother died from a broken neck. Joanna and her mother had been heard to be arguing, not long before the accident, by a number of guests at Middlepark. One of the guests said he actually saw Joanna push Mrs Roseby, as he went in the hallway to collect his cape. However, he was a short-sighted gentleman and his evidence was dismissed. It was quite a scandal at the time and Joanna was sent abroad where she married. She never returned to live in this country until her husband died a little over a year ago. Since she came back, she has used the name Verity and Lina does not know she is her aunt, but one day she will have to be told." Here the nurse stopped.

"Told about her mother, too," I said to no one in particular.

"That too," said Miss Curtis with gusto. "Now let us have a cup of tea." While drinking tea and eating small sandwiches, Miss Curtis said, "Have I solved all your mysteries for you now, Miss Trent?"

"No," I said, "there is one other. Who is the man in the miniature I found with the letters?"

"That would be Madeline's brother, who she adored. Sadly, he died as a young man and she treasured the miniature, keeping it with her all the time." Her words had revealed all to me but there was one more question I had to ask.

“Please can you tell me what Madeline looked like, Miss Curtis?”

“She was a lot like you, Miss Trent,” the nurse told me and as we left the cottage. I looked back thinking of Madeline and her unhappy life, and then I thought of Richard and the words came to me without conscious thought: “You are a coward, sir”. But in spite of that, he had written those beautiful love letters and truly believed that he would never love anyone but Madeline. With this thought I felt some sympathy for him. In all of this, the one thing which mattered above all else, was the fact that he dearly loved his daughter. How I wished that Madeline knew this. I would never know if I had seen Madeline’s apparition in the mirror in my room at Middlepark for I was then a daydreamer, but I am pleased I learned her story.

Jonathon and I went into the church as I wished to sit for a while and think over all Miss Curtis had told us that day. As we neared the church path, I looked up at the tall square tower and thought what a lovely place this would be to marry. No one had asked me yet, but I had a strong feeling that Jonathon would ask me one day.

I stayed at Middlepark until the following Spring, wishing to do right by Lina and not desert her until she was ready for me to leave. The young man, Brett, whom she had danced with at the ball, courted her and in the March, they became betrothed. It was then I knew it was time to leave Middlepark.

“Lina,” I said to her one day when we were sat together stitching her trousseau in the drawing room.

“I know what you are going to say,” Lina said, raising her head from her work to look at me.

“Then I have no need to say it,” I teased her, as I always did for we were friends more than companion and charge now.

“No, Charlotte, please speak to me. Do not tease,” she said seriously.

“You know that the time has come for me to leave. You are a woman now and no longer in need of a companion,” I told her, as gently as I could.

“You are right, Charlotte. You need to pursue your own life with Mr Moor, as much as you loathe Georgina.” Here she giggled for we were always talking of Jonathon’s sister although I had learned over the past months to tolerate her.

“I am pleased you understand,” I said with relief, for I had picked my moment well.

I saw little of Richard Roseby or his sister Verity except at dinner when I joined then as usual. I felt their problems must have resolved themselves somehow, for we were all still at Middlepark and Richard seemed more relaxed these days. I could never forgive him or Verity for trying to force me into a marriage on that misty evening in September, but as I told Jonathon, I stayed for Lina's sake.

On one occasion, I met George, Richard's father, on the landing and all he said was, "My son is a foolish man."

I had declined Mrs Rivers' offer of employment, but had agreed, on special occasions, to sketch a gown for her, to which suggestion she gratefully agreed.

A few days later, as Jonathon and I walked through the grounds of Redcliffe Manor, admiring the Spring flowers, we found ourselves by the lake.

"I need to speak with you," said Jonathon stopping and turning me to him, "and this is the very place to do it."

"It is our place, isn't it," I said, "our very special place, because this is where it all began."

"It is indeed, Charlotte and that is why I want to ask you here, in our special place, if you will make me the happiest of men and marry me?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" I told him, my joy unconfined and I reached up to kiss him gently on the mouth. "Together we will bring this glorious house to its former glory," I told him.

"You said that one day you would describe Redcliffe Manor to me in a word," Jonathon said. As we stood, our arms around each other, full of love for one another, I looked down toward the hauntingly beautiful home I would share with Jonathon for the rest of our lives, a place where we would love and laugh and hopefully raise a family. I looked up at the man I loved.

"It is a jewel," I told him, "a precious jewel for us both to treasure."

THE END

BOOK 5:
A STRANGE AFFAIR

For my two lovely sisters Irene and Ruth
Friends Forever

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1

I first met Kieran Alexander on an autumn day in Shrewsbury in 1883. I'd been looking out of the long glass window of the library at the scene below. I could see Shrewsbury Castle opposite me. Its red walls mellowed to a warm orange by the early afternoon sun matching the autumn leaves which covered the ground on this late September afternoon.

I had little to look forward to, no family and no friends except for Clarissa who taught at the Academy as I had done until two weeks ago, when I was dismissed for taking a pupil's side, when to my mind she had been treated unfairly. What path lay before me now I had no idea, a post as a governess perhaps, but with no recommendation I doubted whether this would be possible. So I spent my days in the warmth of the library reading books about Elizabeth I and the Tudors, a subject I was avid about.

It filled my days and then the evenings were spent alone in my dingy room except for an hour or two which Clarissa managed to share with me. Thankfully I was surviving on savings I'd accumulated while working and living in the Academy.

A footstep on the dark polished floor behind me interrupted my thoughts and I turned to see who other than myself wished to use the reference department. A silent exclamation escaped my lips as I looked at the tall handsome fair-haired man who stood before me by one of the many tables.

His piercing blue eyes met my grey ones across the room and my heart thudded in my chest, so much so that I was afraid the gentleman would hear it.

'Good afternoon, Miss...?' he queried in a soft masculine voice. I had an instant attraction to him as if someone had dealt me a harsh blow.

My legs were weak and trembling and I prayed my voice would not betray my overwhelming emotion.

'Miss Thorpe, Barbara Thorpe.' I answered. 'And you, Sir, are?'

'Kieran Alexander.' As he spoke he stepped nearer towards me, I noted the grey bowler hat he held under one arm and the immaculate grey single-breasted morning coat which he wore, together with a white high-necked shirt and red necktie. He looked so handsome and perfect, I could not draw my eyes away, although propriety urged me to do so.

He drew towards me and whispered, 'We cannot talk here or the librarian will admonish us.' He said looking across at the prim grey-haired woman

who sat at her desk watching us.

I laughed quietly for his eyes were full of mischief and gaiety.

‘So Miss Thorpe, will you do me the honour of joining me for afternoon tea?’ I could not say no, no matter how much my head said beware, you don’t know this man, my heart screamed, yes!

‘Yes,’ I agreed picking up my reticule from the table. I suddenly felt drab in my brown dress and jacket with my best beige-decorated bonnet, but my face must have held a look of eagerness and pleasure and I felt an emotion I had not felt before, it crept over my whole being uninvited yet welcomed and I had yet to work out what it was.

From that day we spent most of our days together. We walked around the castle and spent much time in all weathers walking by the River Severn. We dined each evening at the Clarence Hotel where Kieran was staying.

On each occasion I’d worn my best beige poplin gown and stitched on various collars and cuffs and added trimmings to alter the gown’s appearance. How I wished I could buy another gown, but Kieran was happy as I was, so it mattered little.

I told him my life story, but he told me little about himself, except that he lived in a castle in North Wales with his brother and sister. Sometimes Kieran’s face held a faraway look, but he was soon smiling again. There was a lot I wanted to ask him, for one thing why he didn’t go home, but something stopped me. Was it a premonition that if I asked him all this would end? And the Lord knew how much I didn’t want this ever to be over, this dream world that we were living in, so enrapt was I in the moment that I didn’t give the future a thought. How I was to wish one day that I had.

We were dining on the evening of Christmas day at the hotel, red candles were lit all around us giving everything including Kieran and myself a warm rosy glow. I was partaking of my Christmas pudding and Kieran was watching me, a serious expression on his face. My heart started beating faster with an irrational fear.

‘I have to return home,’ he had said quietly and my heart sank, tears pricked at my eyes and I pushed the plate which held the pudding away from me and dabbed at my mouth with the red napkin.

‘Soon?’ was all I could say. My eyes cast down not daring to look at him for fear he would see the tears.

‘I want you to come with me Barbara, as my wife.’ His words were so unexpected I looked directly at him and mumbled.

‘Your wife? But surely you would wish to marry with your family around you.’

‘No.’ He had said adamantly, ‘I wish to marry in January, quietly without any fuss. You know I was attracted to you from the moment I set eyes on you. I just want it to be us and a couple of witnesses. Please say yes.’ So saying he took my hand across the table and squeezed it gently.

‘Yes,’ I whispered, ‘yes I will marry you. Wherever and whenever you want.’ I agreed without further questioning.

‘Splendid!’ Kieran had replied. ‘I will make the arrangements.’

On Boxing Day Clarissa came to spend the day with me. I danced around my drab dreary room with joy in my heart as I related to my friend my good fortune.

‘But you hardly know him,’ Clarissa had said, and still no doubt entered my mind. All that mattered to me what that I became Mrs Kieran Alexander, Kieran’s wife.

The day of our wedding arrived, Clarissa was to be one of our witnesses as was Mrs Malvers, an acquaintance of Kieran’s, who was staying at the same hotel as he. A carriage had been sent for Clarissa and I and on my arrival at the chapel Kieran had placed my arm through his and smiled down at me encouragingly with Clarissa and Mrs Malvers behind us.

The interior of the small stone chapel was dank and dim, I had not noticed it on the three occasions we had been to a service when the banns were read for our marriage. The grey January day cast little light through the small slit windows, the candle on the bare altar fluttered in the draught from a broken window, throwing an eerie, puny light on my bridegroom and I as we stood before a rotund priest at our marriage ceremony.

‘I pronounce you man and wife,’ the priest said in a mundane voice. Clarissa clapped her hands together at the priest’s words, bringing to a conclusion such a dreary marriage service. I glanced sideways at my tall handsome husband, his face expressionless, his fair hair curling on the collar of his black frock coat. He glanced down at me and smiled.

‘You look beautiful,’ he whispered, although I never considered myself as beautiful, although some said that my grey eyes fringed by long curling dark lashes would attract any man.

I had known Kieran for four months and suddenly realised I knew so little about this man I had just married, except that he was thirty years old and

lived in Wales where we were to travel this very day; and that was when the first rumblings of doubt came into my mind.

'Take my arm, Madam.' As he spoke in his deep measured voice, Kieran offered me the crook of his arm, I did as I was bid and we proceeded to walk down the aisle. As we stepped out of the chapel door into the yellow daylight large flakes of snow fell like pieces of white lace, adorning my beige-coloured cape which I pulled about my person, for I was cold from head to foot, my nose threatening to drip on to my cape.

As I watched the snow swirling down ever faster I recalled how I had dreamt of marrying a man I loved wearing white lace, so unlike the gown I wore today was my thought as I looked down at my beige-coloured poplin skirts which were already beginning to get wet on the hem, the snowflakes now settling on my black boots causing me to shiver.

'You are cold, Madam,' observed my husband solicitously. 'Let us get you into the carriage.' Before Kieran helped me into the carriage, Clarissa and I put our arms around each other as she kissed me on the cheek, and Kieran thanked Mrs Malvers. As I was helped up the steps of the carriage I suddenly felt sad and knew I was stepping into the unknown.

I made myself comfortable on the plush red velvet seats as Kieran wrapped a burgundy-coloured blanket around my legs. On looking around the carriage I could see my brown portmanteau containing all my worldly possessions had been placed on the corner of the seat.

Through the window I could see Clarissa waving at me. A tear slipped from my eye and trickled slowly down my cheek lingering on my mouth, a mouth my husband had never ventured to kiss, but he is after all, a gentleman. I chided myself as the carriage moved off.

My friend shouted, 'Good luck!' And I watched her and the chapel fade away in the distance until I could no longer see either my friend or the place Kieran and I had become husband and wife. Kieran leant across and took both of my hands in his.

'No regrets I hope, Mrs Alexander?' he said quietly.

'None.' I assured him, for it wasn't regrets that I had, but a niggling doubt at the back of my mind, and wondered with some misgivings where he was taking me to spend our first night together as man and wife.

The snow persisted during our journey, driving against the carriage, so much so that we could scarcely see out of the window. We stopped at a hostelry for some refreshment and when we stepped back into the carriage I

could see the snow was banking up on each side of the track, and I set to wonder if we would safely reach our destination, but our cheery conversation lightened the journey.

'We are nearly there, wife,' Kieran's voice startled me as he had hardly spoken for the last half-hour. 'We will be at Rowan Castle in about ten minutes and not before time, I'm thinking. I've sent word ahead so we are expected, all will be waiting to meet my bride.'

'I am looking forward to seeing your home and meeting your family, I pray your castle isn't too grand for I am just a simple young woman,' I said pleasantly.

'You can see for yourself, Barbara.' As my husband spoke I could see through the driving snow that we had left the mountains behind and turning through some gates travelled up a long driveway flanked by trees, the bare branches of which were heavy with snow. In the distance I could make out a huge building with crenulated towers, the light from the candles already twinkling in many of the windows and smoke spiralling from the chimneys.

As we drew up to the main entrance I gave a gasp of surprise, it was very grand, but in this weather I could barely make anything out except to see that the walls were a sandy red and the vast expanse of the building boasted large mullioned windows.

'You are impressed, Mrs Alexander?' Kieran asked of me a smile on his lips.

'I am overawed, I had not expected...' I began and could say no more so overwhelmed was I by the immense size of my new home. As I looked one half of the main double doors opened and a woman with a lantern held high called out to us.

'Welcome home, brother, please hurry, I am anxious to greet your wife.'

As Kieran helped me from the carriage the woman stood at the top of the steps watching our progress towards her. I shielded my face with my hand against the biting snow, how I wished I didn't feel so weary, all I wanted to do was climb into a soft bed and lie between crisp white sheets, and then the thought came to me that this night I would not lie alone. Reaching the top of the steps I could see the woman with the lantern was as young as I, her fair curls were partly covered by a pale blue lace mantilla which matched the full skirts of her blue merino dress.

'Come,' she said taking my arm and drawing me through the main door into the vast hallway where I could see a fire burned cheerily in the huge

stone fireplace with a pile of logs stacked against the wall. ‘I am Justine,’ the young woman continued, ‘Kieran’s only sister, welcome to Rowan and to the family. I shall be more than pleased to have your company.’ As she spoke Justine placed the lantern on a chair and then proceed to untie the ribbons of my bonnet which she then removed to reveal my golden brown hair, passing the bonnet to a maid in a black dress with a white frilly apron covering it.

It was then that I saw the row of people waiting to greet me. My cheeks grew hot and all I wished for was to escape, having been so used to spending hours alone I found all these people quite intimidating.

‘This,’ said my sister-in-law stopping by a short buxom woman dressed in a grey serge dress with a white frilly cap covering her dark greying hair, ‘is Mrs Burnet, our housekeeper.’

It’s lovely to meet you, mistress,’ said Mrs Burnet taking one of my hands in both of hers and squeezing it gently, she smiled and her eyes twinkled and I knew that the housekeeper and I would get on well.

‘I’m pleased to meet you,’ I said quietly, still overawed by my surroundings. I felt I was in a dream and at any moment would awaken to find myself in the dingy room I had occupied in my lodgings near Shrewsbury Castle.

‘Mrs Burnet will introduce you to the staff,’ said Justine going back to my husband who stood watching me in silence and I set to wondering what he was thinking. Did he regret marrying me? His expression was unfathomable. While I had been in deep thought, Mrs Burnet and I had moved along the row of head maids and kitchen maids, six in all and then we reached the young woman at the end of the line who was dressed in black like the others with a white apron and a mob cap perched on her black curly hair.

‘And this is Megan, Mrs Alexander,’ said the housekeeper. I could sense she was fond of the girl who was about twenty.

‘I’m pleased to meet you, mistress,’ Megan said in a sweet Welsh accent, dropping me a curtsey at the same time.

‘Megan is to be your personal maid mistress, she has many skills and is a friendly soul if this suits you,’ enquired the housekeeper.

‘I would be delighted, Megan,’ I agreed, not wishing anyone to know I had not had a maid before.

‘And I am Derrick Alexander.’ A masculine voice from behind me startled me and I turned to see a tall man similar in stature to my husband Kieran and I guessed this to be the brother he had talked of. While Kieran was quiet his brother exuded friendliness his blue eyes dancing with merriment.

‘I’ve heard a lot about you,’ I said foolishly for I had no idea of what to say to anyone, I felt I had been thrown into a den of lions although the welcome I had been given was friendly enough.

‘All good I hope,’ said Derrick taking hold of my gloved hand and kissing the back of it and I thought once more that my bridegroom had not yet kissed me not even on this, our wedding day.

‘And I am Kerensa Templeton.’ Looking over Derrick’s shoulder I could see the beautiful young woman who had spoken. She had not been in the hall when we arrived for I would not have missed her, her flaming red hair cascaded down the back of her emerald green silk cloak, underneath which she wore a matching dress, the bodice so tight at the waist it accentuated her perfect figure. I suddenly felt inadequate and hated this woman on sight as she looked me up and down, her green eyes flashing. Without a second glance in my direction she swept past me and headed for my husband whose face held a wary expression, but nonetheless his eyes lit up with pleasure at the sight of her.

‘Kieran, darling!’ enthused Kerensa, taking both my husband’s hands in hers and kissing him on both cheeks. ‘It is so good to have you back, Derrick has been a complete bore and won’t go riding with me along the beach,’ she complained beautifully.

‘I don’t think any of us will be riding for a while,’ Derrick said, annoyance in his voice. ‘There is a blizzard raging outside which could last for days.’

‘How convenient,’ Kerensa expressed her displeasure and slipped her arm through that of my husband. ‘At least you are back, dear Kieran, that’s all that matters to me.’ She tossed her head, her hair rippling luxuriantly down her back, it was as if I wasn’t there. I felt the tears well up in my eyes.

‘You will join us for dinner?’ asked Derrick.

‘I think not,’ I replied as I glanced at the beautiful but arrogant Kerensa Templeton. ‘What I need is an early night.’

‘Let me take you to your room,’ interrupted the kindly housekeeper, ‘for I can see it is rest you need, and we will have some refreshment sent up to

you. Come now.'

I had not expected Kieran to be so indifferent to the fact that I had just become his wife, and I certainly hadn't expected him to be so attentive to the most lovely woman I had ever set eyes on. Even Justine had disappeared and I set to wondering if she had been disappointed by her brother's bride.

By the time we had walked along the wide corridor my whole body shivered with the cold and as Mrs Burnet ushered me into my room, tears were streaming down my face; unwilling tears for I had not wished to cry in front of anyone.

'There child,' the housekeeper soothed placing her arm around me and drawing me towards her ample bosom, 'you cry, let it out.' And I did, tears of pity for myself and the situation I had placed myself in. I had married without any mention of love and Clarissa's words came back to me, 'But you hardly know him, Barbara.' Suddenly I pushed myself away from Mrs Burnet's warm embrace, catching my hand on the keys at her waist causing them to jangle. I laughed and sobbed at the same time.

'I must make the most of this,' I said to Mrs Burnet, my tears subsided and I pulled myself up straight with determination, looking around at my surroundings. 'What a beautiful room.' I gasped, my tears forgotten as I looked around me. The drapes at the windows and around the huge four-poster bed which dominated the room were of red-coloured velvet, and crisp white sheets peeped over the red counterpane on the bed which looked inviting to one as weary as I.

'I'm so pleased, mistress, 'tis the master bedroom, where all the Alexander heirs have slept,' she informed me bustling over to a beige curtain in one corner of the room and as she drew it back I could see it had concealed a hip bath. 'Now I'll get some water sent up and we'll get you into a nice warm bath.'

As soon as she spoke Mrs Burnet removed my cape, draping it over a small chair which stood by the window and then she bade me to sit on a comfortable beige-coloured armchair which was drawn up to the fire. Sitting down I put my feet on the fender and bent to remove my boots while the housekeeper went off on her mission for water. I was warming my hands by the fire and feeling more relaxed than I had all day when there was a knock on my door. My heart thudded thinking it was my husband, but surely he wouldn't knock.

‘Come in.’ I called in as strong a voice as I could muster. The door opened to reveal a pleasant-looking middle-aged man who had brought up my portmanteau.

‘Where would you like it, mistress?’ he asked in a kindly Welsh brogue.

‘Somewhere by the wardrobe, please,’ I answered, pointing to the large mahogany wardrobe which stood against a wall by the window.

‘There you are,’ he said as he placed my possessions where I had indicated. ‘I’m David, the housekeeper’s husband, if there’s anything I can do for you, you have only to ask.’

‘Thank you, David, that’s very kind of you, I’ll remember it,’ I assured him.

The water for my bath was brought up and I sank thankfully into the warmth of it. Megan helped me out, wrapping me in a fluffy white towel, luxuries I had never been used to and I recalled the cracked jug and bowl I had washed in at my lodgings, quite often with cold water.

‘Are you to dress in your nightgown, mistress?’ asked Megan as I dried myself.

‘Yes, I think that is the best course to take.’ I agreed, although I did now feel more alert.

‘Is it all right for me to unpack your luggage?’ my maid asked.

‘Why yes, but I’ve not much to unpack as you will see,’ I replied somewhat ruefully.

‘The master’s first wife had little when she first arrived, but if she’s anything to go by you’ll have a wardrobe full of pretty things before too long.’

Megan’s words drifted across to me and stopped me in my tracks.

‘The master’s first wife?’ I said with some astonishment, reiterating my maids words. ‘So my husband has been wed before?’ I asked with great interest.

‘Yes indeed. I’m sorry mistress, I thought you knew.’ Megan apologised, an anguished look on her face.

‘No matter,’ I soothed for I could see the girl was quite distraught. ‘I’m glad you told me for I would have learned of it soon enough.’

Megan had taken my best white lawn nightdress out of my bag, I had pressed it only this morning when I had high hopes of a happy wedding day. But since our arrival at Rowan Castle the day had not gone well, indeed not,

and as Megan slipped the nightgown over my head and fastened the pearl buttons I tried not to anticipate how my wedding night would fair.

Sitting at the dressing table, Megan brushed my long straight golden brown hair until it shone. The reflection which looked back at me was pleasant enough, but I had not one ounce of the beauty Kerensa Templeton possessed. At the thought of her I felt angry at the way both she and my husband had acted as if I weren't there, as if I hadn't this very day married the master of Rowan Castle.

'What was the master's first wife called?' I asked Megan, startling the girl as the only sound in the room for some time had been the logs crackling on the fire.

'Annabel,' was Megan's short answer.

'And what happened to the first Mrs Alexander?' I asked quietly, needing to know more about my predecessor.

'It's not for me to say, mistress,' the girl answered quietly, the hairbrush still in her hand. 'The housekeeper would be the one to ask.'

'Very well, Megan, but you can see I have a right to know,' I said, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

'Oh yes, you certainly have and I hope you find out soon,' she said, as a look of sympathy mirrored in her lovely brown eyes. 'I'll unpack the rest of your things now if that's all right with you?' she asked of me.

'Thank you, Megan.'

I was very interested in my husband's first wife and I set to wondering if the reason he had been so aloof to me since we had arrived at Rowan Castle was because he felt a traitor to her memory. But my instinct was that he was head over heels in love with the beautiful Kerensa. Whatever the situation my intention was to find out exactly where she fitted into the scheme of things at Rowan Castle. I chided myself, I must be tired to even think these things about my beloved Kieran.

After my maid had left I crossed over to the window and pulled back one of the heavy curtains. Snow had started to bank up on the window pane, but over it I could see the blizzard still driving down and the white landscape looked like a huge cake topped with icing sugar. Swiftly I drew the curtain back in place, the whole scene causing me to feel cold once more.

For a little while I sat by the fire thinking of the day's events, it all still felt like a dream, our wedding, the castle, its inhabitants and the heavy

snowfall all seemed unreal and for an instant Derrick's smiling face appeared in my mind.

I glanced at the clock on the mantle which showed the time to be nearly midnight. Would my bridegroom come to me or was he with the lovely Miss Templeton? I blew out the candle on the table by my chair and climbed between the crisp white sheets, my honey brown hair spread on the snow white pillow. By the candle light I looked around the room lying expectantly waiting for some time, but as I suspected Kieran did not appear. I couldn't honestly say if I was relieved or disappointed, but whatever I felt it would appear for tonight at least I was to sleep in the marriage bed alone.

2

I awoke refreshed the next morning after a surprisingly good night's sleep in the comfortable four-poster bed. Megan was already in the room, she had lit the fire and drawn back the heavy curtains to reveal a watery sunlight casting its ray across the carpeted floor. I got out of bed with a resolution to be strong today and face my husband with a clear and firm determination. Little did I know this was to be easier said than done.

As I slipped out of bed I noticed things I had not seen the previous evening. To one side of the bed I observed a doorway draped with a red curtain which hung from a brass pole.

'Good morning, mistress,' Megan distracted me, It's a better morning, at least the snow has stopped falling,' she said in a cheery voice, at her words I stepped over to the window. The snowfall had indeed ceased, the whole countryside was covered in a blanket of white as were the mountains beyond. I walked back to the fire warming my hands in front of the blazing coals.

'I need to look my best today, Megan,' I said, turning to her as she poured water from a jug into the china bowl.

'We'll make you fit for a king,' replied Megan, throwing me a beautiful smile and I set to thinking she must know I slept alone, but I felt I couldn't breach the delicate subject with her, to me it was embarrassing and I needed to know the young woman better before I could confide in her.

Megan had just finished twisting my hair into a knot and securing it with pins when Justine walked in.

'I've come to take you down to breakfast, Barbara,' she said. All the while glancing around the room, her eyes resting on the marital bed. It was plain for her to see that only one side had been slept in. 'Run along Megan please, I wish to talk to your mistress.'

Megan did as she was bid and Justine waited until the door had closed behind her before she spoke again. 'All is not well is it, Barbara?' As she spoke Justine looked at me expectantly, waiting for an answer.

'No, it is not,' I said calmly moving away from the dressing table.

'What is amiss? For Kieran has been in the library since six o'clock this morning.' As she spoke she glanced again at the four-poster and then back to me.

‘In truth, Justine, I don’t know what is amiss,’ I answered her, looking out over the landscape.

‘I will not interfere, for now at least,’ Justine began, ‘we shall go down to breakfast and then I will show you around your new home. We are to hope that things will improve and...’ Here she looked me up and down. ‘You look charming, but as soon as the snow disappears we will take a trip to Llanberis to see Mrs Harding the local dressmaker.’

So, I thought, it was very probably Justine who had arranged the first Mrs Alexander’s wardrobe, did this mean that Annabel had little in the way of possessions also? This to me was a very intriguing question. As I walked with Justine along the corridor and down the staircase with the wide curving polished banister I mulled this over in my mind.

On reaching the hall I glanced around, so tired had I been the night before I had taken no heed of my surroundings on entering the castle.

‘The building is fourteenth century,’ Justine told me as I looked at the large tapestries depicting hunting scenes which hung on the whitewashed stone walls. The floorboards beneath my feet were of dark wood and highly polished, candle sconces were dotted around the walls with the odd reindeer head here and there, the antlers curling majestically.

‘The hall has a lot of character,’ I observed as I followed Justine to a corridor which led off the hallway. The door of the room we entered was open and as I stepped inside the first thing I saw was the huge table of light polished wood which could seat at least sixteen people. My heart sank as I saw Kerensa Templeton seated at the head of the table eating her breakfast.

She turned around giving me a cursory glance before returning her attention back to her plate. Thankfully Derrick was there also, he stood up and pushed back his chair when he saw me, quite the gentleman was my thought. I was somewhat relieved to see that Kieran was not there, and then I chided myself that it was how I felt.

At Justine’s direction I lifted each silver lid on the dishes laid out on the huge sideboard, helping myself to breakfast. I sat down opposite Derrick who gave me an encouraging smile whilst Justine poured me coffee.

‘Where is Keiran?’ said Kerensa in a sweet voice to no-one in particular.

‘Where indeed,’ the words escaped my lips unwittingly.

‘She has a voice!’ Kerensa said in a cutting tone.

‘Don’t be rude,’ Justine admonished her. ‘Barbara is the mistress now, so you’d do well to curb your tongue, young woman.’

‘So you’ve lost him have you?’ Kerensa said to me, ignoring Justine’s advice completely. ‘Or maybe you never really found him.’ And she laughed, a light laugh, but it was meant to accompany her unkind words.

‘You are wrong there, Miss Templeton,’ I retorted, my knife and fork poised in my hands, ‘for I can assure you Kieran and I married only yesterday.’

‘Married!’ Kerensa shrieked. ‘It’s just a word, for it will never last.’

‘It might be better for all, Kerensa, if you kept your misjudged opinions to yourself for once,’ cut in Derrick, who had been watching the two of us waiting for the right moment to interrupt. Kerensa’s answer was to push back her chair and flounce out of the room, the skirts of her exquisite pale-blue gown swishing on the patterned carpet, but before leaving she turned back in the doorway and said, ‘You’ll see, I’m right,’ and left us with the sound of her laughter ringing in our ears.

‘Don’t fret about her,’ soothed Derrick, laying a hand across mine on the table as though it were the most natural thing to do, ‘she has always been the same since we were children.’

‘So she lives here and always has?’ I asked.

‘Kerensa is our late father’s ward,’ explained Justine, ‘she is the daughter of a good friend who died when Kerensa was a small child. She is twenty-two now and free to leave having been left a vast inheritance, but she chooses not to go...’

‘Because of Kieran,’ I finished the sentence for her and neither Derrick nor Justine contradicted me.

After breakfast Justine told me to wait in the hall while she instructed Ginny, the head maid, to clear the dining table. I was looking closely at a particularly attractive tapestry when Kieran’s voice startled me.

‘Good morning, Barbara, I trust you slept well,’ he said as if nothing was wrong and he hadn’t totally ignored me since our arrival. I walked across to him.

‘Why did you not join me in our room last night?’ I asked quietly for I failed to understand it.

‘Believe me when I say I have good reason,’ Kieran replied gently, a smile curving his perfect mouth.

‘What has happened to you since we arrived here?’ I asked. ‘You suddenly seem cold and distant, where as in Shrewsbury you were

charming and attentive. Do you not find me attractive anymore?' The thought had suddenly occurred to me.

'Have no fear, Barbara, I find you endearing. But I cannot share a room with you for the time being at least. And when I do I shall arrive through the adjoining door.' At his words I recalled seeing the doorway alongside my bed.

'Then I shall lock it,' I said with triumph, at the same time loathing the words I spoke for I yearned for Kieran to need me as a wife.

'You do as you will, Barbara, but I ask that you have patience with me.' As he spoke he touched my cheek gently and then walked off in the directions of the dining-room.

It wasn't usual for me to stamp my foot with frustration, but I did only to be caught out by Mrs Burnet as she walked across the hallway closely followed by Justine.

'Is it the master?' they both said in unison.

'It most certainly is,' was my emphatic reply to the question. 'Mrs Burnet, I wish the door between my bedroom and my husband's to be locked forthwith.'

'Surely not,' said Justine, aghast to think that I should be barring her brother from my room.

'I don't wish to speak of it,' I said with a strength I didn't feel. 'Now please show me my new home as you promised.'

Justine took me to see the morning-room first which was a pleasant room, quite small compared with the dining-room and decorated in pale green, with green brocade curtains at the windows beyond which I could see the snow, the watery sun not having any effect on the white scene. There was a charming writing desk standing beneath the window.

'You can write your letters here,' said Justine with some enthusiasm and I could tell that she liked this room.

'I only have one person to write to,' I admitted honestly, 'For I am an orphan and only recently left my position as teacher where I worked my fingers to the bone in the kitchens also. I had very little time for social pursuits.'

'That's strange...' commended Justine.

'What is?' I asked looking at her for she had a thoughtful expression on her face.

‘Nothing really, I suppose,’ my sister-in-law began, ‘it’s just that Annabel was an orphan also with no-one, but it’s nothing. Come now, I want to show you the ballroom.’

‘You mean Kieran’s first wife, don’t you?’ I said quietly.

‘Yes, but come now, that’s all in the past.’

Although it was in the past, the fact that my husband had been wed before and not had the decency to tell me very much affected the present, along with the lovely Kerensa. Kieran had all the cards stacked against him as far as I was concerned. But I said no more and followed Kieran’s sister along the corridor until we reached an archway with no door.

We entered the largest room I had ever seen, not even the assembly room at the academy had been so vast. I looked around me, the bottom half of the walls were panelled in a rich coloured wood giving the room a feeling of warmth even though no fire burned in the large stone fireplace, which was set in the wall opposite the four windows, at which hung red curtains with gold braided tassels looping them back from the glass.

The floor was of polished wood and completely clear of furniture, except for beautiful red and gold brocade chairs which stood side by side against the panelling. Large portraits covered the walls above and over the fireplace I caught sight of a painting which drew me to it.

So out of place was it amongst the faces of the Alexander ancestors, I went to stand before it in the centre of the room so as to get the full effect of the beauty of it. The subject matter was a waterfall which flowed down between craggy rocks, falling on the boulders beneath, it was so real I almost believed I stood in front of it in reality.

‘It is rather beautiful, isn’t it,’ observed Justine as she came over to stand beside me. ‘It is a picture of Rowan Falls, from where I believe the castle got its name being only a small way from here. Kieran has been fascinated by the falls ever since he was a child. I’ve no doubt he will take you to see them when the weather improves.’

I couldn’t have known it then, but Rowan Falls would play a great part in my life and in some ways shape my future.

‘It is beautiful as you say,’ I agreed, ‘and I’m sure the reality surpasses the beauty of the painting.’ As I spoke I found it difficult to draw my eyes away but Justine had more pressing things on her mind.

‘This is where we shall hold a ball to celebrate your marriage to my brother,’ she enthused. ‘All the gentry from hereabouts will be invited and

we will dance until dawn in your honour.'

'There is really nothing to celebrate, for now at least,' I said, dampening my sister-in-law's spirits.

'Give it time, Barbara,' she said placing her arm around my shoulder. 'I would wager that by the time the snow has disappeared all will be well.'

Sometime later back in my room, darkness was falling and I thought of her words. I knew in my heart that things would one day be well between Kieran and I. Going across to the doorway by my bed, I drew back the curtain and tried the handle of the door.

Thankfully it was shut firmly against my husband.

Mrs Burnet had very obviously heeded my instructions. The only light in the room was from the flames of the fire which leapt up the chimney. I couldn't locate the tapers to light the candles and while I waited for Megan I walked across to the window, the view outside was akin to a haunted landscape with a silver moon casting its light on the snow.

Everything was still and quiet, how eerie it looked, I mused and shuddered once more at the sight of it. Megan did not appear so I headed back down the stairs to see Justine crossing the hall.

'Justine,' I called to her, she looked up a startled smile on her face.

'Can I help?' she asked.

'Have you a work basket with needle and threads please, as I have a sampler to complete, but nothing to work with,' I told her.

'Why yes, there is one in the morning room which belonged to my mother,' she offered. 'Can you find your own way for I am about to speak to the cook about the menu for dinner tomorrow. I know it should be your job but best you settle in first.'

'I shall find my way,' I assured her and as she started to walk on I interrupted her progress. 'By the by Justine, I wish to see the dressmaker at the earliest opportunity if that can be arranged.'

'But of course, dear,' Justine agreed. 'We shall go as soon as the tracks are clear.'

Making my way to the morning room I was quite proud of myself, for once in my life I felt as if I was in control of the situation. I acknowledged that I needed finer clothes, in some small way to enhance my appearance. I suddenly had a spring in my step and entered the morning room with renewed determination.

I located the workbox which stood on the floor by the writing desk, it was a wooden box, quite small in size with a handle. On lifting the lid I could see an array of coloured threads, red, green, blue and yellow to name but a few, with needles and pin cushions plus a delightful silver thimble. Placing it on my finger I was delighted to see it fitted perfectly.

About to close the lid of the workbox I stopped for I could see a name inscribed in the wood, looking closer I could see the name, Annabel. My heart sank. So Justine had lied to me and if this was the case, what else had she lied about if anything?

Nevertheless, I closed the lid and catching hold of the handle proceeded back to the hallway. As I reached the doorway I stopped in my tracks as I could hear voices, one of them was certainly Kerensa, standing to the side of the doorway I carefully peered into the candlelit hall. It was Kieran she was with and their voices drifted across to me.

'But why did you marry her, darling when you could have married me?' said Kerensa's pleading voice.

'Because Kerensa, I have told you so many times I cannot marry you,' said my husband in a gentle voice.

At these words Kerensa entwined her arms around his neck and he bent his head as if to kiss her lips. My heart thudded for I felt like an intruder, but to my astonishment he gently pushed her away from him, as they drew apart the lovely Miss Templeton said softly, so softly I could only just hear her words, 'But darling, she is a mouse.'

'Don't be unkind, Kerensa,' were my husband's words.

I fled back to the morning room, my heart racing. I would show my husband and Miss Kerensa Templeton that I could indeed be anything but a mouse.

3

Sunday morning arrived and so did Justine just as Megan was arranging my hair. I knew we were to attend chapel today in the grounds of the castle, for Justine had told me only yesterday.

‘Good morning, Barbara,’ my sister-in-law said cheerily as she looked at Megan.

It’s all right, Miss,’ said Megan to Justine, ‘I’ll just finish securing this pin and I’ll be gone.’ My maid obviously sensed that Justine wished to speak with me alone.

‘How are you today?’ Justine asked of me. ‘And is there an improvement in your relationship with my brother?’

‘Sadly no,’ I answered, ‘if it weren’t for Kerensa I feel there may be a chance.’

‘Why do you say that?’ asked Kieran’s sister.

‘Because Justine, I saw them together in the hall last evening,’ I told her honestly, recalling last night’s incident.

What I failed to comprehend were Kieran’s words, ‘Because I cannot marry you.’ it was a very strange thing to say; little did I know that in the weeks ahead I would come to understand it.

‘No matter now,’ said Justine dismissing the problem, ‘I’ve come to ask you if you would like to choose one of my gowns to wear to chapel today?’ she asked looking at my dull brown dress.

‘I couldn’t,’ I uttered, the proud part of me coming to the surface.

‘I understand how you feel, but whatever you choose you are welcome to keep. I have gowns aplenty and it would tide you over until we are able to visit Mrs Harding, the dressmaker,’ Justine said kindly.

‘Very well,’ I agreed, for I knew that to go to the chapel in my present gown meant I would feel akin to one of the servants, who I knew from Megan would attend the morning service.

‘Splendid, come along to my room where we can assess the situation.’ Doing as I was bid I followed Justine further along the corridor and around a corner where we entered a smaller bedroom than mine, which was in truth a very feminine one, everything was pink, the heavy damask curtains, the bed hangings, the carpet and wallpaper boasting large pink roses, and the

figurines dotted here and there on the mantel and small table were pink also.

The only thing not pink was the white marble fireplace from which a fire burned lazily in the hearth. I stepped over to where Justine was opening her large wardrobe door, I gasped at the sight of its contents. Gowns of all hues and colours and various materials hung closely together.

‘This side of the wardrobe is where my winter gowns are hung,’ Justine told me, and I could see some were darker in colour. My eyes rested on a wine-coloured velvet gown with a white sable collar. ‘You have chosen I can tell,’ said my sister-in-law. Now tell me which one your eyes have alighted on for at last I can see a sparkle in their depths.’

I laughed as I lifted out the gown, it was sumptuous and heavy and would no doubt keep me warm. The skirts were full and the back of the jacket fell over the skirts to a point, the buttoned bodice nipping in at the waist and the white sable sitting snugly at the neckline.

‘Can I really have this one?’ I asked.

‘Yes indeed, you have good taste, Barbara. Now let us get you into it,’ ordered my sister-in-law, already helping me out of my brown merino day dress. As I slipped into the velvet jacket, the material of the sleeves felt luxurious on my bare skin, the white sable at the wrists feeling soft and warm. Justine walked me over to a full-length mirror set in the wardrobe door.’

‘It’s beautiful!’ I enthused, ‘And the colours so rich and warm looking. Thank you,’ I said and gave Justine a well deserved hug. Never had I been dressed in something so sumptuous and expensive, indeed gazing at the reflection of myself in the mirror, the image looking back at me didn’t seem like me at all.

‘Here,’ said Justine as she passed me a white beaded reticule, ‘this will finish the whole thing off admirably.’

‘As indeed it does,’ I agreed, looking briefly once more at my reflection.

‘It is 10.45,’ said Justine with some alarm, ‘we must assemble in the hall, but not before I give you this,’ she said reaching in a hatbox and then coming across to me. I looked with some delight at the beautiful bonnet which she then placed on my head. The wine velvet matched my gown, the wide brim edged with white sable looked perfection as Justine tied the white ribbons around my neck.

As we walked back along the corridor my sister-in-law in a rose-pink gown and cloak with a matching bonnet on her fair curls, I felt like a queen. As we stepped down the staircase into the hall I felt a different person from the plain, simple, uneasy young woman who had arrived at Rowan Castle only three days ago.

The other three members of the household were already waiting in the hall, my husband looking as handsome and immaculate as ever in a black frock coat, as was his brother Derrick, who as I watched them talking I could see was a little taller than Kieran. Kerensa was dressed like a bride I thought, in a cream-coloured gown and cloak of shimmering satin, her glorious red wavy hair tied back with a matching ribbon, she looked a picture of perfection I realised, and knew that no matter what I dressed in I could never match her beauty.

Her green eyes flashed with a look of surprise as she saw me, just at the moment Kieran took notice I was there and a spark of the man I had married showed in his blue eyes, but was as quickly gone to be replaced by a look of indifference towards me.

'Take my arm, wife,' he said unexpectedly, and I did as I was bid without any conscious thought, and glancing at Kerensa I could see the scowl of her face which for an instant marred her beauty, and I felt pleased with myself, pleased that I was Kieran's wife and that it was I who held his arm.

The small building where we were to worship was built of the same large sandy red stone as the castle, set back at the side of it. When we stepped into the interior I had a sudden intake of breath for the chapel wasn't as austere as I had expected it to be. It was charming in its simplicity, carved wood panelling covered the bottom half of the whitewashed walls, ahead of us over the altar was an exquisite stained-glass window, which held my attention as Kieran and I took our places in the front pew.

The congregation complete, which included Megan, the housekeeper and her husband, David, the service commenced. Kerensa who sat on a pew on the other side of the aisle kept glancing across to look at Kieran with a distracted expression on her lovely face.

I felt elated that I was with my husband as we stepped out into the fresh air once Kieran took my arm, and I could see that the lovely Miss Templeton was irate at this. We left her standing there like an abandoned child.

‘Walk with me,’ came Derrick’s voice as he took Kerensa’s arm. And as I turned back to look, I could see an unattractive scowl on the young woman’s face; whereas my heart was singing and as I clasped my husband’s arm tighter he looked down at me and smiled.

Later on in my room, removing the exquisite bonnet and placing it on the bed, something caused me to go over and try the connecting door, some instinct made me do it and as I tried the handle the door flew open to reveal Kieran’s very masculine bedroom, which was decorated in colours of brown and beige.

Swiftly I closed the door, I was incensed and set off along the corridor and down the staircase in search of Mrs Burnet. I was directed to the housekeeper’s quarters by Ginny, who looked somewhat startled at my sudden overbearing manner, but I gave little thought to this as I walked down a clean but shabby narrow corridor to the room the head maid had directed me to.

I knocked on the door and David’s voice called for me to enter, both he and his wife seemed startled to see me.

‘Why mistress!’ said Mrs Burnet in a shocked manner, ‘Whatever ails you? Do come and sit down, you look as white as a sheet,’ she said, urging me to sit on a small red chair.

‘I’m sorry to intrude, Mrs Burnet,’ I apologised, watching David as he sat on a chair by the small dining table lighting his pipe, this fascinated me and I must have watched him too intently for the housekeeper walked over to him and took the pipe from his mouth saying, ‘Don’t smoke in front of the young mistress, David. Now go and make her a nice cup of tea,’ she instructed her husband. David left the room through a doorway into what must have led to a scullery for I could hear the kettle being filled with water.

Now while my David is gone, you tell me what’s amiss,’ she said sitting opposite me and taking one of my hands in hers.

‘The door in my room,’ I began, ‘it’s unlocked once more.’ At my words, Mrs Burnet looked at me with sympathy in her eyes.

‘I’m sorry, mistress Barbara, truly I am,’ she said squeezing my hand, ‘but the master ordered me to unlock it.’

‘Well, I’m asking you now to lock it again,’ I instructed her. ‘Please lock it and give me the key, that’s the best idea,’ I said suddenly feeling much

better at this wonderful notion of mine, for if I had the key no-one could unlock it again.

‘Well, you’re the mistress without a doubt,’ agreed Mrs Burnet releasing my hand and going over to her bunch of keys which I could see hung on a large hook by the fireplace. She brought them over to me and after a struggle released the said key and handed it to me just as David brought in a tray of tea and biscuits which he deposited on a small table by his wife’s chair.

‘There you are, Pegs,’ he said, ‘while you’re taking tea with the mistress, I’ll go and clear some snow before darkness falls.’

Left on our own, Mrs Burnet poured some tea.

‘It’s not really my place to say, mistress, but I can see you’re unhappy about something, and that grieves me to see that you are in this large castle with hardly a friend to your name,’ she said kindly.

‘I’m used to being alone, for hours at a time on occasions, Mrs Burnet,’ I told her.

‘I know it’s not the done thing, but when we are on our own I’d be so pleased if you’d call me Peggy, the last mistress did.’ Here she stopped and I interrupted her train of thought.

‘What exactly happened to Annabel?’ I asked her, snatching the chance. ‘Megan said you’d tell me.’

‘It was a rare accident that befell the master’s first wife,’ began Peggy Burnet. I smiled at her encouragingly as she continued, ‘The poor girl slipped and fell at the waterfall into the water below, her body has never been found.’

‘So how do you know what happened?’ I queried.

‘Because the master was there. He did all he could to save her by all accounts, but it was in vain. Right sorry I was as she was a lovely young woman, a bit like you, she even looked like you in some ways, but now she’s gone.’ And the housekeeper looked ahead of her with her own private thoughts.

‘And was she happy? Annabel I mean.’ For I needed to know the answer to this important question.

‘She was very happy, lit up the whole place with her smile, and yet there was something not quite right, now and then she would have a faraway look on her face.’

‘And did they marry here at the castle?’ Was my next question.

‘Bless me no, mistress. The master brought her back one day, just like he did you, but with a couple of hours warning.’ Here she stopped and I wondered if I could press her farther.

‘And how long were they together before this unfortunate accident?’ I asked.

‘About two months would be my reckoning,’ Mrs Burnet told me. ‘But don’t you go dwelling on all that I’ve told you, mistress. I just want you to be happy, a young woman like you deserves some joy in life. Look at me, I’ve been married to my David for nigh on thirty years.’

Walking back across the large hallway I encountered Derrick. ‘Barbara, we have been looking for you, everyone is waiting for you to join us in the drawing-room for our weekly evening of music,’ he told me.

‘I would prefer to go to my room,’ I said, the key to the communicating door burning in the pocket of my velvet skirt. I desperately wished to lock the door before Kieran went to his room for the night.

‘Please join us, Barbara, it would please me to have my beautiful young sister-in-law for company,’ Derrick cajoled me.

‘As you asked so sweetly I will join you for a short while,’ I agreed as Derrick put his hand beneath my elbow and steered me towards the drawing-room, somewhere I’d not been before.

On entering the room, the first person I saw was Kerensa sitting on a stool by an upright piano which was beautifully made of walnut.

My thoughts drifted back to Kerensa, she had removed her cloak, the creamy white of her skin almost matched her gown and her hair now flowed freely once more down her back. It was an uncharitable thought, but I knew that if Miss Templeton could play the piano, I could play it as well as her, since I was a young child I had played and I loved music.

‘Barbara!’ exclaimed Justine, who sat on a cream settle by the magnificent onyx fireplace. The whole of the large room was impressive, most of the room was in cream, including the curtains which gave a light airy feel to the room, the tables and sideboards were in contrast of dark wood which the cream colour complimented perfectly. ‘Where have you been?’ Justine asked for the second time.

‘I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve been getting to know our housekeeper better,’ I told her.

‘What you do here is entirely of your own making, dear, as after all you are the mistress of Rowan Castle.’ Did I detect some displeasure in Justine’s

voice I thought just as we were interrupted by Kerensa.

'Come and play for us, Barbara,' she said, 'for I'm sure you can.' The young woman was being far too sweet, obviously hoping I could not play the piano.

'Very well,' I agreed walking over and asking Kerensa to vacate the stool, which she did with a swish of her skirts on the cream carpet beneath us. Kerensa walked over to Kieran purposefully, taking hold of his arm and kissing him on the cheek. I was anything but jealous, but for some reason the whole scene incensed me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Derrick smile and wink at me with encouragement.

The beautiful music of Chopin filled the room and I felt vibrant and alive as I caressed the cream-coloured keys. I must have played for half-an-hour and could see that my husband, Derrick and Justine were enraptured by my performance, but Miss Templeton wore a scowl on her face once more as she tried to distract Kieran from my playing, but my husband would have none of it and stayed focused on me and my music the whole time, a look of pleasure on his handsome face.

I finished the piece with a flourish and bowed as they all clapped in unison, all except Kerensa who fidgeted and tried once more to hold Kieran's arm. I felt that this at last was my triumph over her and she was probably wishing she had not asked me to play, but my triumph was not to last.

Leaving the others in the drawing-room I went back to my room, noting how the candles cast a golden light along the corridor and looking out through one of the long arched windows I could see the scene outside was not so sparkling white even though the moon shone down on it.

Reaching my room and swiftly walking over to the connecting door, I locked it. I had a sudden hesitation for after the look on Kieran's face as I played Chopin I had a sudden indecision as to whether I really wanted to lock him out.

I was drifting off to sleep and wondering where Megan was when I heard footsteps in the hallway, they stopped and I heard a door quietly open. I felt sure it was Kieran and walked quietly to my door and out into the corridor along to my husband's room. As I reached it I could see the door was ajar and as I looked through the opening to my astonishment I could see Kerensa silhouetted in the moonlight.

As I watched, Kerensa sat on the bed and ran her hand lightly over the cover and pillows, as if in a caress. She then got up, walking gracefully over to the window and looking down on to the scene below, her lovely hair shining in the light from the moon. I wondered what her thoughts were as she stood there. Of unrequited love maybe, I mused.

As she went to turn back to the door I left as silently as I could and as I reached my room I heard the click of the door as Kerensa shut it.

As I lay in bed that night, a cloak of darkness surrounding me I mulled over the day's events. I heard the handle to the connecting door being turned in vain, but it did not bother me for both my doors were locked. Or did it bother me? No matter how cool Kieran had been with me since our arrival at the castle I was still desperately in love with him.

4

Three days passed and the snow disappeared, leaving behind an unfamiliar landscape. Sitting by the drawing room window stitching my sampler I could see two sweeping lawns, one each side of a narrow path led down to the surrounding wall of the castle.

Observing the mountains beyond, the peaks of which were still covered with snow, Justine's voice interrupted my thoughts, 'I thought I may find you here,' she said as she came across and looked down at my work. 'You've nearly completed it,' she said. I'd worked the sampler of linen with coloured silks for some time, the theme was the academy where I taught, surrounded by birds, trees and flowers.

A simple enough scene, so much so that a child of twelve could have done it, but embroidery was not one of my strong points. Justine had interrupted me as I stitched my name, Barbara Thorpe in red silk at the bottom, but of course my name was Alexander now I mused although I felt no different. 'You found the workbox,' observed Justine, indicating the wooden box on the floor at my feet.

'Yes, I found it, but it's not your mother's,' I told her.

'What makes you say that, Barbara?' Justine said, obviously quite taken aback by my words.

'Because Annabel's name is inside the lid,' I explained, lifting the workbox on to my lap and opening the lid for her to see.

'My mother's name was Annabel,' she told me in a voice which was barely a whisper. My heart thudded in my chest as I realised what an awful mistake I had made.

'I'm so sorry,' I said placing the workbox and my sampler on the chair as I went over to put an arm around Justine's shoulders for I could see she was upset. 'I understood Annabel to be Kieran's first wife.'

'She was, but it was also our mother's name,' she explained. 'That's why we thought it such a coincidence that Kieran should marry our mother's namesake.'

'I'm truly repentant, believe me,' I assured her.

'You weren't to know,' she told me gently, 'You've heard snippets of conversation from the servants no doubt and just haven't pieced it together very well.'

‘No indeed I haven’t,’ I said sheepishly. ‘I wouldn’t normally make a judgment before holding the true facts in my hand. But Kieran has told me so little and in truth been so distant since we arrived here, I have pieced things together as you say and not made a very good task of it.’

‘No matter,’ said Justine in her normal voice, ‘I’ve come to say that if you are agreeable we will visit Mrs Harding the dressmaker today.’

‘That would be totally acceptable to me,’ I agreed.

‘Then shall we say ten o’clock? I will organise the carriage,’ Justine told me as she walked to the drawing room door. Turning back her departing words were, ‘Please give Kieran a chance for he has never got over the loss of his mother, nor his first wife.’

Justine left me wondering how the first Annabel departed this life and also my sister-in-law obviously had no notion of the liaison between her brother and his father’s ward, and if she did she chose to ignore it. Or was I over-reacting?

Leaving my sampler and workbox on the chair, I made my way to my room to change into the wine-coloured velvet for my outing with Justine. As I reached the door of my husband’s bedroom, he stepped into the corridor.

‘Barbara,’ he greeted me in an affable manner and, as I looked past him into his room beyond, I thought of the evening I had seen Kerensa silhouetted in the moonlight.

‘Sir,’ I returned in not so agreeable a manner.

‘I wished to seek you out,’ he continued, ‘for I wish to show you Rowan Falls, a favourite beauty spot of mine. Do you ride?’ he then asked and my heart somersaulted, here was another pursuit which Kerensa no doubt excelled in, and a pursuit that I had never had a chance to master.

‘Sadly no,’ I told him expecting a rebuff. But his next words surprised me.

‘Then I shall teach you, but in the meantime you will ride bareback behind me on my horse, Lancelot.’ At his words I felt totally apprehensive.

‘Very well.’ And why I had agreed so amicably I couldn’t honestly say, except to be with him alone again would bring joy to my heart.

‘Tomorrow then, about 10.30,’ Kieran suggested and as I watched his impressive figure striding down the corridor I could barely believe that this encounter had gone so well.

Duly attired with Megan’s help, Justine and I set off to Llanberis in the carriage. Sitting once more on the plush red velvet seat of the carriage,

Justine opposite me, dressed today in a cornflower blue outfit which suited her fair colouring admirably, I thought of my journey from Shrewsbury in the blizzard and the events that had happened in the short space of time I'd been at Rowan Castle.

We travelled through impressive mountainous countryside once more and Justine pointed out Mount Snowdon, the highest of mountains which I gazed at, in awe of the snow covered peak. As we climbed up through the pass I was exuberant at the changing scenery, from green grass to huge boulders of slate, which had at some time fallen to the ground beneath and lay in confusion at the feet of the mountains.

We left the mountains behind and travelled along a road lined with cottages opposite a pleasant lake and came to a halt outside a nicely cream painted double-fronted building with large windows either side of the dark blue front door. As Justine pulled the bell it was no time before the door opened to reveal Mrs Harding herself, a dour thin middle-aged woman who in view of the expensive gowns she made was dressed very plainly in brown which boasted a delightful cream lace collar.

'I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs Alexander,' the dressmaker said in a friendly manner as Justine introduced me. My sister-in-law and I looked through bales of beautifully-coloured material, from silks to velvet. I chose enough for four day dresses and four evening gowns in different shades from pale lemon to cornflower blue. I'd spotted a beautiful turquoise-coloured silk which I was drawn to.

'Your ballgown would be admirable in this,' Justine told me as Mrs Harding agreed.

'It is a glorious colour,' I said. 'Yes. If you could please make a gown in the turquoise I'd be most pleased.'

As Justine and I travelled back to Rowan Castle through the mountains, I thought that to wear such a beautiful gown to the ball would compensate and more for the sad state of my marriage.

As we swept up the long drive I marvelled once more at the size of the sandy red castle which I was now mistress of.

'Is the whole of the castle in use?' I asked Justine.

'No, the wing on the left which is where our father and mother's quarters were is now uninhabited. In truth, my mother's room is as she left it,' she said wistfully. And as we came to a halt at the foot of the curving stone steps I wondered what Justine had meant when she spoke the words, 'As

my mother left it.' I took it to mean her mother's passing from this world to the next and thought no more of it until some time later.

We could see another carriage pulled in farther along the front of the castle, a plain black one, not half as magnificent as the one we had travelled in today. 'I wonder who that is,' Justine said, and as we entered the vast hallway, the fire burning in the grate, we were to find out when Mrs Burnet came running towards us.

'Mistress, Miss, thank the Lord you are home, the authorities are in the drawing room with the master,' she said breathlessly.

'And why is that?' said Justine, already removing her gloves and bonnet and patting her blonde curls into place.

'It would seem, Miss, they've found mistress Annabel,' Peggy Burnet informed us, reaching for the lace hanky in her pocket and dabbing her eyes with it.

'Thank you, Mrs Burnet, you may leave us. Quickly Barbara,' she said to me, 'remove your bonnet. You needn't come into the drawing room if you don't wish to,' she said as an afterthought.

'No, I will come with you for I have as much right as anyone to know what is happening,' I told her, removing my bonnet and all the while wondering what implication the finding of Kieran's first wife had on our marriage.

As we entered the drawing room I could see two men, both strangers and middle-aged standing by the cream settle, their top hats under their arms. Kieran and Derrick sat on the settle facing the door, my husband's face was visibly drained of colour, while his brother looked as calm as always. Both brothers indicated for Justine and I to sit opposite them.

'This is my wife, Barbara,' my husband introduced me to the two strangers, 'and our sister, Justine.'

'How do you do,' said both men in unison.

'Is it true Kieran what our housekeeper has just told us?' asked Justine, looking at her two brothers and the two official looking men for an answer.

'Mr Johnson here will tell you both,' said Kieran in his measured voice, reminding me of our wedding day.

'I'm sorry to tell you ladies, but the body of a young woman was found this morning by a young farmer in his stretch of the river farther down at Nant Peris. As we have only one reported missing person on our list in the area being that of the young Mrs Annabel Alexander, who tragically, so it

seems, fell into the river beneath Rowan Falls in early July last year, we are following this line of enquiry first,' explained Mr Johnson admirably, causing me to wonder how Kieran could possibly marry me so soon after this tragic accident.

Getting to my feet and walking over to look out of the window, noting my sampler and the workbox still on the chair I had sat in only this morning when there had been some air of normality in this room.

'I know this must be distressing for you,' said Derrick's voice as he came over to me and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder, but today I was more worried about Kieran. Any other time I would have found solace in Derrick's gesture. 'So what is to happen now?' I asked, walking over to the two men and looking at my husband.

'I'm afraid, Mr Alexander will need to accompany us to the mortuary to identify his wife's body, which will be difficult after a space of six months, but the young woman's clothes should give a clue,' said Mr Johnson, the other stranger remaining silent.

'Can you remember what your wife was wearing on the day of the accident, Mr Alexander?'

'Yes, I can Sir, vividly,' said Kieran, rising from his seat and coming over to my side and placing an arm around my shoulder just as Kerensa Templeton burst through the door. My husband and I both turned our heads to look at her.

'What is amiss?' she said, taking in the scene of Kieran and I close together and I smiled to myself for I felt a victory over her once more. 'Am I to understand that the downtrodden Annabel has been found?' she said disrespectfully.

At her words Kieran squeezed my shoulder and released me, walking over to Kerensa he said in a menacing voice, 'If you have nothing but insults to bandy about then please leave the room.'

'But darling,' Kerensa began, but Kieran interrupted her once more.

'Derrick, please escort Kerensa from the room. I am in no mood for her today.' As Derrick did as he was bid the lovely young woman cast a disdainful look in my direction and swept out of the room, the skirts of her beautiful pale green dress catching in the door as Derrick went to close it.

'You imbecile!' she berated him and as she disappeared out of the door into the hallway I smiled a secret smile.

‘I apologise for that ill-mannered interruption,’ apologised my husband, ‘now back to where we were,’ he continued. ‘You asked about Annabel’s clothing. If my memory serves me correctly she wore a lilac coloured dress and cloak, the colour which suited her best.’

‘Then,’ said Mr Johnson, ‘if you could accompany us now before the light starts to fade I’d be grateful.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ offered Justine, who had not spoken at all during the conversation.

‘No,’ I said, stopping her as she made to rise from the settle. ‘I shall go, for as Kieran’s wife I feel it is my duty.’ The first duty I will have performed for him I thought, other than marrying him was my notion and I couldn’t understand why I had so willingly offered to go.

As we walked into the hallway and Justine helped me to arrange my bonnet, I could see Kerensa standing next to Derrick, an unbecoming scowl on her face once more. She went to say something but Derrick caught hold of her arm. She almost spat at him as loosening his grip she ran over to Kieran.

‘Where are they taking you? Please allow me to come with you, please,’ she pleaded, but to no avail as Kieran removed her from him and dramatically she started weeping.

It’s all right, Kerensa,’ I told her, ‘I shall accompany my husband, for that is what wives do.’ At my words she fled over to Derrick and collapsed in his arms. As we went to walk out of the front doors I turned back and noticed Derrick kiss the top of her beautiful head. So, I thought, she is now going to captivate the younger brother.

As we travelled back along the road to Llanberis, Kieran sat next to me, a hand over mine. I wondered if this were to show unity in front of the two officers and I didn’t honestly know if I preferred this to be the case or not. I was confused at my feelings, but not so confused as I was to be later that day.

The journey proved to be most uncomfortable, and by the time we reached the small building where the young woman’s body lay I was quite nauseous.

I felt some sympathy for my husband as he left me where I sat in a small room to go and identify Annabel’s body, if indeed it was she. When he re-emerged his face was ashen.

‘Was it her?’ I asked.

‘The clothes were certainly the ones she wore. Oh my God, what have I done?’ And he held his head in his hands. ‘I’ve been so foolish.’

‘What do you mean, Kieran,’ I asked of him, feeling quite perplexed at his words.

‘Nothing,’ he replied, sitting up straight once more.

‘And how has it taken so long for the poor young woman to surface?’ I asked of Mr Johnson.

‘The body had probably got caught on a bush down river, and with the swelling of the water due to the melting snow I suspect the remains of Mrs Alexander got disentangled and moved farther down-stream. We don’t suspect foul play so you are free to go, Sir,’ he said addressing Kieran.

‘There’s one more thing Mr Johnson has to say to you,’ said my husband quietly, and looking at the officer he said, ‘Please proceed and tell Barbara what you told me.’

‘Tell me what?’ I asked of them, turning my wedding ring round and round on my finger.

‘I’m sorry to have to tell you young woman, but as you and Mr Alexander wed before the first Mrs Alexander had been found, that your marriage may be null and void. In other words not legally valid.’

I looked at Kieran whose blue eyes reflected sadness.

5

Kieran and I travelled back in the coach in silence. When we entered the hall of Rowan Castle, Justine came across to us, an anxious look on her face.

‘Was it Annabel, brother?’ Were her first words.

‘It was indeed, now, please organise some tea,’ Kieran told her and I felt some sympathy for Justine at Kieran’s words for she was obviously upset.

As Justine went off to the kitchen to do as he bid, Kieran turned his attention to me. ‘I need to talk to you, Barbara. The morning-room would probably be the best place.’

‘I agree, Sir,’ I replied following him out of the hall and along the familiar corridor which brought to mind the evening I had seen Kieran with Kerensa in the hall and by the time we entered the morning room I could not contain myself.

‘How fortuitous, Sir,’ I said facing him, ‘that we had not shared a room.’

‘Please be calm, Barbara,’ he urged me in a soothing tone.

‘Calm? How can I possibly remain calm?’ I turned on him angrily, my skirts swishing on the carpet beneath me as I spoke. ‘Do you have any idea what an impossible situation you have put me in?’

‘Let us not be hasty,’ was Kieran’s reply.

‘Hasty!’ I exclaimed. ‘You were surely the one to be hasty by marrying me when poor Annabel, God rest her soul, had only been gone less than seven months, and now I find that after all you have put me through since I arrived at Rowan Castle, that our union, such as it is, may not be legal.’

‘But there is the chance it may be,’ Kieran had the audacity to say.

‘Well, I for one will be happy if the marriage is null and void,’ I told him. ‘And I feel the best thing I can do while the weather holds is to leave and go back to Shrewsbury.’ As I spoke I made my way past Kieran towards the door, but he stopped me, catching hold of my wrist.

‘Stay, please stay, give me a chance to make amends,’ he pleaded.

‘I think, Sir, that any relationship we may have had is beyond repair, now please release me.’

As I spoke the words, he hesitated before letting me go and as I made to leave the room he said quietly, ‘I shall not let this go, madam.’

Leaving the pleasant morning-room and walking back to the hallway with each step I took was a resolve to leave Rowan this very day, but I hadn't bargained on bumping into Justine across the hallway.

'All is not well, Barbara,' she said walking swiftly towards me, 'I perceive it by the expression on your face and the purposeful way you walk. What is wrong?'

'It would appear that the marriage between your brother and myself may be illegal,' I told her, stopping in front of her.

'And what formalities are to be taken to resolve this?' she asked me quietly.

'I have little idea,' I told her, 'but my thought is to leave Rowan Castle today.'

'Surely not!' exclaimed Justine, a shocked look on her lovely face, her blue eyes looking at me with disbelief. 'I will not let you go. In fact, I forbid it until such a time as this matter has been substantiated. It's bad enough that Annabel has been found dead, but for you to leave would be a double setback for the Alexander family and there are your beautiful gowns, being stitched probably at this very moment.'

As Justine spoke the words I realised I had not given our visit to the dressmaker a thought. As we stood together in the hallway Justine placed a gentle hand over mine just as Mrs Burnet came from the direction of the kitchens carrying a large tray, closely followed by Ginny, a plate laden with cakes in her hand.

'Shall we place this in the drawing-room, Miss?' The housekeeper asked Justine as she smiled at me.

'Yes please,' said my sister-in-law, who then turned her attention back to me.

'Come, Barbara,' she persuaded, let us talk about this over a nice cup of hot tea.'

As she spoke, Kieran appeared from the direction of the morning-room, looking at both of us he said, 'I have been a fool, yes indeed.' With which words he disappeared up the beautiful staircase.

Justine and I sat drinking tea and talking over the day's events.

'Why would Kieran marry me so soon after the loss of his wife?' I asked her, for this was the question which I kept asking myself.

'Kieran must have loved you and indeed needed companionship,' Justine said.

‘But there was no mention of love from either of us. In truth, I adore your brother, so if you ask why did I marry him, I can answer the question,’ I told her, and then there was Kerensa. Why had Kieran not married her? So I asked the question and Justine’s reply shocked me a little.

‘Because,’ she began, ‘my father left a clause in his will that Kieran and Kerensa should not marry.’

‘But why should this be?’ I said with curiosity. ‘And does Kerensa know of this?’

‘As to why, I don’t know the answer, but I am sure Kieran does and will not speak of it. Kerensa doesn’t know and we have been asked not to tell her.’

‘But why not?’ I asked with some exasperation, ‘for it is plain to see that the young woman adores your brother and he, her.’

‘You are right about her, Barbara, she does adore Kieran, but I have my suspicions that Kieran does not feel the same,’ she told me, and I wanted so much to tell her of the scene I had witnessed in the hall, but something thankfully stopped me. ‘So will you stay?’ asked Justine, rising from her seat and walking across to the window.

The light was fading fast and we were talking by firelight which cast soft shadows across the lovely peaceful room. Justine turned back, retracing her steps and came to sit beside me on the settle.

‘Please stay,’ she said softly, and I was reminded of the very same words Kieran had spoken only an hour since which strangely seemed like a lifetime ago and I set to wondering what his thoughts were at this moment. The shock of identifying Annabel would have been an ordeal for anyone and I suddenly felt uncharitable at the way I had berated him in the morning-room, today of all days.

‘You have persuaded me with your kind words,’ I agreed, ‘on condition that I am moved from the marital bedroom until such time as I have a right to be there.’

‘Very well, Barbara, I shall instruct Mrs Burnet to prepare the yellow room for you,’ agreed Justine.

‘So we are all happy,’ I said as Justine kissed me on the cheek and went over to pull the bell cord to summon Mrs Burnet.

Megan and the housekeeper moved my clothes and meagre belongings to my new room, which was a pleasant enough room with yellow brocade

curtains at the windows and around the four-poster bed. A fire was soon burning cheerfully in the small black hearth.

'There, mistress,' said Peggy Burnet, 'I do hope you feel settled in here. It's none of my business why you have moved but we will make you as comfortable as we can, won't we, Megan. Now, you come and sit on this armchair by the fire and try and get some rest,' she said, plumping up a pretty floral cushion to place behind me. Just as I made myself comfortable Kerensa burst unannounced into the room.

'So,' she began, surveying the room as she spoke, 'You've moved, I knew it wouldn't last with Kieran, and now Annabel has been found it will be the end of your reign here,' she told me unkindly, gloating at my predicament.

'Off with you, Miss Kerensa,' said Peggy Burnet, shooing the beautiful girl out of the room, but not before I had looked at her and said in a strong voice, 'This mouse has found wings, Kerensa.' The startled expression on her face made up for all the mixed fortunes this day had brought and I knew that the lovely Kerensa would know I had heard what she had called me and would no doubt flee to Kieran to tell him. Splendid, I thought, for he would know as well as she that I had witnessed the scene in the hall.

That night I lay in bed in my unfamiliar surroundings, the candlelight flickering over the yellow walls and I wondered what was to become of me now.

Next morning after Megan had drawn back the curtains, I slipped out of bed and stepped across to the window looking out over the scene before me. I could see that I was now situated at the back of the castle for the view was completely different. I could see the stables and a large rose garden surrounded by a low wall which in summer would be a lovely place to sit, but I doubted I would see a summer here, and I mused as to how the validity of my marriage would be ascertained.

I was to learn later that Kieran had it all in hand. As I thought of him he burst into the room just as Kerensa had the previous evening. I was startled at his intrusion for I was not yet dressed and I pulled my robe tightly around me.

'What bad manners,' I berated him. 'Madam, you are, if you remember, my wife,' he said quietly.

'At this moment in time we are not certain of that, remember?' I said cuttingly.

‘No matter, I have come to remind you of your promise to accompany me to Rowan Falls today,’ he said.

‘I have not forgotten,’ I told him, which was a small lie, for it had slipped my mind. ‘I will meet you in the hall at 10.30 as we agreed, but I will not ride bareback on your horse as you wished for it is unladylike and I have never ridden a horse before.’

‘Very well, Barbara, we will take the pony and trap for it is a pleasant enough February day,’ he conceded. ‘And Barbara, all will be well, trust me,’ were his departing words at which I scoffed, for how could I possibly trust someone who now treated me as a stranger, not a wife.

I wore the wine-coloured velvet once more and thought momentarily how pleased I would be when my new gowns were ready. Mrs Harding, the dressmaker, had said to return in a week’s time. Maybe Justine would be kind enough to lend me another gown until then for she and I were the same size and height. Waiting in the hall for Kieran, his brother came over to me with his usual cheery smile.

‘And where are you going, fair damsel?’ he asked.

‘With Kieran to Rowan Falls,’ I answered, blushing at Derrick’s words.

‘Then be careful that my beloved brother doesn’t push you in,’ he said, the smile vanishing from his face. His words shocked me.

‘Why do you say that?’ I questioned.

‘No matter, it was a foolish thing to say, enjoy your outing,’ Derrick said and I had the briefest feeling as he walked away that he was jealous. What gave me that notion I had little idea but I knew I was right.

Kieran and I settled ourselves in the pony and trap, Kieran wrapping a blanket snugly around my legs for although the sun shone weakly the air was chill and I wondered if we would see any more snow this winter. It was a pleasing ride as we bowled along the country lane, the mountains rising majestically in the distance.

We came to a halt at the beginning of a rough track, Kieran helped me down, his hand lingering in mine and I had a pleasant feeling of being safe, which belied Derrick’s words.

‘Link your arm through mine, wife,’ said Kieran gently, ‘for the track is uneven and I don’t wish you to twist your pretty ankle.’ Kieran’s words caused me to realise he was being most charming today and I wondered at his change of heart and also mused as to what the lovely Kerensa would have to say about our outing together.

I heard the pounding of the water before I saw the falls and when they did come into view I gasped at the beauty of it, the water cascading down the high craggy rock was captivating. All we could hear was the rush of water as it tumbled down and over the large rocks in the river below. I stepped nearer to look at the frothy water which caressed the large boulders, and Kieran caught my arm pulling me back and I had an instinctive feeling that this was how Annabel had fallen to her death.

Kieran's face was full of genuine concern and pain and I had at last seen a different side to his character once more in the briefest of moments. We couldn't hear each other speak for the pounding of water, we just stood side by side for some time watching the beauty of the waterfall.

After some time we walked back to the pony and trap, my clothes were slightly damp where the water had sprayed me with a fine mist as it went on its merry way down the gorge but it didn't bother me, I felt content and I realised it was because I had at last shared another pleasant moment with the man I'd married that day in the grim chapel.

'What do you think of my favourite spot?' asked Kieran as we left the roar of the water behind us.

'It is beautiful, I am enraptured by it,' I told him honestly, 'and I wish so much to see it again one day soon.'

'You shall, I promise you. It pleases me that you loved it so much for it is one thing at last we share, the love of Rowan Falls. If only you could learn to love me, too?' he said almost to himself and I turned away as if I hadn't heard, my heart racing and my whole being feeling a contentment I'd never expected to feel.

Arriving back at the castle, Kerensa spoilt the moment, it was almost as if she were waiting for our return.

'Where have you been, Kieran darling?' she gushed, coming over to us and totally ignoring me as if I weren't there, which irked me more than I cared to admit.

'We've been to Rowan Falls,' I told her, my voice angry.

'I hate the place,' she said unexpectedly, 'It's far too noisy and damp for my liking.' She went to put her arms around Kieran's neck, but he pushed her away from him.

'Remove yourself from me, Kerensa,' he told her quite kindly.

'What has happened to you, Kieran?' she said in a rage, stamping her foot and looking at me with hatred in her eyes. 'You've surely not fallen for the

mouse!' she screamed, total contempt in her voice.

'These games have got to stop, for games they are,' Kieran told her sharply. 'You are old enough now to have respect for people and thankfully I have just come to realise it. Now, go and find something to do.'

I was amazed at Kieran's words, had their closeness just been some game he indulged in to please her? Even if this was the case, he had failed to see that the young woman was besotted by him.

'I have a new sampler you can stitch,' I offered her kindly.

'Sampler! You can keep your sampler. I have no time for ladies' mundane pursuits, far better to be out riding a horse with the wind in your hair,' she said to me with some disdain. Then she looked back at Kieran, 'And you, sir, will tire of this woman for she has no fire in her blood.' With which words she flounced off in the direction of the drawing-room where a moment later we heard the sound of the piano being played with gusto.

'I apologise for Kerensa's rudeness. I will not let her be rude to you again, she may have the fire in her blood but you are a gentlewoman and deserve better,' he assured me.

As Kieran left me to keep an appointment in Llanberis, which I assumed to be pertaining to Annabel, I made my way to the ballroom for I wished to see the picture of Rowan Falls once more. As I entered the vast room I looked around me, imagining people in vibrant-coloured clothes whirling around the floor in celebration and me in my beautiful shimmering turquoise gown and my husband captivated by it.

But these were daydreams and would no doubt never take place now. I had a strong feeling that my marriage was indeed a sham and yet I had today once more seen the better side of the man I had married.

As I lay in bed that night thinking of our visit to the waterfall, I felt that a warm glow surrounded me. I could hear the crackle of the fire as it burned low in the hearth and hear my heart beating at the thought of my husband, who indeed may not be my husband, and I resolved to set the wheels in motion tomorrow to find out for certain for I needed to know.

As these thoughts warmed me and I was about to fall asleep I imagined I heard the sound of someone sobbing. I listened again and realised I had not imagined it, somewhere close by a woman was sobbing. Swiftly I got out of bed, it seemed to be coming from the chimney breast. Was it Kerensa?

I wondered as I listened to the painful sound, but it could not be her for her room I had learned was at the other end of the corridor. Then who was

it? The sound subsided and I got back into bed listening for some time, but the sound didn’t come again and I drifted into a peaceful slumber resolving to ask Mrs Burnet who slept on the other side of the chimney.

6

Next morning after Megan had helped me prepare for breakfast in my grey day dress she went in search of Mrs Burnet for me. Half-an-hour later the housekeeper appeared in my room, the keys jangling at her waist.

‘Megan said you wished to see me, mistress,’ she said.

‘Can you tell me, Mrs Burnet, who sleeps in the room the other side of my chimney breast?’ I asked her.

This morning after thinking it over I was more perplexed than ever as I’d been to Justine’s room so I knew it wasn’t her, so if it wasn’t Justine or Kerensa, who else could it be? Apart from myself they were the only females in the castle excluding the servants, and surely it couldn’t possibly be one of them, I waited with some anticipation for the housekeeper’s reply.

‘It’s the uninhabited wing of the castle, mistress,’ she told me looking somewhat perplexed herself. No-one sleeps there to my knowledge, why do you ask?’

At Peggy Burnet’s question I hesitated as to whether to tell her but decided I could trust her. ‘I heard the sound of weeping and it appeared to be coming from behind the chimney.’

‘That’s strange, mistress.’ And at her words I was waiting for her to ask me if I’d imagined it, but she didn’t.

‘Have you any idea whose room it is the other side of the chimney?’ I asked.

‘Well I think it was the mistress’ room,’ offered Peggy Burnet.

‘You mean my husband’s first wife?’ I said feeling more perplexed than ever.

‘Bless me, no,’ was her reply, ‘It was the old master’s wife who slept in that room, the first mistress Annabel.’

‘And have you the key to this room?’ I then asked.

‘I have, mistress, but no-one is to go there,’ the housekeeper said with some alarm.

‘You agree that I am the mistress here?’ I asked gently.

‘I do indeed,’ she replied adamantly.

‘Then please give me the key. If anyone challenges you then it is my fault,’ I instructed her.

‘Very well,’ she agreed, ‘but I must accompany you, you will never find it with all these corridors being like a maze,’ the housekeeper said kindly.

‘I’ll meet you back here after breakfast if you are agreeable, shall we say ten o’clock?’ I suggested.

‘That suits me fine, mistress. I can get on with my other tasks in the meantime,’ Peggy agreed.

‘And please Peggy, tell no-one,’ I told her as she left the room.

‘Don’t worry, mistress. I can keep my mouth closed,’ the housekeeper assured me and I did indeed trust her.

Entering the dining room I could see that Kerensa was there in earnest conversation with Derrick, they both stopped talking when they saw me.

‘Please don’t let me interrupt your conversation,’ I told them as I served myself some breakfast and then seating myself opposite Derrick I helped myself to coffee. Kerensa wore the colour green today once more, which suited her admirably, matching her startling green eyes.

‘And where is your husband?’ she asked almost civilly, but I detected the hint of sarcasm in her petulant voice.

‘I have no idea,’ I answered, wishing that I had so that I could surprise her with my answer.

‘He could be anywhere on the estate,’ offered Derrick smiling at me. It’s a sad business about Annabel,’ he observed, not looking at me as he spoke, but down at his plate.

‘Yes it is,’ I said quietly, ‘but it was to be expected.’

‘What would you know about what is to be expected in this household?’

Kerensa turned on me. ‘You are an intruder just as Annabel was.’ At her words I noticed that today, Derrick did not jump to my defence.

‘I am not an intruder and nor was poor Annabel,’ I retorted, ‘I am Kieran’s wife whether you like it or not.’

‘But Kieran loves me,’ she simpered.

‘To be honest Kerensa, I don’t think that Kieran has ever loved anyone,’ and as I made my way back to my room after this unfortunate encounter I realised that I was probably right. My husband had never loved and found it difficult to do so. Yes, I thought, I am right and I fervently hoped that my husband was starting to fall in love with me.

Mrs Burnet was waiting for me as promised and she led me through a couple of unfamiliar corridors until we stopped outside an oak door in what was obviously a neglected part of the castle.

As we entered the room both the housekeeper and I stood on the threshold and looked at each other with amazement.

The pretty room was for all intents and purposes still occupied, a fire even burned in a small white marble fireplace. We both stepped farther into the room.

'Well!' exclaimed Mrs Burnet. 'This I cannot explain, for believe me when I say that I knew nothing about it, and I'm certain that the servant girls don't either. It's a real mystery to be sure.'

The room was cosy and warm with peach-coloured finishings. There was no four-poster bed here, but a charming brass bed head and bed end with a colourful hand-stitched quilt which covered what appeared to be a feather mattress, a snowy white bolster peeping out from beneath.

A beautiful porcelain clock decorated with peach roses stood on the mantel and showed the time as 10.30 which was correct I thought as I looked at the fob watch pinned to my dress. A scent of roses hung in the air and going over to the dressing table I picked up a crystal glass perfume bottle which did indeed contain the perfume, someone had obviously sprayed it recently. Under the window was a towel rail on which were folded towels of peach and white.

'They are from the laundry room and still smell fresh,' Mrs Burnet exclaimed picking one up and placing it under her nose. 'I cannot explain this, it is almost as if someone was living here. Wait 'til I tell my David.'

'No, Mrs Burnet,' I cautioned her. 'Please tell no-one, not even your husband.'

'Very well, mistress,' she agreed, 'but how are we to solve the mystery? And you heard sobbing you say?'

'Yes I did and it will be interesting to see if it happens again tonight,' I said going over to the window. Although we had come down different corridors to this room, the view was the same as mine, only nearer to the rose garden. If this were the first Annabel's room then I had the distinct feeling she loved roses.

I was loathe to leave this room for the atmosphere was calm and serene but I knew that I must in case the occupant returned unexpectedly, if indeed there was an occupant or was someone keeping Annabel's memory alive.

That night as I lay in bed mulling over this mystery the sobbing started once more, I looked at the small clock on the table by my bed and I could see it was the hour of midnight.

Putting on my robe I quietly opened my bedroom door and looked down the corridor, I could see there was no one about, and no sign of life at all so I made my way to Annabel's room, praying I was going in the right direction as one corridor looked very much like another with the carpeting underfoot the same.

Just as I was nearing the neglected corridor Derrick stepped out of a room and it was impossible for me to hide, in any case he had already seen me, he looked somewhat shocked to see me but smiled nonetheless coming towards me.

'Well, well Barbara,' he exclaimed, 'I had not expected you to be wandering around the castle at this time of night in your night attire and with bare feet,' he said looking down at my feet which were indeed bare, causing me to blush and not knowing what reason I was going to give for me wandering the castle after midnight.

'I appear to have lost my way,' I said quickly.

'Then it is fortunate I was stepping out of my room,' Derrick said. 'I will escort you back.' At these words I said a silent oath for now I would not be able to ascertain if the sobbing were indeed coming from Annabel's lovely room. As Derrick escorted me back the way I had come, his hand on my elbow, I prayed we would not meet a soul for it would appear to anyone that I was in a compromising position with my husband's brother. Thankfully we met no-one and as I stood with Derrick outside my bedroom door bidding him goodnight he took me in his arms.

'What are you doing?' I exclaimed.

'I have really taken to you Barbara, and just wish to hold you. If your marriage to Kieran proves to be unlawful then please marry me. I promise I will treat you with the respect you deserve, unlike the way my brother treats you.'

I was shocked at his words for I had not seen it coming, except that the day I had visited the falls with Kieran I had thought Derrick to be jealous and it would now appear my instinct was right. Just as Derrick bent towards me to kiss me I managed to wriggle free.

'How dare you, Sir! We will speak no more of this,' I told him angrily, 'I bid you goodnight.'

'You will see that I am better for you than my brother ever will be,' were his words as I closed the door on him wishing I could lock it. I leant against

the door for some time hoping that he wouldn't trouble me again and after a short while I heard his footsteps walking down the corridor.

I breathed a sigh of relief and got back into bed, but my sleep that night was a restless one and I wondered if Derrick's proposal had been genuine, but I assured myself that I would not put myself in that situation again with my husband's brother no matter what a charming person he was.

A week passed after the incident, I saw Derrick several times when he was his usual self and I began to imagine that the unfortunate incident had been a figment of my imagination. Kieran was charming and kept his distance from Kerensa much to her chagrin, but I saw little of my husband and we were no nearer to finding out if our marriage were indeed legal but that was all to change very soon, the sobbing had ceased also for a week.

It was today that Justine and I were to travel back to Mrs Harding. the dressmaker, We decided to take the carriage as although nearing the end of February the cloudy skies were laden with rain, but thankfully the snow had not returned to keep us indoors.

I was very excited about our outing and anxious to see what Mrs Harding had done with the materials I'd chosen.

'Come in,' she said as she met us at the door. She took us to a large room at the back of the house where there were three tailors' dummies. On one hung my beautiful ball gown.

'How enchanting!' I enthused, going over to it and running the pale turquoise silk through my fingers. I'd never seen a dress as exquisite as this let alone having one belong to me. 'Can I try it on first?' I asked like an anxious child wishing to play with a new toy.

'Let us see the other gowns first,' suggested Justine. 'It is far better to save the best until last.'

'I've made you four day dresses and two evening gowns,' Mrs Harding told me. 'I'll just get my seamstress, Polly, to help me bring them in.'

While Mrs Harding was gone I went back over once more to the gown, marvelling at how the three roses at the neckline looked so real.

'You are really taken with that gown, aren't you,' said Justine indulgently just as Mrs Harding returned with Polly and a couple of my dresses. Trying them on I marvelled that the dressmaker had got everything right from the size to the length. I looked at my reflection in the mirror at the lilac dress I was wearing, the neckline and wrists edged with cream lace and just as I had felt wearing the wine-coloured velvet I could hardly believe it was me.

It was the same with the other gowns in pinks and blues, I was overwhelmed by it all and by the time I tried my ballgown on I was almost in tears, realising my good fortune and I knew that I had Kieran to thank for marrying me a few weeks ago. How I prayed that things would work out between us for we had certainly reached a tacit understanding during the past week.

Polly and Mrs Harding slipped the ball gown over my head and it fell into place with little arranging, the turquoise silk shimmered in the daylight and I bent down to pick up the hem allowing me to admire the small turquoise flowers which had been stitched perfectly to it.

'You look beautiful, Barbara, my brother will not be able to resist you when he sees you, and I suggest a long pair of white gloves will finish the effect admirably. Don't you agree, Mrs Harding?' She looked to the dressmaker for advice.

'I agree totally,' she said.

'Would you like to wear one of your new gowns for our return to the castle?' Justine asked.

'Could I?' I asked, not having thought it.

'Of course you can,' laughed Justine.

Reluctantly I let them remove the ball gown, the soft silk feeling luxurious on my skin. I selected a cornflower blue gown to wear back to the castle, it had a high necked pointed bodice with full skirts and lace of perfect blue stitched at the neckline.

As we left Mrs Harding's I felt a different woman, my experiences since I had arrived at Rowan Castle had transformed me from a quiet, shy, retiring young woman into a self-assured one.

'Mistress!' exclaimed Megan as I stepped into my room. 'You look right beautiful and the colour suits you perfectly.'

'Thank you,' I replied enjoying the compliment. Megan was replenishing the fire and as she got to her feet she asked where the other gowns were. 'They are following later,' I told her.

'I can't wait to see them, truly I can't,' she said excitedly. 'The master was looking for you earlier,' she then told me. 'I told him you'd be back mid-afternoon. I hope I did the right thing.'

'Absolutely the right thing,' I assured her. When she left I sat on the armchair by the fire arranging my lovely skirts around me and musing over what Kieran wanted to seek me out for and I was soon to find out for no

sooner had I thought it than he knocked on the door and entered quietly. For some time he stood there looking at me before he spoke.

'You look charming, Barbara,' he said at last. 'I hope that you will wear it often.'

'If it pleases you, Sir I shall,' I told him, hot colour suddenly suffusing my cheeks.

'I would be most pleased if you would after all these weeks call me by my Christian name again,' he said thoughtfully.

'Kieran,' I said out loud, letting the name fall from my lips like a caress.

'It is so easy, isn't it?' he said laughing and I realised that he was right, I had used his name before, but not since our arrival at the castle. This surely was a step forward.

'Are you comfortable in here, Barbara?' he enquired, his eyes dancing around the room, his gaze resting momentarily on the bed.

'I am very comfortable,' I assured him.

'There was no need for you to vacate the marital bedroom,' he said and without preamble pulled a high-backed chair opposite me by the fire.

'I'm sorry to say that there was, and it was on that condition that I didn't leave Rowan the day poor Annabel was found. Did you love her? Annabel I mean.'

'I realise now that I never did,' he told me honestly, so my assumption had been right.

'And what of Kerensa?' I had to ask and he paused for some seconds before answering.

'I have no love for Kerensa either,' his words astonished me after the moments I had seen them together in the past weeks.

'What do you feel for her?' I asked quietly.

'Compassion,' was his simple answer. 'And why is that?' I asked him gently. 'Because she loves me and I cannot return it. She is but a child still and vents her feelings on both me and Derrick. I play games with her to keep her amused and sane,' he told me.

'Are you saying she loves Derrick also?' I asked softly.

'Yes indeed she does, but my brother will not indulge in her games, he is too serious about everything,' he answered.

'And here was me thinking that Derrick was the humorous one and you the serious one,' I said laughing.

‘Beware Barbara, for first impressions can often be deceiving and lead you into danger. Beware of my brother for he is a wolf in sheep’s clothing.’ Kieran was serious as he spoke and I thought back to the incident in the corridor a few days ago, but I would not tell my husband for fear of causing trouble.

‘I will heed your warning, husband,’ I said, praying all the while that he was indeed my legal spouse.

‘Do you like it here at Rowan Castle?’ he asked unexpectedly.

‘I love it and can’t wait for the spring to arrive so we can go walking in the gardens,’ I began, secretly wondering at the same time if this would ever be possible.

‘Your dream sounds idyllic. I must apologise for the way I have treated you since our marriage, I am very unhappy about the way Annabel ended her life, but let us talk no more of it for now at least. I sought you out to tell you something.’ Here he paused and lent forward in the chair, his hands hanging loosely between his knees and his head bowed, then he lifted his head and looked me in the eye before continuing. ‘The hearing regarding our marriage is to be held tomorrow. We are both to attend.’

‘And what time is this?’ I asked him and I realised that the time of reckoning was nigh.

‘Not until two pm. I apologise that you are to be put through this ordeal, but due to my own stupidity I have brought this situation about for which I apologise profusely.’

‘I accept your apology, Kieran. We shall face it together,’ I assured him, for I could see he was repentant. As Kieran left me he looked back as he stood by the open door and said, ‘I shall pray tonight for our future, little one.’

As I lay in bed that night the sobbing started again, but to solve that mystery I would have to wait until after tomorrow and I too silently prayed that all would be well for my husband and I; for I realised even more how much I loved and adored him, and I knew in my heart nothing would change it.

7

After breakfast the next morning there was great excitement when my gowns arrived from the dressmakers. Megan was waiting for me when I came out of the dining-room.

‘Your dresses have arrived, mistress,’ she told me and I walked up the staircase with her as anxious as she to see them. When we entered my room I could see they had been laid across my bed in a profusion of colour, walking across I looked at them hardly believing they now belonged to me.

‘We had best hang them in the wardrobe, Megan,’ I told her my voice aquiver.

‘Aren’t you going to try one on, mistress?’ Megan said with disappointment in her voice.

‘Of course I will,’ I agreed, picking up the beautiful turquoise silk ballgown.

‘Let us hang this first for it is special,’ I said, all the while wondering if I would ever have cause to wear it, which brought to mind the hearing this very day. Megan and I were laughing while I stood in a pale lemon gown with a high neck and long sleeves, the lace of which fell over the back of my hand.

‘You look lovely, mistress,’ said Megan walking around me admiring the fullness of the skirts.

‘I agree,’ said Kieran’s voice from the doorway. Megan and I had been so distracted by the beautiful gowns that we had not heard the door open.

‘I’ll leave you, mistress,’ said Megan as she looked at the master, so saying she gave a brief curtsey to Kieran and scuttled from the room closing the door behind her.

Kieran stepped farther towards me, surveying me as he did so, ‘I’ve come to ask if you’ll walk with me around the outside of the castle,’ he began, ‘for it is a pleasant enough day for late February.’

‘I would like that very much, but I shall need to change my gown,’ I told him.

‘No, please stay as you are for you look exquisite.’ And I realised that my hair was escaping its pins, so swiftly I went over to the dressing table and rearranged it as best I could with trembling hands. This was indeed a surprise and a very pleasant one that Kieran should seek me out.

‘I’ll need my shawl,’ I told him, searching through the chest of drawers. I found it easy enough as there was very little in there. ‘I am ready.’ I told him and so it was that Kieran and I walked down the main staircase of Rowan Castle together for the first time. I felt proud and elated as Mrs Burnet crossed the hall.

‘Good morning, master, good morning, mistress,’ she greeted us as she went about her business and then Kerensa crossed the hall in front of us dressed in a lovely beige-coloured riding outfit.

‘And where are you two going together?’ she asked rudely.

‘It is hardly your business, young woman,’ said Kieran light-heartedly, ‘but we are going for a walk.’

‘You’d be more suited to come riding with me. I intend to ride out to the beach at Abermenai Point with Derrick, I can’t imagine what has happened to you, unless you are in love?’ As she spoke she threw me an indignant glance.

‘Play your games somewhere else, Kerensa,’ Kieran said dismissing the fact she was there completely and taking hold of my arm in his.

‘How could you dismiss me so easily after all the years I have loved you?’ she wailed. ‘You have no idea how much I care for you, she’ll never love you like I do.’

‘I’m sorry you feel this way, but I cannot return that love, we are more like sister and brother, this is what I feel for you, a brotherly devotion.’ As Kieran spoke the words I thought of the night I had seen Kerensa sat on Kieran’s bed. Had I dreamt it I mused, and the whole conversation had spoilt the joy of Kieran seeking me out to walk with me. We left Kerensa weeping in Derrick’s arms and as Kieran and I walked across the front of the castle I felt I had to be honest with him.

‘Kieran,’ I began, stopping at the same time and looking directly at his handsome face, ‘I have a confession to make.’ Here I hesitated, was I doing the right thing?

‘Confess then pretty lady,’ he said urging me to speak.

‘A short while after my arrival here I went to the door of your room to speak with you, the door was ajar and I could see Kerensa standing next to your bed, framed by the moonlight,’ here I paused, ‘which leads me to believe she has a great love for you.’ There, I’d said it, but what would be my husband’s reply? What he did say startled me somewhat.

‘I can honestly say, Barbara, that I have never loved Kerensa, but whatever she feels for me I have no control over it. As much as I have told her I cannot love her, she pursues me. I am at a loss to what course of action to take next. Do you believe me, little one?’ Kieran asked earnestly.

‘Yes I do,’ I told him honestly just as Derrick and Kerensa rode past us on their mounts, hers a lovely grey and Derrick’s a horse as black as thunder. He doffed his hat as he passed and I realised I didn’t know what to make of Kieran’s younger brother and wondered if I should tell Kieran about the incident in the corridor.

‘Can we continue our walk now, madam?’ Kieran asked as we both watched Derrick and Kerensa disappear out of sight down the driveway. ‘Or have you another confession to make?’ he said, his blue eyes twinkling.

‘Yes, I have,’ I told him and he laughed.

‘Then let us walk while you recount it or we shall both be too cold to carry on.’ So we walked and I told of the evening I had seen him with Kerensa in the hallway.

‘So why do you do these things? Have you such little respect for me?’ Here Kieran stopped.

‘I will answer that question after we have walked around the castle, for then I wish to show you something and explain it to you,’ he told me, so we continued our walk, he pointing out the marital bedroom to me and as we rounded the corner to the back of the castle he showed me the stables and introduced me to his horse, Lancelot.

‘A true knight,’ said Kieran laughing as I backed away from the overbearing presence of the great beast. ‘He will not harm you.’ and he called to David, the housekeeper’s husband, to bring a lump or two of sugar. ‘Now hold this in the palm of your hand and offer it to Lancelot,’ he instructed. The sugar lumps lay in my palm and slowly I moved my hand towards the horse’s mouth.

Lancelot was surprisingly gentle as he bent his head and took the sugar, his wet nose tickling the palm of my hand, I laughed.

‘There Barbara, you and he are friends already,’ said Kieran with mirth in his voice, for I must have looked petrified.

We carried on to the rear of the rose garden, the rose bushes had been pruned and appeared to be sitting waiting to flower and for the summer sun. My husband pointed out my bedroom high up in the wall.

‘The apartments next to you are unoccupied. It’s where my parents slept and where the nurseries are.’ As he spoke I wondered if I should confess that I had visited his mother’s room, but something stopped me from doing so for I felt it would upset him. We were at the far end of the castle now and I could see a delightful terrace which in the afternoon would face the sun.

Kieran led me up a couple of wide steps and we stepped on to the flag stones beneath our feet. It was like being perched on an island with a glorious view over the rose garden.

‘And here,’ said Kieran drawing me over to a large window, ‘is the ballroom.’ As I looked through the window and along to the others I could see that it was indeed the ballroom.

‘How perfect!’ I enthused for I could imagine attending a ball on a warm summer’s evening and coming out through the French windows to stand and look out over a riot of colour in the rose garden. Once more I thought how fortunate I was, which brought to mind our attendance at today’s hearing at Llanberis.

‘No sad thoughts now, Barbara,’ Kieran chided me, Tor I can see that something has caused the smile on your face to fade.’ Here he took me in his arms and looking down at me said, ‘Whatever the outcome of my foolishness is today, I promise that all will be well.’ Here he let me go when I had so longed for him to kiss me, but maybe he thought the time wasn’t right. ‘Now let us go back indoors for I promised to explain something to you.’

The French windows were unlocked and we walked arm in arm across the ballroom floor, standing together we looked at the picture of Rowan Falls.

‘It is beautiful.’ I uttered to myself more than to Kieran which caused him to look down at my face.

‘You don’t know how much it means to me that you love it, for I have loved it since I was a boy. The whole place has such natural beauty and I love the thunder of the water which rings in my ears long after I have left there, serving to remind me of its power.

‘And then it has many moods, in the summer when there is little rain the water cascades down in but a trickle compared to the thunder it emits after the rain and snow. You will see it in its many changing moods I promise you,’ Kieran assured me and for the second time in his company I felt safe as I had done when we visited the waterfall.

‘I do hope so,’ I murmured, ‘for I can almost imagine that we are there by the way you describe it.’

Now let us proceed to the lower floor where I have something to show you,’ he said steering me from the ballroom and down some steps which I had not noticed before. Suddenly we stepped into a dark panelled room, quite a small room and dark until Kieran lit a lamp which threw its light on a wall facing us where there hung a large portrait of a lovely young woman.

‘Who is it?’ I asked softly. Her white gown with flowers at the low neckline could almost be the fashion of the today. Blue eyes looked down at me, and the plump red lips were parted in a half smile. I was mesmerised by her beauty, I looked at Kieran for an answer.

‘It is my mother, painted when she first came to Rowan Castle as a bride over thirty years ago,’ Kieran told me and I could sense the emotion in his voice as he spoke the words.

‘And what happened to her?’ I asked gently.

‘To be honest, Barbara, I do not know for she didn’t die here. One moment she was here when I was ten years old and then she was gone and we’ve not seen her since. I’ve tried to find her, but in spite of lengthy investigations around the country I have never managed to locate her. She could be dead, but it is the not knowing which grieves me for I truly love her,’ he said and I laid a hand gently on his arm.

‘So what is it that you wanted to explain?’ I asked, for the portrait did not answer my questions.

‘I want to explain that when I married poor Annabel I thought I was in love with her, but since I met you I realise now what true love is. I married you because I didn’t want to lose you. I loved you from the first moment I set eyes on you in the library. But I suspected that being back at Rowan Castle I would feel a sense of guilt over Annabel, and I have. But my love for you has not diminished, in truth it’s grown since we came here, and I longed to tell you. The truth is I should have laid Annabel to rest before I married you. But I was so afraid I’d lose you, my only true love. Do you understand, dear heart?’ he said, pulling me into his arms.

Tears welled up in my eyes and we stood for many minutes in a loving embrace, with the first Annabel looking down on us. When we tore ourselves apart he took my face in his hands. ‘But now, I am praying that our marriage is legal for I have great respect for you, you have said what you feel and I admire you for that.’

Here he paused again. ‘The day you first came with the family to the chapel, I looked at you as you stepped into the hall looking every inch a lady as my mother would have done, and then that very same evening you played the piano so perfectly, you were as one with the chords. I was entranced, captivated and desperately in love all at once.

‘A feeling I’d never experienced until I met you, so I failed to understand it until our visit to Rowan Falls, and now if our marriage doesn’t exist, I shall find a way to woo you, so you will love me as much as I love you for I want to keep you here to love you and protect you as I should have from the beginning.

‘But maybe this was all meant to be, to make me realise my folly.’ He stopped, obviously exhausted from the emotion he had put into this declaration.

‘I...’ I began, but he interrupted me, placing his finger on my lips.

‘Let us say no more until after the hearing, let us see what the outcome is and what course we will need to take for I fear it may not go well.’

After lunch, while Megan helped prepare me for our visit to Llanberis, I mulled over all Kieran had told me. It had certainly been a morning full of confessions and had brought me to a greater understanding of the man I had married.

He seemed intent on doing the right thing and I admired him for his honesty, and the fact that he had told me that he loved me pleased my whole being for I knew without any doubt that this was the truth. Now we had to face some stranger who would decide whether we were truly man and wife.

I looked at my reflection in the full length mirror on my wardrobe which contained my beautiful new clothes.

The royal blue velvet suit with the fitted bodice to the neck and the full skirts with a small train suiting the austere occasion admirably. As I put my black gloves on and Megan helped me into my royal blue bonnet with a black band around the brim on my head she said to me, ‘I don’t know what errand you are on, mistress, but whatever it is I can tell it’s a right sombre occasion. I want you to know that I am proud to be your maid and look after you. You are a kind mistress and I,’ here Megan broke down in tears and I placed an arm around her, ‘and I hope, mistress, that nothing changes.’

‘Nothing will change I assure you, Megan.’ And as I left her tidying my room I silently prayed that I had told her the truth.

Kieran and I were silent all the way to Llanberis in the carriage, as he helped me down into the street he placed my arms through his and patting my hand smiled down at me. Not a word was spoken, but I knew that today, whatever the outcome we were united at last.

We sat together in a gloomy room side by side on uncomfortable hard-backed chairs, facing a table at which an elderly magistrate sat whom we understood to be a Mr Simmonds. He had no humour in his eyes and scrutinised us both silently before speaking.

My heart was pounding and when I glanced at Kieran who still held on to my arm, I could see his mouth was set in a determined line.

'I have the facts before me, Mr Alexander and Miss Thorpe?' he questioned and I nodded foolishly in reply as if a cat had got my tongue. 'The first Mrs Alexander fell tragically to her death, I understand,' Mr Simmonds said looking at Kieran for an answer.

'Yes indeed,' said Kieran in his measured tone.

'And before her body was recovered you married the lady now sitting at your side?' Mr Simmonds questioned again and I wished with all my heart he would just get on with it.

'That is correct, Sir,' said Kieran politely, which must have pleased the old gentleman.

'Did you not realise that a decree of presumption would be required before you married again?' asked Mr Simmonds.

'No, I did not,' said Kieran.

'Well I have to tell you that exhaustive enquiries should have been made before a second marriage took place. I declare therefore that no valid marriage exists between you and Barbara Thorpe and I declare that you're marriage to Barbara Thorpe is null and void,' Mr Simmonds uttered the words with a flourish and Kieran and I looked at each other with disbelief.

'But I can tell you,' continued Mr Simmonds, 'that now the first Mrs Alexander has been found and identified you are now free to marry, and with all the evidence I have before me there will be no charges brought against either of you. You are therefore free to go.'

As we stepped out into the street once more I burst into tears and Kieran gathered me in his arms once more.

'Marry me, Miss Thorpe?' he said most unexpectedly, 'And this time we will do it properly, little one.' At his words my heart was singing and I wrapped my arms around his neck.

‘Yes.’ I whispered. ‘I will marry you.’

And Kieran bent to kiss me without any thought for where we were and I had no care either as at last his lips met mine with the gentlest of kisses.

8

It's strange how indifference can turn to love, and despair to joy in such a short space of time, but for Kieran and I thankfully it had; and we arrived back at Rowan Castle longing to tell everyone our wedding plans. As we stepped into the hall Mrs Burnet was laying a letter on a silver salver which stood on a table by the main door, seeing us arrive back the letter was forgotten.

'Master, mistress!' she exclaimed, 'I'll be making you both a nice cup of tea,' she said bustling over to us.

'That would be perfect, Mrs Burnet,' Kieran said kindly, 'but what I would like you to do is fetch Justine, Derrick and Kerensa from wherever they may be and ask them to join us in the drawing-room,' he instructed.

'Well I know Master Derrick and Miss Kerensa have just returned from their ride, but I shall need to locate Miss Justine. I'll get on to it straight away,' said Peggy Burnet going in the direction of the kitchens.

Kieran and I went into the drawing-room when I removed my bonnet and gloves, then we sat together on the cream settle facing the door. Kieran turned me to him.

'Do you agree that we should marry in the chapel here at the end of August? For we must wait a few months, out of respect for Annabel,' he told me softly.

'I agree, and it will give us enough time to arrange everything,' I said, thinking of all that was to be done and the most important thing of all was my wedding dress.

'Six months will be ample enough time, little one. I admit I can hardly wait,' Kieran confessed.

'Shall we pick a date so we can tell the others when they arrive?' I said smiling with happiness. I was longing to tell Justine for I knew she would be happy for us, but I wasn't too sure how Derrick and Kerensa would take the news even though their thought was that we were married already.

'Shall we say the twenty-eighth of August which is about six months away?' suggested Kieran.

'Very well,' I agreed. Just then Justine and Derrick arrived.

'Now let us all be seated for we have something to tell you, haven't we, Barbara,' Kieren said.

Derrick and Justine sat on one settle and Kieran and I on the other opposite them.

‘So what have you to tell us?’ Justine asked curiously.

‘I’d rather wait until Kerensa were here also.’ As he spoke Miss Templeton burst through the door, she had changed and now wore the green silk she’d worn on the day of my arrival, the emerald colour matched her eyes perfectly.

‘So why have we been summoned? No doubt it’s to tell us the marriage is over,’ she said sarcastically. Looking at her I could see no resemblance to the other three siblings.

‘Sit here Kerensa,’ offered Derrick, rising from his seat and sitting on a high-backed chair. Kerensa did as she was bid.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘let us get it over with for I have things to do.’

‘It’s a rare occasion when you have anything to do except to be rude to others, which is to stop,’ Kieran said severely. ‘Barbara and I have been to a hearing today regarding the validity of our marriage, and we have to tell you that it has been deemed null and void.’

‘What did I tell you!’ gloated Kerensa as she stood up and clapped her hands together with glee. ‘Now perhaps the little mouse will go back to her hole so we can get back to some normality.’ At her words Kieran’s face held a look of thunder.

‘Sit down!’ He shouted at her. ‘For I haven’t finished, and what I am about to say, young woman, will hopefully wipe that smug expression off your face.’

‘Let me tell them, Kieran?’ I asked quietly, for at this moment I would like nothing better than to upset the gloating Kerensa.

‘Your brother, Kieran, and I are engaged to be married, and will marry here at Rowan Chapel on the twenty-eighth of August, giving time for respect for Annabel,’ I told them.

‘Oh Barbara, Kieran!’ said Justine jumping up and coming across to both of us and kissing our cheeks. ‘So we can at last attend a wedding, what a happy day this is. We must get to see Mrs Harding at our earliest convenience,’ she said excitedly taking both my hands in hers. Tor you will need a wedding dress and I a new outfit. Oh what a happy day! I’ll ring for Mrs Burnet to ask David to fetch us a bottle of champagne from the cellar.’ With which words she released me and went to pull the bell rope by the fireplace.

‘And where’s the ring? The Alexander ring?’ asked Kerensa. In all the excitement of our announcement I had almost forgotten her. She had said the words quietly and with menace in her voice and now she looked at Kieran for an answer.

‘It is here,’ said Kieran softly, as he spoke he drew a small blue velvet box from his pocket. ‘Come to me, Barbara,’ he said and I went back to the settle where he still sat and he indicated for me to sit where he was; and quite unexpectedly he knelt before me.

My cheeks grew hot as all eyes were on us just as Mrs Burnet answered the call of the bell but the master took little notice. He opened the box and I gasped, for inside nestling amongst the velvet was a glistening round sapphire ring surrounded by diamonds. Kieran took it from the box and taking my hand placed the Alexander ring on my finger. ‘We are now officially betrothed before everyone,’ he said, rising once more to his feet.

I looked across his shoulder at Mrs Burnet who hovered in the doorway, a tear in her eyes and out came her hanky once more.

Kerensa however was not smiling at the scene she’d just witnessed and for once she seemed lost for words, but found her voice once more just as I’d thought it.

‘You!’ she screamed at Kieran, her skirts swishing on the carpet as she turned to my betrothed, her finger pointing at him in a menacing manner, ‘You Sir, have broken my heart and I put a curse on both of you. Come Derrick, we will leave them to their ill-timed celebrations.’ With which words she flounced out of the room with Derrick at her heels pushing a startled Mrs Burnet to one side as she went.

‘Well, I never did in my life before!’ exclaimed the housekeeper,. ‘May I say congratulations to you master and your lovely lady from my David and me and all you staff here at Rowan. Now you called me,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ said Justine, ‘would you be kind enough to ask David to fetch a bottle of champagne from the cellar.’

‘I’ll do that right away, Miss,’ agreed Peggy.

‘And Mrs Burnet,’ Kieran called her back, ‘please tell no-one about the scene you’ve just witnessed with Miss Kerensa.’

‘I won’t, I promise, Sir,’ she said placing a finger to her lips.

‘Take no heed of Kerensa,’ soothed Justine when the housekeeper had left us, ‘she is fickle that one and as we speak will be casting her spell on

Derrick.' As Justine spoke the words I fervently prayed that this would be the case but I had my doubts.

Although I'd drunk champagne I found it very difficult to sleep that night, the mixed events of the day going round and round in my head. Kieran's mother's portrait, being married and then not being married, the engagement ring and Kerensa's outburst all whirling in my mind and I came to the conclusion it was Kerensa's reaction which disturbed me most of all. In all my darkest imaginings I could not have perceived what the outcome would be.

When morning came I had dismissed Kerensa from my mind for Justine and I were to visit Mrs Harding today and I was jubilant at the prospect of our outing.

'I hear congratulations are in order mistress, no I mean Miss,' said Megan, 'I'm real pleased that all is well for I'd have been right sad if you'd had to leave.'

'Well, I'm not, so all is well Megan and today I am to choose the material for my wedding dress,' I told her.

'Oh Miss, it must be the most exciting time for you, but didn't you wear a special dress the first time?' she queried, obviously quite perplexed at the whole situation, which I could well understand.

'No Megan, but this time I intend to choose exactly what I imagine I should wear at my wedding.'

'How lovely, Miss. I look forward to seeing you in your wedding gown,' she said sincerely.

I met Justine in the hall at ten as arranged last evening, I was dressed in the cornflower blue as Kieran had liked it so much, and was so glad I had as he came into the hall just as we were leaving and kissing my hand he whispered, 'Choose well, little one.'

'I think I ought to tell you that Annabel's funeral is to be held next week,' said Justine as we travelled to Llanberis in the carriage. At her words my hand flew to my mouth for I had to confess I had quite forgotten poor Annabel and suddenly I felt that I shouldn't be so happy or making plans for our wedding under these circumstances.

'I can guess what you are thinking, Barbara,' said Justine kindly, 'but it is none of your fault as to what befell Annabel. We have to put it behind us as Kieran has done. It was an unfortunate accident but we are to thank God she has been found, haven't we,' she said with a matter of fact manner.

As we arrived at Mrs Harding's I had butterflies in my stomach for I did so want to make the right decision. As always Mrs Harding welcomed us into her home and Polly took our bonnets and gloves, after which the dressmaker took us to the room full of bales of materials where I had chosen before.

'I wish to wear white lace,' I blurted out before we began choosing.

'Do you, dear,' said Justine, quite surprised at my words.

'It is most unusual,' said Mrs Harding, 'but I'm sure we can achieve it with a little imagination,' she said kindly, taking us over to one particular table where the white materials were. I looked at all of them not seeing any white lace which I'd set my heart on. 'First of all we need to choose a white silk,' explained Mrs Harding, obviously having seen the crestfallen look on my face. 'For we will need to stitch the lace over it.' At her words I brightened and the butterflies returned.

I chose a plain white silk and then Mrs Harding showed me a bale of lace which was exquisite with intricate motifs of tiny flowers worked on the net, entwined here and there by hearts.

'Yes,' I enthused, 'this is exactly what I had imagined. Now can we talk of what Justine will wear as my bridesmaid, please.'

At my words Justine looked shocked. 'Barbara, I had never thought...' she began.

'I have no-one of my own, Justine, you are the nearest to family I shall ever have. Of course I wish you to attend me at my marriage to your brother,' I told her. 'And can I tell you what I'd like you to wear please?'

'Of course, I am overwhelmed and can hardly believe you have asked me. But what of Kerensa?'

'You know as well as I that Kerensa would not be my bridesmaid even if I asked her, she would utter some unkind retort leaving me wishing I had not mentioned it.'

'Very well,' agreed Justine smiling, 'tell me what you envisage I should wear on your special day.'

So I did.

'I imagine you wearing the white silk and as pink becomes you so a pink cloak draped over the shoulder falling to the upper leg with a white lace bonnet to match the lace of my dress, decorated with small pink roses. How does this sound?' I asked looking at both Justine and the dressmaker.

Arriving back at the castle having being duly measured by both Mrs Harding and Polly, and chattering all the way home about the wedding arrangements Mrs Burnet met us in the hallway.

'I'm really sorry, Miss Justine, but a letter arrived for you yesterday afternoon and what with all the excitement I forgot about it, I'm truly sorry,' The housekeeper apologised handing Justine the letter from the silver salver.

'Thank you, Mrs Burnet. Could you please bring us a tray of tea in the drawing-room?' said Justine accepting the letter from her.

We both walked into the drawing-room removing our bonnets and then sinking thankfully on to the settle by the fire.

'I'll just open my letter while you sit quietly for you must be exhausted by the events of the last twenty-four hours,' said Justine looking down at the envelope in her hands.

I leant back on the settle relaxing when Justine suddenly sat bolt upright on her seat. I looked at her and noted that her hand trembled and her lovely face was ashen in colour.

'Whatever ails you?' I asked her with some concern.

'I'm sorry Barbara, I need to go to my room,' she said rising from the settle.

'Is it bad news?' I called after her as she left the room, but she did not answer me and I never saw her again that day. Mrs Burnet told me after dinner that Miss Justine had taken to her room and wished to be left alone.

That night I felt exhausted yet had less chance of sleep than the night before, which surprised me somewhat as I had had a pleasant day. I lay beneath the sheets imagining what my wedding gown would be like. I knew that Mrs Harding was an excellent dressmaker and would make me an exquisite gown for my marriage.

I was just about to fall asleep when the sobbing started, I sat up in bed but it persisted, so getting up I slipped my robe around me and put some slippers on my feet intent on solving the mystery and praying that this time I wouldn't encounter Derrick in the corridor.

No-one was around so as swiftly as I could I sped along the maze of corridors to Annabel's room, I stood at the door for some time, the sobbing was indeed coming from within the room.

Placing my hand gently on the doorknob and as quietly as I could turning it, I pushed the door so that I could see around it.

The room was dark, the fire burning low in the grate giving little light, the sobbing was louder yet quieter than I expected it to be.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I could see a figure huddled on the armchair by the chimney breast. The sobbing ceased and the woman looked up.

‘Who’s there?’ she called quietly and to my astonishment I could see it was Justine.

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‘Justine!’ I exclaimed. It’s you! What on earth is going on? I can’t believe you’re in here!’

‘Yes, it’s me, Barbara,’ she said quietly, sobs still escaping her lips.

‘What is the matter, why do you weep so?’ I asked her gently, going over to put my arm around her shoulder.

‘It’s my mother, sometimes I just can’t help feeling so sad about her, and now I’ve received this letter,’ she said, showing me the missive which she was clutching in her hand. ‘After twenty years I don’t know if someone is playing a joke on me.’

‘What does it say, this letter?’ I asked with curiosity.

‘Read it for yourself. I cannot believe that anyone would play such a cruel trick on me,’ she said more rationally now, her sobs subsiding as she handed me the letter. I opened it up, smoothing it out for it had crumpled somewhat in Justine’s hand and looking at it with some difficulty by the dim light from the fire I read,

Shrewsbury the 26th February, 1842.

Dear daughter,

You will be shocked and surprised to hear from your mother after twenty years, for I left Rowan Castle when you were only eight years of age. I have been living in Venice where I have pursued my love of painting and am back in Shrewsbury to visit a sick friend.

What your father has told you, if anything, before his death, of my leaving I have little idea. Although this will be a shock to you, could you see it in your heart to come and see me. I would come to Rowan, but I don’t somehow think that I would be made welcome. I am staying in room 44 at the Duchess Hotel and will be here until the 7th of March.

I wish to explain to you what happened all those years ago and would find it easier to tell my daughter than my sons. You can send a message to me here at any time and I pray you will see it in your heart to do so.

Your mother,

Annabel Alexander.

I read the letter through twice before looking at Justine.

‘I think this is a genuine letter and you must go to her. I would were I in your position,’ I told her honestly.

‘Do you really think so?’ she said, taking the letter from my hand and reading through it once more. ‘You are right, Barbara. I must go and see her, for there is much I wish to know. Please say you will accompany me,’ she pleaded.

‘I will come with you, for I can see that you need some company,’ I said thoughtfully.

‘Thank you, Barbara. We can tell Kieran and Derrick that we are going to pick a headdress and shoes, which indeed we can,’ Justine said brightly, for now she had a purpose and I wished to help her for this sadness could not continue.

‘This is your mother’s room, isn’t it?’ I asked.

‘Yes it is, and for many years I did not bother with it, but for the past few months I have felt that life is passing me by and I kept wondering if I had a mother, would things have been different and a great sadness came over me. That’s when I decided to busy myself and create mother’s room just as I remembered it. On the days I feel the sadness I come here and somehow it helps me, I have cried so many tears in this room,’ Justine told me.

‘I know, for since I have been in the yellow room I have heard you,’ I told her. ‘But no more, we will visit your mother and hopefully you can put all this sadness behind you,’ I encouraged her. Now, let us go back to bed for it is chilly in here now the fire has burned low and also very dark.’ At which words we giggled, and made our way back to our rooms linking arms.

So it was that two days later Justine and I were in the carriage travelling to Shrewsbury, our trunks along with us. Kieran had been delighted for us to go without any suspicion and as we drew away from the steps at Rowan Castle, my betrothed stood by the door waving to us until we were out of sight.

Justine and I had needlework to keep us busy through the evenings, for I was needing petticoats and nightdresses. We were becoming closer as each day went by for which I was thankful, for I was growing ever fonder of her.

We arrived at the Duchess Hotel in Shrewsbury at nearly four o’clock in the afternoon, it was a very grand place which overlooked the River Severn. We swept into the lobby, Justine in the pink which so became her and me in my royal blue outfit which I had worn to the hearing which now seemed such a long time ago.

We were to share an apartment and as Justine signed the register I looked around me at the round marble pillars and all the activity which was going

on in the foyer. Through French windows I could see tables laid for dinner with white and yellow tablecloths, the glasses shining even from here. How things had changed for me, I mused, in such a short space of time.

We chose to walk up the wide sweeping staircase, the gold-coloured carpet thick and soft beneath our feet. The doors along the corridor were white and gold with gold inlaid in the cream wallpaper.

How luxurious it all seemed to me and when I saw our apartment my breath was almost taken away; gold brocade covered the couch which was drawn up before a white marble fireplace which was inlaid with gold and the luxurious gold carpet continued in here also, while two beds with white and gold bed heads stood in each alcove, a gold quilt carefully covering the mattresses.

A fire burned in the beautiful grate emitting a warmth for which I was thankful for after the long journey, I felt decidedly cold.

‘There’s a bathroom!’ exclaimed Justine as she opened a door. I went across to look at what she’d discovered. We stood side by side inside the doorway gazing at the huge white enamel bath with large gold taps which stood in the middle of an otherwise almost empty room, apart from a very grand washbasin decorated with pink roses and green leaves. Justine and I hugged each other.

‘What an adventure!’ I said going across to the ottoman which stood at the end of one of the beds and laying my bonnet on it.

‘Come and look at the view,’ said Justine who was standing by the window. The light was now fading outside, but I could see the river, the lamplight reflecting an orange glow on the water. There were still people arriving and we stood for some time watching the comings and goings.

‘I think we should freshen up and leave a message for your mother at the desk,’ I said to Justine. ‘And then maybe we should have dinner and an early night.’

To which Justine agreed, just as there was a discreet knock at the door, and on opening it, I could see that our luggage had been brought up by two porters in very grand gold silk waist-coats. They put our trunks where I’d indicated and I reached in my reticule for two florins to give the young men as Kieran had instructed me.

After washing away the grime of the journey and changing into evening gowns, Justine in blue, which matched her piercing blue eyes and I in a soft green which brought Kerensa to mind. We’d not seen her since she had put

a curse on Kieran and I that fateful day; at the thought of him I suddenly felt homesick for Rowan Castle.

We walked down the staircase and young men lifted their hats to us, stopping to let us pass. We nodded in acknowledgement and one particular young man with dark hair and warm brown eyes smiled at Justine and bowed before her. As we reached the lobby, Justine looked back to see him retracing his steps down the stairs.

'Can I escort you to dinner, ladies?' he asked in a cultured voice. He was tall and prepossessing and Justine had obviously warmed to him.

'We have to leave a message for someone,' she said and looked at me.

'We'd be delighted for you to accompany us, Sir,' I said, 'if you will excuse us for a moment.'

The young man hovered behind us at a discreet distance and I could see as I observed him that he didn't take his eyes off Justine. We left a message for Mrs Annabel Alexander in room 44 to join us for coffee in the foyer tomorrow morning at eleven.

Our business attended to, the young man took each of us by the arm and escorted us into the dining-room. We sat at a round table with gleaming wine glasses and sparkling cutlery laid on a white damask tablecloth. While I was taken with my surroundings, Justine was taken with the young stranger.

'It is rude,' he began, 'to ask a lady's name before offering one's own. I am Daniel Madison from Wales and I feel the most fortunate of men to have encountered two such lovely young ladies,' he said, all the while looking at Kieran's sister.

The evening went well, we found that he was on business in Shrewsbury and lived in Porthmadog which was quite close to Rowan Castle.

Justine laughed and chatted all evening, her mother quite forgotten, for which I was pleased. I had not seen her so animated and alive since I had met her. We left Mr Madison at the foot of the staircase, agreeing to walk with him by the river after breakfast the next morning.

On reaching our room, Justine couldn't stop talking about him and I was pleased for her and prayed that the association would fair well. Which it did, with me walking a few steps behind them the following morning as we walked alongside the lovely river; which brought to mind my walks with Kieran, and then it was time to meet Annabel.

We sat together anxiously on a gold couch in the foyer looking at every middle-aged woman who walked past us; and suddenly, there she was standing before us in a cream-coloured gown. I recognised her instantly from the portrait and so did Justine, age had not altered Annabel Alexander much, except for a few streaks of grey hair she looked as she had when she had come to Rowan as a bride.

'Mother?' questioned Justine as she stood up and went towards the lovely woman and they embraced each other so suddenly that tears sprang to my eyes. When they had drawn apart, mother and daughter sat together and I felt intrusive.

'Would you like me to leave you?' I asked.

'Who is your charming friend?' asked Annabel, her voice soft with a trace of the Welsh accent still in her speech.

'This is Barbara, who will shortly be my sister-in-law,' Justine introduced me. 'And I would like you to stay, if that is all right with you, Mother?' she said and I noticed there was no hesitation when she spoke the word 'Mother'. And as they talked while we drank coffee from delicate white china cups, it was as if the years between them meeting again had dropped away.

'So you are to marry my son?' said Annabel gently, including me in the conversation.

'Yes, I truly am most fortunate,' I told her honestly.

'How I wish I could be there to see it,' she said wistfully.

'Well you can, Mother. Please return from Venice to attend Kieran and Barbara's wedding,' pleaded Justine.

'But it is not as simple as that,' said Annabel laying a hand gently on Justine's arm, 'your two brothers may not wish me to come to Rowan. They may not be so welcoming as you and I couldn't blame them.'

'Why did you leave?' asked Justine, Tor you said in your letter you wished to explain. Whatever the reason I am so pleased to have you here and would like nothing more than for you to come to Rowan and sleep once more in your room.'

'I would like that too, now your father is gone,' Annabel said, looking directly into Justine's eyes. 'I will tell you simply why I left you all as young children. Your father beat me many times until I was black and blue when he was drunk; and then he brought his mistress to the castle. How I

hated him for that, she had red hair and beautiful green eyes and he paraded her in front of me.

'The beatings I could stand for all your sakes, but not the humiliation of having Hannah strutting around the castle as if it were her own. So I left one dark night with little to my name except the clothes I stood up in and a valise containing miniatures of my children and a few personal belongings.

'I loved to paint and fled to Venice where I painted day and night to try and mend a broken heart, for my heart ached for the three of you, but there could be no return, and thank God Jacob never found me or he would have dragged me back by my hair.' Here she stopped.

'And why have you not contacted us before?' While Justine asked the question, I thought of the red-haired Hannah and Kerensa, the similarity was surely more than a coincidence.

'Because, my child, I didn't know how you would receive me. This is the first time in twenty years that I have stepped on English soil and I knew this may be the only chance I get to make amends,' she told her daughter. 'I heard of Jacob's death, but feared to come too soon.'

'How I wish you had, Mother,' said Justine with tears in her eyes.

'Hannah I know had a child and Hannah herself died not long after the child was born,' said Annabel.

'It must be Kerensa,' Justine said more to herself than to us. 'I've always hated her and now I hate her even more,' she said vehemently.

'You mustn't blame her,' said Annabel softly.

'But I do,' said Justine, 'For she is rude and arrogant.'

'Her mother's daughter then,' observed Annabel.

'I had my suspicions that she may be our father's child for he left a clause in his will that she should not marry my brothers, so it doesn't come as a shock. What I want now more than anything, is for you to come to Rowan for Barbara's wedding,' Justine pleaded once more. 'We will go back and speak to Kieran and Derrick to pave the way for you. Please say you will come.'

'What I will do is delay my return to Venice. When you arrive home you can send word to me and if all is well I will visit Rowan and then make a decision about the wedding, which is when?' she said, looking kindly at me.

'August the twenty-eighth,' I told her. 'We are to look for my wedding shoes while we are in Shrewsbury, if you'd care to join us.'

‘I’d be delighted,’ she replied, clapping her hands together and I thought how I’d taken to this gentle woman who was indeed the mother of my betrothed. We talked of Rowan and told Annabel when she asked that Mrs Burnet was still housekeeper.

‘Peggy Burnet is a treasure, I will be so pleased to see her and her husband, David, again. But my sons, they are the most important thing at Rowan, along with yourself, Justine.’ As we were talking, Daniel Madison walked across the foyer, he stopped in front of us.

‘Good morning, ladies. I wish you a pleasant day,’ he said with a smile on his face.

‘Please join us for dinner this evening. I’m sure my mother won’t mind,’ said Justine, looking at Annabel.

‘If it pleases you, then it pleases me,’ Annabel said with a gleam in her eye and I knew that she’d guessed, as I had that her daughter was falling for this young man.

We spent the afternoon in the opulent lounge and for a while I left them to talk of the past. I was more than relieved that things had gone so well between them. I just prayed that Kieran and Derrick would take to it kindly as well.

I guessed that Kieran would be greatly pleased to see her, but I had been unable so far to fathom Derrick out and since the incident in the dim corridor that night, I had kept my distance from him as much as possible.

We dined that evening in the gleaming dining-room with Annabel and Mr Madison. Justine looked radiant in a peach-coloured gown, the off-the-shoulder style complimented her lovely cream skin. Annabel wore a gold-coloured gown inset at the neck with lace which caused to remind me of my wedding gown. Annabel was every inch a lady and although I had never known her husband, Jacob, I hated him for what he had put this beautiful lady through.

My heart bled for her that she was obliged to leave her children because of a monster of a man, which undoubtedly he had been.

Staying in Shrewsbury two more days, we walked and dined with Justine’s mother and the charming Daniel Madison. By the time our last morning had arrived Justine confessed that she was in love with him.

‘Please will you allow me to ask him to your wedding, for if I don’t see him again I will die!’ she said, and how could I refuse such an urgent request. I was so happy for her.

We had spent a happy afternoon at a department store, I'd chosen petticoats, nightdresses and undergarments as there had been no time to spend sewing as we had planned.

'Look at this,' said Justine as we passed briefly through the men's department. I looked at what she'd spotted. It was a man's embroidered waistcoat, the white flowers embroidered on grey silk was perfect and with much frivolity, I purchased it for Kieran.

The time came for us to leave, Justine was practically distraught at leaving her mother for fear she may not see her again, but I encouraged her saying that all would be well, which I prayed it was. It had been a most fruitful journey. Justine had found her mother and an attentive beau who had agreed to attend our wedding.

As we sat in the carriage, our parcels around us, I was elated and so looking forward to seeing Kieran and Rowan, I could not have known what menace was to befall me before my wedding day.

10

Justine and I arrived back at Rowan Castle, exhausted. We chatted all the way back about Annabel and Daniel Madison. Kieran's sister seemed like a different person from the one who had left Rowan Castle three days ago, and I was so pleased to think there would be no more sleepless nights spent sobbing in Annabel's room.

Kieran came across to greet us as we stepped into the hallway. 'Sister, Barbara,' he began. 'I trust it was a good journey and that you fared well,' he said, looking at the parcels which were being brought into the hall by David.

'We have had a splendid time, haven't we, Barbara?' enthused Justine. 'But we are tired,' she said, laughing, and I knew that Kieran must see a difference in his sister's manner and it was to turn out that he had, for he said to me when we were alone later.

'Justine seems happy. What manna from heaven has fallen to make her such?' he asked with some amusement.

We sat on the two settles in the drawing room and I thought back to the Duchess Hotel. Justine and I had agreed for me to tell Kieran about Mr Madison, but I was to wait for Justine to tell her brother about their mother.

'She has met a beau,' I told Kieran simply.

'Has she indeed. I never imagined that my sister would fall in love, but I guess she has?' he asked me.

'It would seem she has, Sir. He is a nice young man who lives not far away and we have invited him to our wedding,' I told him.

'Have you indeed,' Kieran replied light-heartedly. 'Well, I shall look forward to meeting this fellow, whoever he may be.' As he spoke, Justine entered the room.

'I have something to tell you also,' she said awkwardly.

'Then I shall go and organise some coffee while you talk to each other,' I said tactfully, noticing Justine held the letter in her hand.

As I made my way across the hall to the kitchens, Kerensa stopped me. 'So you are back. My prayers have not been answered then,' was all she said before making her way up the staircase.

Later that evening while I was showing Megan the purchases I had made in Shrewsbury, Justine came in to tell me that all had gone well with Kieran

as I suspected it might, for I knew that Kieran loved his mother as much as Justine.

'And I am to send word to her to come and join us for a few days,' said Justine excitedly. Megan had listened without conscious thought to our conversation.

'Is the first mistress coming back?' she asked wide-eyed. 'Mrs Burnet will be well pleased as she always speaks of her with affection.' At her words, I told Megan not to mention it to anyone, far better I thought that Justine and her siblings told the household staff in their own way.

A few days later I made the decision to visit the waterfall while Kieran was on estate business. I was asking Mrs Burnet who could accompany me when Kerensa crossed the hall.

'I will go with you,' she said sweetly, and I accepted her offer with little thought to the consequences, except to think momentarily that the lovely young woman had stated that she hated Rowan Falls.

So we set off in the pony and trap which Kerensa steered like someone possessed. Thankfully we came safely to a halt where Kieran and I had stopped on my first visit. As we stepped down from the trap, I heard a rumble of thunder in the distance and could see that the skies were rapidly darkening.

'Maybe we should return,' I said.

'The storm is far away for the moment,' Kerensa replied just as I saw a flash of lightning in the distance and another rumble of thunder came ever nearer than before. I suddenly felt afraid and was hesitant about walking to the waterfall, but Kerensa had already started walking.

As I looked at her going on ahead of me, I thought how she was not dressed for this visit at all. Her blue silk dress with a cloak to match moved as one with her. Everything about her was beautiful, from the way she walked to her perfect features. I followed on in my heavy cornflower blue dress, pulling my shawl tighter around me as I followed her, for the sun had disappeared and I felt cold.

The falls still thundered on their way down the gorge, and the water frothed on to the boulders below, hissing like a cauldron. A few drops of rain started to fall and above the roar of the water I heard another clap of thunder. I caught hold of Kerensa's arm as she looked at the swirling mass of water below and then I stepped back, feeling suddenly dizzy just as the rain started to fall heavier and lightning lit the skies above us.

Kerensa had not heard my plea to return above the thundering sound of the water, and then suddenly without warning, she caught hold of my arm, pushing me to my knees and all I could see were the huge boulders below with the water angrily raging over them.

I managed to get to my feet, but stumbled and fell to my knees once more, with Kerensa holding tightly to my arm. She screamed some words in my ear.

'You must go like Annabel, for he is mine!' I looked up at her, her face ugly with hatred. Our clothes were getting damp and I shivered more from fright than cold as the thunderstorm raged above us and the rain now fell heavier.

I struggled to rise to my feet but she was strong and was pushing my face ever nearer the edge. Then without warning she dragged me to my feet. I could not fight her for I felt weak and we were both drenched from the rain, our clothes and hair sodden with water.

I looked at her for a brief moment, there was no beauty or pity there now, I knew that her intent was to push me to my death below. Silently I prayed and thought of Kieran. It all happened in seconds, but suddenly Kerensa was pulled from me and to my relief I could see Kieran's handsome face and as he gathered me in his arms I fell into unconsciousness.

When I awoke again I could see that I was in the master bedroom lying between crisp white sheets, candlelight flickered on the walls as did the firelight and I could make out a figure sitting by the bed, it was Mrs Burnet.

'Thank you, Lord,' she said, more to herself than to me, 'I'll fetch the master and a nice hot mug of sweetened milk for you, Miss.'

I couldn't speak for I felt weak and the horror of what had happened to me came to mind and although I was warm and safe I shuddered at the thought of how I so nearly came to my end as poor Annabel had done.

Kieran arrived with Justine not many minutes later. They told me Kerensa had been told the circumstances of her birth and had sadly become deranged, they had taken her to stay with their governess, Miss Hewitt for the time being, a kindly lady who had known the four of them from childhood, with the hope that in time her condition would improve.

I had agreed with some reluctance not to bring charges against her. I couldn't say that I was sorry she had gone from Rowan. Not only had she tried to murder me by daring to try and push me in the swollen river, but she had been unkind since my arrival at Rowan Castle.

Although at the same time feeling some pity for her, for it must be hard to love someone as Kerensa loved Kieran and see them with someone else, causing the object of your affection to appear out of reach. But Kerensa knew now that she was Kieran's half-sister and hopefully would in time let it go.

Kieran came to see me every few hours, as did his mother, Annabel, who had arrived back at Rowan. As Kieran and his mother sat by my bed, I was delighted to see how well they were getting on. My betrothed looked somehow different with his mother at his side.

They were both relaxed and happy, and on one occasion Kieran took hold of my hand, 'We had buried Annabel,' he told me gently, 'I am pleased really that you were indisposed.'

'I would have coped with it,' I answered, 'for she has done me no harm.'

'The fact remains that I should not have considered marrying you so soon. Please say you forgive me,' he pleaded in earnest.

'I forgive you your folly,' I assured him, 'and I am pleased Annabel is finally at rest.'

'Thank you, dear heart,' Kieran replied lifting my hand to his lips, 'I truly love you.'

'And I you,' I told him softly.

I got stronger and one day felt able to share a family celebration for the first Annabel's return to Rowan, which gave me the chance to wear my lovely turquoise gown. As I stepped into the drawing room, the silk moving with me I had eyes for no-one but my betrothed and he for me.

Derrick had been quite amenable about his mother's return, but being the youngest he barely remembered Annabel so didn't have the love for her that Kieran and Justine had. Everything seemed to be falling into place nicely. We spent a lovely summer at Rowan, Justine and Daniel became engaged in July.

Kieran and I spent many hours sat on a bench in the rose garden, the heady scent of the blooms surrounding us. We talked of many things, the second Annabel included, and a few days before our wedding we walked to her grave and laid a single white rose on the soft mound of earth. Neither of us spoke, but we both knew Annabel's death had been a tragic accident and Kieran genuinely repented for the error of his ways.

A week before our wedding date, Justine and I visited Mrs Harding to be fitted for our gowns. We both sat in Mrs Harding's fitting room full of

anticipation while the dressmaker and Polly fetched the gowns.

'Here you are, Miss,' said Mrs Harding as she returned. I looked at the white silk and lace creation which she held over her arms and could have burst into tears.

After removing my pale yellow gown and standing in my petticoats Polly slipped the gown over my head, it fell shimmering to the floor. While Polly did up the hooks and eyes I thought once more how lucky I was, indeed, lucky to be alive I mused.

Looking in the mirror at my reflection I thought back to the grim day I had first wed Kieran in my poplin skirts, now looking at myself, this dress was all I had ever imagined.

'Thank you so much!' I said to the dressmaker and Polly, wishing to hug them both, but knowing it would not be seemly to do so.

The twenty-eighth of August arrived and the sun shone in a clear blue sky, the boughs of the trees were laden with leaves and everything looked so different to the snow-covered scene I had witnessed on my arrival at Rowan Castle.

Megan proudly helped me prepare for my wedding, she did my hair in a knot at the back of my head which the orange blossom headdress fitted over perfectly and deftly Megan fixed my veil to it, drawing the front of the veil over my face.

Annabel had brought me a spray of orange blossom and lily-of-the-valley to carry, my wedding slippers fitted perfectly and at last I was ready. Derrick was to accompany me down the aisle, he looked handsome in his black frock coat and as the doors of the chapel were opened for us he said, 'You look beautiful, would that I were the bridegroom.' And he squeezed my hand smiling at me and I realised at that moment that he was, indeed, harmless enough.

I had a fleeting thought of Kerensa as Derrick and I stood together waiting to walk down the aisle. I'd learnt from Kieran that Hannah Templeton had left her daughter a vast fortune, and I hoped that one day in the future it would help Kerensa get her life on the right path. But today was for Kieran and I, whatever else happened, we had both agreed to put the bad things behind us.

In the congregation I could see Peggy Burnet, her David and the household staff dressed in their Sunday best. Annabel Alexander stood proudly by her son with Daniel Madison next to her, who looked back at

Justine as she walked behind us dressed in pink and white. And then I saw Clarissa's face smiling at me. Dear Clarissa, my joy was now complete, and I knew this must have been Kieran's doing.

The sun streamed through the stained-glass window spilling a multicoloured light on the floor before us, and as we walked, my handsome bridegroom wearing the embroidered waistcoat I'd brought him, smiled at me watching my progress towards him and I felt serene and happy at last. The skirts of my lovely dress brushing the floor with each step, at last it was as I'd dreamt, love, happiness and white lace.

THE END

BOOK 6:
THE LADY AND THE LAKE

Dedicated with love to the memory of my friend Beryl Lord of East Budleigh who appreciated the written word, and was a wonderful conversationalist.

You are greatly missed.

1

I stood in the hot July sun watching the coach and horses which had conveyed me from York trundle away in the distance across the Yorkshire moors. I looked at the signpost which pointed to Kerslake Hall and then surveyed the small trunk and valise at my feet. There was little chance that I could carry them the two miles indicated to the Hall.

My brow was hot and I brushed my equally warm hand across it with little relief, it was tempting to remove my straw boater and mauve short wide-collared jacket, but knew it would not be seemly even in this wilderness, for that is how it appeared to me.

The track I would need to traverse was rough and uneven, no trees were in sight where I could have rested for a while in the shade. The high-necked collar of my white blouse was suffocating and swiftly I loosened the large bow, undoing the top button, now I could at least breathe.

While mulling over what to do it would seem help was moving towards me in the form of a brown pony and small trap. As the young man came to a halt on the dusty road beside me he raised his cap.

‘Can I help you, Miss?’ he asked in a pleasant Yorkshire brogue while glancing at my luggage.

‘I am bound for Kerslake Hall,’ I replied with hope, although knowing it would be unconventional to accept assistance from this stranger, but it appeared I had no other choice and he seemed pleasant enough. The young man looked over my head into the distance somehow deliberating what to do.

‘There’s not many that would venture near the Hall since...’ His words trailed away.

‘Since what?’ I enquired somewhat sharply, was it with anxiety or impatience I wondered.

Not for me to say, Miss, but I can see the predicament you are in, let me help you on board.’ So saying he jumped down, swiftly storing my luggage in the back of the trap, and then assisting me on to the seat beside him, my flared petticoats almost sticking to my legs.

We moved slowly along the uneven track, out of the corner of my eye I could see him glancing at me from time to time. I kept silent until he spoke.

‘My name’s Harry,’ he said, ‘And yours, Miss?’

At this question I was reticent to offer a name but in view of his help realised it would be rude not to. ‘Abbey Sinclair,’ I offered quietly.

‘A lovely name if I may be so bold, Miss, and quite appropriate as there are many abbeys in these parts albeit they are ruined.’ That piece of information was pleasing to my ear as I had a love of history which prompted my next question.

‘Is there one near the Hall?’ I asked with interest.

‘There most certainly is Miss, not far from the surrounding wall. I don’t know for sure, but would imagine you could see Thurston Abbey from an upper window.’

The ground was flat, covered with a springy carpet of beautiful purple heather. On the horizon there were ranges of hills some higher than others, the tops of which were obscured by a heat haze, then ahead of me on the right I caught sight of a large grey forbidding-looking building surrounded by a high granite wall. Harry must have heard my sharp intake of breath.

‘Still time to change your mind Miss, for that is indeed Kerslake Hall.’

At his words I was sorely tempted to instruct Harry to retrace our journey, but then I thought of Mrs Henrietta Kershaw who would be expecting me, and maybe it wouldn’t be so bad as it appeared, but then if the place looked so eerie in sunlight, what would it look like in the dead of winter?

‘Please stop for a moment, Harry, for I need to collect my thoughts.’ Without realising it, as I spoke I gently touched his arm as he drew Bessie to a halt. What am I doing here? I asked myself already knowing the answer, in this year of Our Lord 1890 an impoverished young woman had but two courses to follow in life, marriage or a position as governess or companion.

As I was twenty-five years of age the former had obviously eluded me, so the latter had been inevitable and I had found myself being interviewed by a starchy solicitor named Mr Lang for position of companion to a Mrs Kershaw of Kerslake Hall in Yorkshire.

It had all seemed very romantic sat in Mr Lang’s office, but now it would seem somewhat unfortunate that I had been successful in securing the post. I would however endure it for a short time, after all Mrs Kershaw may be a very amenable person, unlike the exterior of her home. Little did I know then, thankfully, what sort of person she would turn out to be.

Harry set me down outside the iron gates which were flanked either side by pillars, on top of which sat two demons with open mouths and fiery

tongues. He graciously excused himself from helping me with my luggage and with little ado was gone leaving me stood in a blast of dust due to the speed of his departure.

Tentatively I pressed down the iron latch and the gate swung open with ease, squealing as it came to a halt against the hedge, which lined the drive on either side. Picking up my luggage I hesitated before stepping across the boundary of the Hall. I placed the luggage down once more before closing the gate, retying the bow on my blouse I picked up trunk and valise and proceeded up the long path.

Everywhere was silent and I had a fancy that the place was in truth uninhabited, when a large black raven swooped noisily over the top of my head almost dislodging my hat, so close had it flown, leaving me trembling and somewhat startled.

The house loomed up on me suddenly as I looked at the tall three storey building with many large plain glass windows I had an overwhelming feeling of familiarity, yet I was sure I'd never been here before in my life.

At the far end of the building on the left was a small round turreted tower, although attached to the house it looked incongruous and somehow filled me with dread. I had had my chance to retreat but it was too late for as I looked, the double front doors opened as if by themselves, before a tall woman appeared in the doorway at the top of the steps.

'I take it you are Miss Sinclair?' she called out to me in a cultured voice.

'I am indeed,' I answered moving towards the bottom of the steps, my feet crunching on the gravel beneath.

'Mrs Kershaw is expecting you, indeed waiting for you,' she added, almost as an afterthought. As she spoke I looked at my fob watch and realised that I was one-and-a-half hours late, not a good start, but I didn't really care as my intention was to leave this cold gloomy house at the first opportunity.

As I stepped across the threshold the woman who bade me enter closed the doors behind me, I could barely see the huge hall I had stepped into for the sun did not reach this side of the house at this time of day. All I could ascertain were shadowy corners and a musty smell, as though the house were unlived in.

'I'm Mrs Grafton.' Her voice brought me back to the present, 'I'd like to welcome you to Kerslake Hall and ask that in future you use the servants' entrance.'

‘Which is where?’ I interrupted sharply, for I felt anything but welcome in this gloomy place.

‘At the far side of the house, someone will show you later,’ replied Mrs Grafton through gritted teeth, she was obviously unused to being questioned. ‘Please leave your bags here, as before I show you your room, Mrs Kershaw wishes to speak with you, follow me!’

Doing as I was bid, I followed the slim, grey-clad woman to the back of the hall and along a corridor which was sparsely carpeted in green, my eyes were adjusting to the light and I could see many small pieces of furniture set against the purple-coloured wallpaper. Mrs Grafton opened a large wooden door, and as she did I was blinded by sunlight which streamed through one of the large windows on the left.

‘Miss Sinclair has arrived, Mistress.’ Seconds after she spoke I heard Mrs Grafton close the door behind her, I could hardly see the room let alone my employer, so blinded was I by the light.

‘You’re late.’ A harsh voice admonished me with two simple words.

I stepped forward out of the sunlight and looked in the direction from which the voice came.

‘Have you lost your tongue girl?’

As I looked at the owner of the voice I could scarcely believe my eyes. A small female form was sitting in an armchair by a large granite fireplace, she was dressed in brown which matched the brown leather chair she sat in, her feet resting on a stool with an ebony stick leaning against her chair.

What fascinated me more than anything was the fact that a black spotted veil covered her face, I could just see her grey hair and pallid face through the fine mesh and quite garishly, the bright red rouge she wore on her thin lips.

I disliked her instantly from her harsh voice to the bony hands which lay on her lap. ‘Don’t stare girl, I’m not a spectacle at some circus. So Abbey Sinclair, you are to be my paid companion.’ Her voice stressed the word paid, which caused me to dislike her even further as she continued. ‘My guess is you are really named Abigail, come on girl speak, I’m right, aren’t I?’

‘Yes,’ I managed to utter trying desperately to keep control of my rising temper.

‘I thought as much, well that’s what I shall call you for I don’t hold with pet names, we should all use the names that we were given. Your job will

not be difficult as I don't need much company, I prefer my own, but my eyesight is failing and I need someone to read to me. I take it you can read, girl?'

'Yes,' I replied ungraciously, for her manner was irking me.

'Thank the Lord for that at least. Your clothes do not please me, far too gaudy, have you anything grey?' As she spoke I looked down at the mauve suit I had painstakingly saved for to make a good impression. The flared skirt fell beautifully across the toes of my black ankle boots and the jacket to match with leg of mutton sleeves was plain except for some piping on the wide lapels, the whole outfit I felt was quite reserved and appropriate. How dare she? I was very much my own person and resented being dictated to as to what I should wear.

'I ask again, have you anything grey?' the voice reiterated.

'Yes,' I answered, quite resolved to leave this place as soon as I left this woman's presence.

There was a sudden commotion behind me as the door opened to reveal a pretty dark-haired girl aged about ten years, dressed in a pretty powder blue dress with white stockings and black shiny shoes.

'Grandmamma; she shouted running across to Mrs Kershaw who put out a bony hand to take the child's offered one.

'Miss Hayward, how many times have I asked you not to let Emily burst into my room unannounced?' As she spoke I turned to look at the recipient of Mrs Kershaw's displeasure.

A tall serene-looking young woman with pale brown hair stood by the door, her hands clasped in front of her. She was dressed in a dove grey dress which fitted in at her small waist, flimsy grey frills fell from the neck not quite concealing her slender white throat. She was a lovely creature.

The child gave life to the drab room which was sparsely furnished with just a large table and two huge brown leather armchairs. In contrast bright yellow curtains hung at the windows.

'I'm sorry Mrs Kershaw, but the child was longing to see you and I could not keep up with her as she ran down the stairs and along the corridor.'

I listened to Miss Hayward's soft almost reverent voice and wondered how she kept so calm at Mrs Kershaw's manner towards her; I could not be so subservient.

'This is Abigail Sinclair, newly arrived, Miss Hayward, and this is my over-zealous granddaughter, Emily.' As she spoke I looked from one to the

other, Emily was by now sat at Mrs Kershaw's feet stroking a long-haired white cat that I had not noticed before. The child's governess stood demurely by the door looking down at the floor, she seemed not to want to meet my eye or talk to me, maybe this would alter out of the old lady's domineering presence.

'I'm weary.' Mrs Kershaw's voice drifted across to me, although weary her voice was still harsh and hostile.

'Please, Miss Hayward show Abigail to the hall and take Emily for her tea. Goodbye, pet, I'll see you tomorrow.' As she ruffled her granddaughter's hair her voice was gentle each time she addressed the child. 'No Emily, you can't take Charles with you, put him down.'

Emily put the purring cat back in his bed at the old lady's feet and ran to take Miss Hayward's hand. I followed them out realising that I'd uttered only three words since entering the room and summed up that the old lady had an acid tongue.

I was pleased to follow Miss Hayward, as stepping back into the corridor it was dark and shadowy once more. Emily skipped along quite unperturbed at the darkness, the silent Miss Hayward walked ahead of me her back straight and head held high.

As we reached the entrance hall once more the front door opened and a man stood silhouetted in the doorway. 'Father! Father!' Emily exclaimed, releasing the grip of Miss Hayward's hand she ran to him and he gathered her in his arms in a strong embrace, this child was obviously well loved.

As he stepped farther into the hallway I could see he was a tall slim man of about thirty-five years of age, the sun had bleached his already blond hair and I could see as he turned his attention to me that his eyes were a startling blue.

'You must be Miss Sinclair.' As he spoke he gently removed his daughter from him. 'I'm Antony Kershaw, welcome to my home, I trust you will be happy here.' He offered his hand to me which I took gladly, this was a genuine welcome indeed. So the abominable Mrs Kershaw was not the mistress here and I smiled. Almost reading my thoughts he continued.

'Have you met my mother?'

'I have indeed, not a moment since,' I replied with feeling.

'And what did you make of her?' he asked politely.

'She is somewhat daunting and also very rude,' I said honestly. A brief smile hovered on Antony Kershaw's lips.

‘You sum her up very well, Miss Sinclair, but I assure you her bark is worse than her bite, just give her a chance. Since my wife,’ here he hesitated momentarily, ‘since my wife died two years ago, things have not been easy for any of us. The last two companions employed for my mother have left within days. I trust this will not be the case with you.’

His words were a challenge and shortly afterwards as I followed Mrs Grafton up the stone staircase to my room, my mind was in a whirl. I’d sensed hostility at every turn in the brief time I’d been in the house, except from Mr Kershaw and his child Emily, even the lovely Miss Hayward had not spoken, but watched me with a silent, unfathomable manner.

I wondered also why my employer covered her face with a veil, and did everyone in the house apart from Emily and the old lady wear grey? For Antony Kershaw also wore it in the form of a country suit, and the hat he had removed was of grey felt with a curled brim. I had quite taken to the man and felt in some way sorry for the position he was in with a domineering mother and a young daughter to contend with.

2

My room was small and adequate, the polished wooden floorboards were covered by a small beige-coloured rug, there was a single wardrobe in one corner adjacent to the door with a matching dressing table next to it. The window opposite cast light onto the bevelled mirror.

Mrs Grafton left me to settle in, telling me that I could either eat in my room or share the table in the kitchen with the rest of the household staff.

Before arranging my sparse array of clothes, I was eager to see the view from the window. The sun was still high in the sky and shone down on a vast lake, two white swans glided across the mirrored water, four cygnets in their wake. I could see a white summer pavilion on the other side of the water, and to one side of the lake was a beautiful garden full of brightly-coloured flowers intermingling with one another.

The whole scene in its entirety was beautifully tranquil and so in contrast to the front of the house. Then on my left out of the corner of my eye I could see that the round tower was adjacent to my room. I was obviously at the top of the house and my window was level with the one that jutted out from the tower, so close to me I could almost touch it.

I shivered involuntarily and went over to the mirror.

Removing my straw bonnet I marvelled at the fact that my thick dark blonde hair had not strayed out of place, the pins which held the back in a twisted knot were still in place.

Replacing my bonnet I decided to take a closer look at the beautiful lake. A walk in the fresh air would do me good after the long journey from London, my unpacking could wait.

As I stepped into the narrow corridor, Miss Hayward was about to step into the room next to mine, she stopped, one hand on the door knob and a tray balanced precariously on the other. Swiftly I walked over to her and removed the tray from her hand.

‘Thank you, Miss Sinclair,’ she said quietly.

‘Abbey, please call me Abbey,’ I urged as I followed Miss Hayward into her room which was a bit larger than mine. She’d made it her own, pictures hung on the walls and a small table by her bed held petite china ornaments. The room looked lived in and was quite pleasant, the bottom of the window

was open causing the pink curtains to flutter softly in the warm summer breeze.

‘What a delightful room,’ I said with honesty.

‘Thank you, and please call me Alice.’ As she replied, Alice lay the tray on the bed. ‘Please join me as you must be hungry after your journey.’

So we sat on the bed sharing Alice’s afternoon tea in almost a companionable silence while looking out over the lake and gardens, the sun shining through the window on us both. Suddenly all fanciful thoughts of gloom and foreboding left me and I felt quite relaxed.

‘Why are you here as a companion?’ Alice’s gentle voice cut into my revelry.

I looked at her for some time before I spoke. ‘I needed the post as much for myself as the wage,’ I said quietly, my hand toying idly with the teaspoon on the tray.

‘And what of your parents?’ Alice questioned further.

‘Both dead,’ I said with a firmness and finality which I felt. ‘My mother died of diphtheria when I was nine, I went to live with various aunts and uncles as my father was a seafaring man.’

‘Was?’ Alice reiterated.

‘Yes, he died some three months ago from an illness of the lungs, and I’ve been looking to secure a suitable position since then,’ I replied wistfully.

‘You’ve not thought of marriage then?’ Alice asked with interest.

‘No, unfortunately not, no man has totally appealed to me, a fair few have had different qualities, but I seek one with them all.’ I looked at Alice and laughed. ‘You?’ she hesitated for a moment before replying.

‘There is someone I truly love with all my heart.’ Here she stopped and I felt to press her further would be folly for she suddenly seemed back in her own little world.

I thanked her for the tea and as I went to leave turned back to her an intriguing question hovering on my lips.

‘Why does Mrs Kershaw wear a veil over her face?’ I asked.

‘Some accident in the past causes her to hide her scars from the world,’ Alice replied vaguely and I realised that to ask her anything else today would be futile.

***

It took me some time to find my way to the lower floor and locate the servants’ entrance, but a kindly young maid in a white mop cap named

Maggie showed me the way out. As I stepped outside once more I knew I was at the far side of the house for I could see the tower at the opposite end.

Slowly I walked to the back of the building savouring the warmth of the sun. Reaching the back of the house I marvelled at how different it was from the front. Wisteria flowered on the walls and the glorious scent of roses pervaded my nostrils. A path wound its way to the lake which I proceeded to follow, quite overawed by the beauty of it all.

As I walked along the path I could see the figure of a young man walking ever nearer towards me. He wore no hat on his dark tousled hair and was tall and as I slowed my step I could almost feel the ground move beneath my feet and my heart started to beat faster, why he had this affect on me I could not say, all I knew was I'd never experienced such a feeling before.

'What a pleasant day!' he called out in a strong low masculine voice.

'Why yes, indeed it is,' I managed to utter. As we drew nearer to each other I could see that the stranger had startling blue eyes, very similar to Antony Kershaw's, but while Antony Kershaw's were cold, his were smiling and bright.

'I'm Thomas Craddock,' he said with a slight nod of his head, he smiled displaying his white teeth which were even more prominent because of his tanned skin. 'And you are?' he questioned.

'Abbey Sinclair,' I uttered, all the while being held by the startling blue of his eyes. 'I arrived today to be companion to Mrs Kershaw.'

'Aunt Henry, well I wish you luck, she can be a real tartar,' he admitted his eyes twinkling.

'Why do you call her Henry?' I queried solemnly. 'She told me she hates pet names and insists on calling me Abigail.'

'Does she indeed, I've always called her Henry since I was a child, I'm the errant nephew, by the way.' He laughed as he spoke.

'And do you live here Mr Craddock?' I asked him.

'Only temporarily, I'm here to catalogue the paintings in the long gallery. And please call me Thomas or Tom would be even more to my liking. Shall we take a seat?' As he spoke he indicated a small wooden bench quite near us on the path.

'Why yes,' I agreed like someone in a trance. I warmed to this young man and felt that I had known him for a long time.

'Where do you normally live?' I asked, more for something to say than any real desire to know the answer for I was quite happy that he was at this

moment resided at Kerslake Hall.

'I have a small house, Tidwell Cottage near Whitby which is about seven miles from here. Do you know it?'

'The cottage, no,' I replied foolishly, for some reason not knowing what I was saying.

'Whitby, I mean!' he said laughing.

'No, I've lived most of my life in Portsmouth and London, I'm newly arrived here today.' My cheeks flushed as I spoke and I prayed he would not look on me as some dizzy person who didn't know what she was talking about. His next words sent warmth through my whole body.

'Then I shall take you to my humble home and to see the beautiful fishing town of Whitby. Saturday perhaps?' he asked quite seriously. As it was only Monday today I felt as if I could hardly wait.

'Why yes, I'd really like that,' I replied with honesty for I felt strongly that I could trust this man with the laughing blue eyes.

'I shall look forward to our outing, Miss Sinclair, and shall think of it while I'm working.' As he spoke he rose from his seat. 'Apologies, but I must go now. My cousin, Antony, is a hard task master.' So saying he took my hand in his and bending over it left a gentle kiss which sent my pulses racing.

As he made to walk off he looked back at me. 'Don't take Aunt Henry's manner to heart, she's quite a softy really.'

As he walked away I could scarcely believe my good fortune, and sat for a while recalling the whole of the conversation several times. My heart seemed to be singing and when I did get to my feet I practically skipped along the rest of the path around the lake, now and then picking a small pebble up and throwing it in the water as I'd done so many times as a child.

Eventually I reached the far end of the lake and the high wall which surrounded the Hall. On the moor beyond which seemed to stretch endlessly, sheep grazed amongst the heather then I looked back at Kerslake Hall and could see it in its entirety from end to end. The round tower looked forbidding and as I looked I could pick out the window of my room and that of Alice's too.

My attention was arrested by some movement in the upper window of the tower. I closed my eyes then looked again, but whatever it was had gone. I knew I'd not imagined it for my eyesight was sharp, even at this distance and as I pondered over what it might be in my haste to retrace my steps I

fell over something at the edge of the path near to the water, luckily falling on to the ground and not into the water itself.

Picking myself up I looked down at the offending object which was a small wooden plaque, engraved in brass the words, *Phoebe Kershaw Rest in Peace*.

I looked at it for some time trying to work out who Phoebe was and why a plaque in her memory should lie at the edge of the lake. No doubt at some time all would be revealed and the answer to the mystery would become apparent to me. As I walked back to the Hall I put the incident from mind and thought instead of the blue eyes and the smile of Thomas Craddock.

***

That night tucked up in bed in the darkness I recalled the events of the day, the veil covering my employer's face, the child Emily, my encounter with Tom and the mysterious plaque by the water. I had just drifted off into a peaceful sleep when I was awoken by a piercing, heart wrenching scream seeming to come from behind my bed.

Trembling I got out of bed, looking at the small clock on the table, it was one in the morning. I made my way to the window my legs like jelly. I parted the curtains a little and looked into the window of the tower. Silhouetted by the light of a candle was a woman dressed in white with long hair cascading down her back.

Swiftly I drew the curtains together and climbed back into bed pulling the covers over my head. If it wasn't for Tom, on the morrow I would be leaving this ghastly place.

After some time I did drift off to sleep but not before I'd asked myself the question, who was the woman in white?

3

When I awoke next morning after a fitful sleep, I realised how terrified I had been in the early hours of the morning. So much so, that I hadn't given much logical thought to the incident. In the light of day, things didn't seem so bad and my sensible head told me that it had been a maid in the tower, but that didn't explain the blood-curdling scream which had awoken me.

I drew back the pale blue curtains and looked at the tower. There was no movement in any of the windows this morning, maybe I'd dreamt it. As I stood there looking, I thought to walk to the tower from the inside and find the entrance to it which surely must be not far from my own door.

Stepping into the corridor, I looked left and right. No-one was in sight although I could hear Emily's voice coming from Alice's room. Walking swiftly to the right and to the end of the corridor, I soon found the sturdy wooden door which must lead to the upper floor of the tower. I needed to climb three stone steps to turn the huge black handle which would raise the latch. I tried to turn it to no avail, the door was shut fast.

'Can I help you, Miss Sinclair?' Mrs Grafton's voice startled me somewhat as I turned guiltily towards her, my one hand still on the latch.

'No, Mrs Grafton. I thought to see where this door leads,' I stammered, negotiating the steps as I spoke.

'The door is no longer used. It leads to the upper floor of the tower, but it is unsafe now.' Did I believe Mrs Grafton's words or my own experience during the night? I thought to believe myself as Mrs Grafton had a sly way with her and I felt that she was annoyed that I had tried to open the door. It remained to be seen what happened during my second night at the Hall.

'I came to ask where you wish to partake of breakfast. I'd be grateful if you'd let someone know the evening before in future,' Mrs Grafton's voice admonished me. I didn't care for her manner and wondered if Mrs Kershaw's abominable attitude had rubbed off on her housekeeper.

'In the kitchen as I did last night and will do in future, if this is acceptable. Thank you.' I found it difficult to remember my manners when dealing with this woman.

'That will be quite acceptable, Miss Sinclair. Now I suggest you run along as it is nearly seven-thirty,' she replied in a bossy manner which I loathed.

It was as if she were speaking to Emily and not me, a twenty-five-year-old woman.

‘I’ll do that, Mrs Grafton,’ I said with some sarcasm. ‘Could you tell me please when Mrs Kershaw requires me?’

‘The mistress sleeps in until twelve o’clock. If you are required this afternoon I will seek you out.’ So saying, she turned her back on me and without ceremony entered Miss Hay-ward’s room.

I made my way down to the kitchen feeling much more familiar with the layout of the house. As I approached the door, I could hear the murmur of voices, but as I stepped into the large room, all six at the table were silent, each turning to look at me.

I seated myself at the long wooden table next to Maggie who glanced at me, smiling her sweet smile before continuing with her stodgy porridge.

‘Please don’t be silent and stop talking on my account,’ I addressed them all.

‘Would you like some porridge, Miss?’ asked Cook who was a rounded homely looking woman. I’d learned the previous evening her name was Ada. I glanced down at Maggie’s dish.

‘No thank you, toast would be very nice, please,’ I said politely.

‘And a nice strong, hot cup of tea, I’ll be bound.’ As she spoke, Ada busied herself at the large black kitchen range, pouring tea into a large white mug from the largest black china teapot I’d ever seen.

‘What were you talking about before I came in?’ I looked from one to the other. ‘I can keep secrets, I assure you.’

‘It’s no secret,’ said Maggie.

‘Maggie, I’ll thank you not to speak unless spoken to,’ said Cook sharply, looking at me with keen eyes obviously weighing up the situation.

‘You have an honest face, Miss,’ she said at length, handing me the mug and a plate of toast. ‘So I’ll tell you for you’ll surely hear it anyway. They dragged another young woman out of the lake this morning. Young Gladys White from the village, pretty bairn she were, only sixteen years old.’ Ada sighed and I looked at her with some astonishment.

‘When you say another, I take it you mean she’s not the first,’ I questioned, my breakfast quite forgotten.

‘Aye, she’s the second in the past six months, apart from...’ Here she stopped and took a deep breath.

‘Apart from who?’ As I asked the question, I felt I knew the answer.

‘Young mistress, but it’s not for me to say.’ Ada shrugged her shoulders and walked back to the range, conversation over.

As I left the kitchen, I mulled all this over in my mind. Two young women from the village, plus I assumed Antony Kershaw’s wife. Were they all accidents or of malicious intent? To think I’d walked around the lake yesterday and marvelled at its beauty. I shuddered at the thought; and perhaps this would explain Harry’s reticence to bring me to the Hall on my arrival, quite a mystery.

As it happened, it wasn’t Mrs Grafton who sought me out, but Antony Kershaw. He stopped me as I made my way back to my room, intent on seeing what was happening at the lake.

‘Miss Sinclair.’ His voice startled me.

‘I wonder, could you help out at the schoolroom in the village for a couple of days?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I stammered, bemused at his request. ‘But what of your mother?’ I asked with some alarm, thinking of the indomitable Mrs Kershaw.

‘Do not worry. I shall instruct the housekeeper to tell the mistress where we are. I just need to show you the schoolroom today. It is tomorrow you are needed as schoolmistress. Miss Anderson has to visit her sick mother for a couple of days.’

I watched him as he spoke, his blue eyes were startling but cold. His clothes today were brown not grey so that was another fanciful thought on my arrival that everyone wore grey and I wondered what the lovely Alice Hayward wore today.

As if in answer to my question, Alice appeared dressed in blue which caused me to feel very dowdy in comparison. Emily ran to her father who embraced her and then put her from him as she eagerly asked if he would walk with her.

Not today, Emily. I have to take Miss Sinclair to the village,’ he said firmly.

‘Can I come, please?’ pleaded Emily.

‘You have your lessons. Maybe we can walk this afternoon. Now go with your governess.’ At his words, Emily looked downcast, but she took the hand of Miss Hayward who had been watching the scene in respectful silence.

As they walked away, Antony Kershaw addressed me once more. ‘I’ll meet you in the hall in half-an-hour, Miss Sinclair, and we’ll make our way to Beckmoor.’ With which words he was gone.

***

Hastily I made my way to my room to change my dress, for I felt really drab, but before I removed my grey attire, I looked out of the window. There was one policeman by the lake, guarding a bundle covered with a blanket. Quickly I turned away, wondering who had found the poor unfortunate Gladys. I was to learn later that it had been Thomas.

Dressed in a pale green day dress with my straw boater in place, I made my way to the hall. How different it looked this morning I thought. Sun streamed through the glass panel above the door and the two windows each side of it. I could now see all the highly polished furniture set against the walls, including a beautiful tall hat rack by the door. I looked quickly into the mirror set in the middle of it.

‘I’m sure you’ll do, Miss Sinclair.’ Antony Kershaw’s voice came to me from some little distance away and my cheeks flushed.

‘I do hope so,’ I countered with some embarrassment. For some reason I felt uncomfortable today in this man’s presence and was not looking forward to the journey with him.

A pony and trap had been brought to the front and once more I stepped on to the gravel path. Mr Kershaw helped me into the trap beside him. I needn’t have worried. He was silent all the way while I looked around at the scenery which was unchanging until we reached the small village. A row of white thatched cottages cut their way defiantly through the surrounding moor.

I observed a blacksmith’s and a communal tap where a couple of women were filling large buckets. As we approached, they turned away, for what reason I could not understand. But very soon I was to find out. I was somewhat surprised when the trap pulled up beside the village church.

‘But I thought we were to go to the schoolroom,’ I uttered.

‘Come, you will see.’ As he spoke, Mr Kershaw helped me alight. We walked through the lychgate and along the path flanked either side by many grey moss covered tombstones.

In one corner I could see a large mausoleum which I was keen to look at closely. I followed Mr Kershaw through the church door and stepped on to

the slab floor. It felt cold in here and smelled damp despite the warmth of the early morning sun and I wondered why he had brought me here.

On the right hand side of the church entrance was a low wooden door. My companion lifted the latch and I followed him up the stone steps which led us into a small room.

Here the sun did shine through a window and five small children sat cross-legged on the wooden floor, slates and chalks in their little hands and the girls wearing white starched aprons over their dresses.

In the corner, writing on a blackboard, was a schoolmistress dressed in black, the braids of her fair hair entwined into a knot at the back of her head with a white lace cap covering her head. I gasped in surprise.

'I've never seen a room like this before above a church porch. I'm sure it's unique,' I enthused.

'It may well be, Miss Sinclair. Let me introduce you to Miss Anderson.' The schoolteacher stopped writing on the blackboard and inclined her head towards me.

'Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Sinclair, and please meet my five young charges, Rosie, Clara, Victoria, Michael and Danny.' She indicated the children one by one and as each name was spoken they all replied, 'Hello, Miss Sinclair.' I was quite touched by the whole scene.

'Good morning, children,' I replied with enthusiasm. I knew I was going to enjoy this new experience. There was a list of lessons for each day, mainly spelling, writing and arithmetic and each day they were to be taken on a short walk across the moor.

Mr Kershaw and I left the schoolroom with the children's farewells ringing in our ears. It was nice to step into the sunshine. I looked up into the sky which was a perfect blue. Another beautiful day was in store and I wondered how bleak the moor would look on a grey and rainy day.

'I have to visit the general store for some comfits for Emily,' Antony Kershaw's voice drifted across to me.

'Very well. May I look around the churchyard while you are gone, please? I like to look at names engraved on headstones for they all tell a story.'

This was true. What I didn't want to tell him was that I intended to take a closer look at the mausoleum for I was sure it was the Kershaws' monument.

'That will be fine, Miss Sinclair. I'll be about three-quarters of an hour. Don't trip over anything,' he said solicitously and then added, 'The last

thing I need is a female with a sprained ankle.'

I watched his retreating figure and didn't know what to make of him. On the one hand he was pleasant and friendly, on the other he was aloof and distant. I walked in and out of the gravestones, weaving my way slowly towards the monument in the corner.

I came upon a fairly new grave with just a wooden cross at its head. Bending over so I could see the name carved in the wood, I read, *Annie Blake*. *Aged 16*.

A woman tending a grave nearby watched me as I stood up once more. Her arms were folded as she watched my progress towards her intently.

'Morning,' I called to her, 'Another lovely day.'

'For some, maybe,' she replied abruptly, 'But certainly not for Gladys White's family.' The girl who'd been pulled from the lake at Kerslake Hall, I thought.

'I'm really sorry,' I said sincerely, for while I didn't know the girl, I felt compassion for her family.

'Are you working up at the Hall then?' she questioned.

'Yes indeed, but I arrived only yesterday.' As I spoke, I had neared the woman and stopped before her.

'You don't really know the Master then? Though I saw you with him just now. Thought you were one of his women until I saw you closer and realised you weren't wearing an expensive gown.' I was shocked at this revelation.

'You are right, I'm not one of his women,' I said, indignation rising in me.

'Just as well, for he has a cruel steak in him, that one. He killed his lovely young wife as sure as I'm standing here talking to you, and I wouldn't doubt that he killed poor Annie and Gladys, too, in his lake. God rest their souls.'

To say I was astonished was an understatement. I was for once tongue-tied.

'Oh, yes,' she continued, 'You watch that one.'

'Thank you for telling me,' was all I managed to say and then I watched her walk to the lychgate, swinging the watering can she carried to and fro.

As I walked towards the corner of the churchyard, my mind was in a whirl, names of people were racing through my brain, Antony, Thomas, Miss Anderson, Alice and Emily.

Poor Emily, who loved her father so much and was so innocent. I could hardly believe it and wouldn't believe it. He was innocent until proved guilty and there again, was he innocent?

I'd reached my goal. The mausoleum was indeed the Kershaws' final resting place. It was tall and stately, rising out of the ground into a triangular peak which was intricately carved. I read many names and dates, some going back to the seventeenth century, all Kershaws except one.

The name jumped out at me, Albert Miles. Died January the 10th aged 30 years. The inscription puzzled me. Why would a Miles be buried in a Kershaw grave? Then I spotted what I think I'd been looking for.

Phoebe Kershaw. Beloved wife of Antony Kershaw. Mother of Emily. Died July 15th, 1888. Aged 28 years.

The day I'd arrived at Kerslake Hall, July the fifteenth, and Gladys had died that day. I was anxious to know what date Annie died, but I wasn't to find out today, for Antony Kershaw's voice arrested my attention.

'So you found the Kershaw mausoleum then.' As he spoke, I turned round to look at him and took a step back. Was I looking at a loving son, husband and father? Or a murderer?

4

Mrs Grafton pounced on me as soon as I stepped into the hall on my return. ‘The Mistress wishes to see you now,’ she said with a look of triumph on her face.

‘I’ll follow you then, Mrs Grafton.’ Once more the housekeeper led me to Mrs Kershaw’s sitting-room, the corridor didn’t seem so dark today.

‘Abigail Sinclair,’ Henrietta’s voice boomed out, It’s not enough that I have to rise early to be questioned by a young policeman, bombastic man. But that’s by the by, more importantly I find that my most recent employee, namely you, is riding around the countryside with my son who tells me that you are to teach in the schoolroom for two days.’ As she spoke the old lady pointed her cane at me.

‘But,’ I interrupted.

‘And why are you wearing a green dress when I specifically requested that you wear grey, tell me that?’

‘I,’ but I was not to be given the chance to explain.

‘Well Abigail, take the week off why don’t you, and please don’t interrupt me again. You are dismissed from my presence for the time being at least.’

As I left the room I felt inclined to slam the door shut, but thought better of it, for bad manners would get me nowhere. I’d been well and truly trounced by an old lady who had left me bristling with anger.

I was not therefore in a good frame of mind when I bumped headlong into Thomas Craddock.

‘Begging your pardon Miss Sinclair,’ he apologised, and then took my shoulders holding me at arms length. ‘Why, you look positively in the doldrums. Now what can I do to rectify that?’ His words brought a smile to my face, also the touch of his hands on my shoulders was very pleasant. ‘That’s better,’ he sighed, cupping his hand under my chin and turning my face to look at him. ‘What ails you?’

‘Your aunt,’ I replied peevishly.

‘Dear Aunt Henry? She blows cold air trust me and don’t take it to heart,’ he soothed.

‘Why no, I shouldn’t let her spoil the day,’ I said in agreement.

‘I’m afraid Miss Sinclair, the day is already spoiled by what I discovered in the lake this morning.’ At these words he looked very serious.

‘Yes, I did hear at breakfast time, but did not know until now who had found poor Gladys,’ I said, touching his arm in a gesture of sympathy.

‘It was rather a gruesome find, the poor girl was lying across the edge of the lake with her head bobbing on the water.’

At these words I felt physically sick and could imagine the whole scene. ‘You look rather pale Miss Sinclair, I fear I’ve distressed you. Now let us put it out of our minds, how about coming with me for a walk to Thursdon Abbey?’ he suggested with enthusiasm.

‘Yes, I’d like that, and as I’ve been given the week off I’m sure no harm is done,’ I laughed.

‘Now, that’s better. Sit on this chair while I persuade Ada to pack up some sandwiches and lemonade.’ I did as he bid thinking he could charm the birds out of the trees.

***

Despite being instructed to use the servants’ entrance, I found myself stepping out of the main door for the second time that day, with Thomas by my side and the sun beating down. It was hard to believe that a young girl had died so recently in the vicinity.

‘Do you think she was murdered?’ I asked Thomas, for I was keen to know his opinion.

‘It’s hard to tell,’ he answered, ‘for one thing, who would want to kill her and what was she doing in the grounds of Kerslake Hall? I found her near the plaque Antony had placed in Phoebe’s memory. For that is where Phoebe was found, not far from the summer pavilion. She could have tripped over the plaque if it was dark.’ As Thomas talked we found ourselves outside the boundary of the Hall and following a hilly dirt track.

‘And what of Annie?’ I asked.

‘I do believe she was found in the same place in similar circumstances, most odd, but don’t worry your pretty head about it today.’ As he spoke we reached the top of the incline and I could see before me the ruined abbey.

‘What a beautiful scene,’ I said out loud, the words escaping my lips for indeed it was quite picturesque with the ruined walls and only the blue sky for a roof surrounded by green grass and the moor.

As we continued walking, Thomas carrying the small wicker picnic basket in one hand and steadying me at the elbow with his free hand, little did he know that this was a scene that I had dreamed of for so long. To walk with a handsome gentleman on a summer’s day.

I fervently hoped nothing would spoil it, not now or ever. We ran in and out of the ruins like children, the soft grass beneath our feet. We sat together on the grass eating sandwiches and sipping lemonade. I was hot and removed my straw hat longing to unpin my hair and let it loose.

'You have such beautiful hair,' Thomas said softly as if he'd guessed what I was thinking. He looked at his silver pocket watch and I knew that this lovely interlude would soon be over. It's two o'clock, we must go.' So saying he rose to his feet and caught my hand to help me up.

'It's been so nice,' I said politely.

'It has indeed and I look forward to our outing on Saturday.'

The picnic packed away we walked slowly back to the Hall. Thomas went through the main door bidding me farewell and I made my way to the rear of the building as I intended to sit in the rose garden for a while. I felt quite lost without Thomas at my side.

***

As I reached the spot which led to the lake I looked sadly at the water, but all seemed normal now with the swans gliding across it and no-one else in sight. I looked at the summer pavilion and hoped that one day soon I would sit in there. It was fortunate I didn't know then how soon it would be nor in what circumstances.

Stepping into the rose garden I realised I wasn't alone, for Miss Hayward and Emily were sitting on one of the many wooden benches. Miss Hayward held a pretty sunshade over her.

At the sight of me she raised her hand, I walked towards them surrounded by a beautiful riot of colour, red, pink, yellow and peach-coloured roses the fragrance overwhelming.

'It is all right for me to sit with you for a while?' I asked Alice.

'Of course,' and as she spoke she gently patted the seat, 'please play with your hoop Emily, but keep to the path.' The child did as she was bid bowling a wooden hoop along with each step, her shiny dark ringlets dancing up and down.

'Have you heard the awful news, Abbey?'

'About Gladys you mean? Yes, at breakfast,' I replied, quite pleased that Alice had used my Christian name. 'It's quite a mystery I believe, were you here when Annie was found?'

'Yes, I've been here since the young Mrs Kershaw had her tragic accident,' Alice said quietly.

‘But she too was found in the lake, or so I understand,’ I said looking at Alice for confirmation.

‘That is true. What worries me is who will be next. If I wasn’t so fond of the child I would think of leaving this place.’

At Alice’s words I mulled over whether I could confide in her about the events of last night but decided instead to try a different course.

‘The last two companions to the older Mrs Kershaw, why did they leave so soon?’ I asked.

‘I don’t really know, they were both older in years than yourself. Mrs Kershaw doesn’t care for younger women or so I’ve come to believe. All I know is that neither of them was here for many days. Thinking about it, the one lady mentioned a light in the tower to Mrs Grafton, I can say no more as Emily is coming back,’ she said quickly.

‘Hello Emily,’ I greeted the child.

‘Miss Sinclair, it’s my birthday next week and I always have a party and as I’m to be ten, Papa says I can have it in the evening, will you come?’ she asked enthusiastically.

‘I doubt it, Emily, for one thing I haven’t got an invitation,’ I replied.

‘Well, I invite you, Miss Sinclair. So please come.’ I had no time to reply as Emily ran off bowling her hoop again.

‘Yes you must come, Abbey.’ Alice’s voice broke into my thoughts. It’s only us grown-ups with Emily and she likes us to dress up.’

‘How delightful, what day does it fall on?’ I asked with some interest, for no doubt Thomas would be there.

‘Next Thursday. It will be more fun with you there, I feel quite lost sometimes among the family, I only wish Emily had some friends, but it appears no-one from the village will come to the Hall,’ Alice said and I could see she was slipping back into her daydreaming again. ‘I must get back for the child’s afternoon tea. Emily,’ she called and the child ran obediently to her.

After they’d gone I thought about what Alice had said during her conversation. The party was of interest, but uppermost in my mind were the words, ‘What worries me is who will be next.’ I had to admit that the thought had not crossed my mind before, but I vowed now to be vigilant at all times.

It was getting hot, but unlike Alice I was without a sunshade and I felt lost as to what to do. If I could seek out Antony Kershaw, maybe he would be

kind enough to allow me to make use of the library if indeed there was a library at Kerslake Hall.

I decided to throw caution to the wind and enter by the side door, praying as I did so that the daunting figure of Mrs Grafton would not be around. As I stepped into the hall once more I needn't have feared and I was in luck, for Mr Kershaw was crossing the hall, his step resounding on the black and white tiles.

'Mr Kershaw,' I approached him, 'please don't think me forward, but please could I make use of your library and find something to read?'

'But of course, Miss Sinclair. The library here is hardly used except by myself which is quite a sad state of affairs. Please feel free to sit there whenever you wish.' He spoke the words quite kindly and I really could not make out what kind of person he was.

'Thank you so much, there is just one thing, I don't know where to locate it.' At this he laughed, the laughter not quite reaching his eyes.

'Mrs Grafton,' my heart sank for the housekeeper had just stepped into the hall, I could hear the keys jangling at her waist, 'please be kind enough to show Miss Sinclair to the library. I have given my permission for her to use the room whenever she desires,' he instructed.

'Yes, Sir,' Mrs Grafton said pleasantly enough, and so once more I followed the silent figure in grey along another corridor. She did not speak or open the door, but indicated the room with her hand and gave me such a venomous look before she retraced her steps that I felt as though she had slapped me in the face.

***

The library was cool and out of the sun for which I was thankful. It was a large room with books lining the walls from top to bottom. Under the long window was a small square table with a large book placed on top of it, I was intrigued by the size of the book more than anything hence I went over to take a closer look.

It was a family bible, with the most unusual cover I had ever seen. It had been embroidered in bright colours of red, green, yellow and blue, whoever had stitched it had worked on it beautifully. I deliberated as to whether to open it or not as I thought it may hold details of the Kershaw family. I was more than curious to know how old Thomas Craddock was.

While deciding what to do, I searched the shelves for a suitable book to entertain me. A cream-coloured volume of *Vanity Fair* caught my eye and I

picked it out then sat on a chair to look at it. I made a quick decision to borrow the book and look through the bible before anyone came in.

Turning the lovely cover I could see there was indeed a list of family births, marriages and deaths from 1750. I quickly turned the page to find the more recent entries, at the bottom of the list was Emily, born July 25th 1880 to Antony and Phoebe Kershaw.

Above I could see Thomas, born 1865 to Mary and Thomas Craddock. So he was the same age as me, I mused, and was about to close the bible when Henrietta Kershaw's name caught my eye.

She had been born in 1825 and had been born a Kershaw. This revelation surprised me somewhat and I quickly went down again to Antony, he had been born in 1855 to Henrietta Kershaw and the sadly departed Albert Miles. Quickly I closed the bible admiring once more the cover, I felt as though I'd been intrusive and regretted prying into the family affairs.

Leaving the library, the copy of *Vanity Fair* in my hand, I thought that Henrietta Kershaw had no cause for all her airs and graces and sharp words, for if the bible were to be believed and it couldn't be wrong she was indeed a Miss. For all my prying I had indeed uncovered a trump card.

Later that evening in my room, I left the lamp burning deciding to read and be awake should there be any movement again in the tower. I read for three hours, my head eventually nodding, my eyes weary for sleep. When I was brought to by a movement behind my bed, someone was climbing the stairs.

I slammed the novel shut and laid it on the table. Looking at the clock I could see it was five to one. I braced myself for the scream and when it came I put my fingers in my ears hardly able to bear the shrillness of it. Quickly I slipped on my robe and as quietly as I could opened my bedroom door, then stepped into the corridor making my way to the door of the tower.

As I climbed the three stone steps I could see that the heavy door was slightly ajar. This fact alone caused me to tremble and with shaking hands I opened the door farther to enable me to take a look behind it. Thankfully the door slid open quietly and I could see stone steps to the upper floor.

The staircase curved at one point and I bravely decided to ascend the steps, the glow of candlelight from above lighting my way. Half of me wanted to retreat and the other half of me, although I was afraid of what I might encounter, pressed on.

I reached the bend in the staircase and stood suddenly still hardly daring to breathe, so much so that I clapped a hand to my mouth for I could see the room above only three steps away and I could see the woman in a long white night-gown, light-coloured wavy hair cascading down her back to her waist.

She was slight of build and appeared to be praying as I could hear the murmur of her voice and caught the word, *Lord*, twice. I couldn't stay for who was she and what would she do if she found me there? If she had a mind to she could push me down the stairs. With this thought, as hastily as I could without her hearing, I descended the steps and gently pushed the door to allow me access to the corridor once more.

I practically fled to my room, closing the door quietly behind me and looking through the curtains, could see no light in the tower.

I'd obviously left just in time but I knew without a doubt that this time I'd not imagined it or dreamed it and as I snuggled under the cotton sheet I prayed that next time I would possess more courage to solve the mystery.

5

I enjoyed my first day at the school, the children were delightful, very obedient and friendly, all except Clara who was quiet all day and didn't join in verbally with any of the lessons. At the end of the day I took her to one side.

'Is something bothering you, Clara, for you've not spoken to me all day,' I questioned. Her answer was to shrug her shoulders and look away. 'How old are you?' I asked gently.

'Eight, Miss,' she replied reluctantly.

'Perhaps you don't like me and are missing Miss Anderson,' I said.

'I do like you Miss, but Ma and Pa told me I wasn't to have anything to do with you as you live at the Hall,' she said quietly not looking me in the face. So, I thought, even the children couldn't escape the animosity towards the Kershaw family. Quickly I cleaned the blackboard and tidied up, then placing my bonnet on I took hold of Clara's hand.

'I'm walking you home Clara as I wish to speak to your mother and father,' I said firmly. The child didn't object and led me to one of the white cottages in the village. A woman was on her knees polishing the brass step at the front door.

She turned her head around at our arrival and I was quite shocked, although relatively young she had dark circles under her troubled eyes and her face was as white as the sheets on my bed. Getting up she pulled Clara from me placing a protective arm round the girl's shoulder.

'What do you want?' she asked with hatred in her voice, 'go home where you belong.'

'Strictly speaking,' I said quietly, 'Kerslake Hall isn't my home and I am not a Kershaw, and have indeed been here only two days.'

'That's as may be, but you were there when my Gladys was found.' Her voice broke as she spoke the words and my heart missed a beat for I had not expected Clara to be Gladys' sister.

'Mrs White, I am so sorry.' So saying I went to her and put my arm gently around her shoulder. I half expected her to push me away, but instead she cried, blowing her nose on the hem of her apron. As she calmed down she looked at me, 'Have you any bairns?' she asked.

'No,' I said simply.

‘Well when you have you’ll understand. A good girl Gladys were, I still can’t believe she’s gone,’ she said sniffing into her apron once more.

‘Mrs White, I understand how you must be feeling,’ I said, an idea forming in my mind, ‘would you allow Clara to come up to the Hall next Thursday for Emily’s party?’ At my words Mrs White looked at me aghast.

‘What! And have her murdered too!’

‘Not at all, I want you to see all is not bad at Kerslake Hall, and young Emily has no friends,’ I spoke with encouragement.

‘I’ll think on it,’ she conceded, ‘and I’ll have to ask my husband, I doubt he’ll be agreeable.’

‘Yes, please think about it and I’ll call on you next week if I may.’ My voice was soothing as I spoke and as she stepped through the door with Clara she looked back at me.

‘You do that, Miss,’ she said grudgingly.

***

Later, back in my bedroom while freshening up my face with some cold water, I thought how foolish I had been to invite Clara to the Hall and that I would have to speak to Antony Kershaw about it as it wasn’t my place to hand out invitations to anyone.

But my thoughts had been with both Emily and Clara, having a strong feeling that they would get on well together.

There was a tap on the door before I had a chance to change my grey dress for the pale green one. Without any ado or by your leave Mrs Grafton appeared in the doorway.

‘The Mistress wishes to see you now,’ she instructed, a sly smile to her lips as she spoke.

‘If that is so, then I had better come with you now,’ I said, pleased that I hadn’t yet changed after all.

As I entered Mrs Kershaw’s sitting-room I was more than surprised to see Thomas standing there, his hands behind his back, he was just as surprised to see me.

‘Miss Sinclair!’ he exclaimed smiling at me and then looking at his aunt who sat upright in her armchair, the cat, Charles, on her lap.

‘So Aunt Henry, why have you summoned the both of us?’ he asked with his devil may care manner.

‘I have brought the two of you here as it had been brought to my attention that the pair of you have been seen walking together to the Abbey and

indeed sharing a picnic on the grass. What have you to say for yourselves?' Henrietta Kershaw's harsh voice boomed out.

'There is no harm done, Aunt Henry,' replied Thomas, somewhat irritated I could tell.

'I will not have you associating with my paid help. For one thing it is unseemly and secondly it displeases me,' his aunt shouted back at him.

'And just what does please you, Aunt Henry?' I felt Thomas had gone too far at these words.

'I'll thank you not to speak to me like that and don't call me by that name, you know it irks me,' Mrs Kershaw retaliated.

'Well I have every intention of taking Abbey to Tidwell on Saturday, whether you like it or not!' Thomas's voice was rising and he tapped his foot slowly on the floor as he spoke.

'But she's as poor as a church mouse!' At these words I interrupted her.

'And how do you know this, pray?' I'd found my tongue in the old lady's presence at last. 'I'll have you know I'm not completely destitute, for I have a wealthy aunt.'

'Enough!' the old lady shouted, banging her fist on the table and shoving the sleeping cat off her lap. 'I forbid you to see each other outside the confines of this house and if you do I shall dismiss you, Miss Sinclair.'

At this she pointed a bony finger towards me. I looked at Mrs Kershaw and Thomas then, picking up my skirts, I fled from the room, tears threatening to fall. Thomas was intent on following me, but I heard the old lady shout, 'Stay!'

I would seek him out later. It was because of him I stayed and I admitted to myself that I could not bear not to see him and spend time with him as we had on the day we walked to the abbey. As I ran I bumped straight into Mrs Grafton, almost knocking her over.

She took one look at my tear-stained face and smiled. I realised then that it was her who had told Mrs Kershaw of my outing with Thomas. I ran straight past her and out of the main door.

Mrs Grafton's voice ringing in my ears, 'Miss Sinclair, use the servants' entrance.' But I didn't give a fig for servants' entrances, Mrs Henrietta Kershaw or Kerslake Hall, all I cared about was Thomas; and then I thought of Emily who had invited me to her party. I stopped running and found myself on the dirt track leading to the abbey.

***

It was late afternoon, the sky was blue and the sun shining, a sun which didn't reach my heart. I stopped at the top of the track and looked down at the ruined abbey. The scene before me hadn't changed, but in the last hour all my hopes had been dashed by a bitter old lady who obviously loathed seeing people happy; but was it really so bad I asked myself.

What was the worst that could happen? I could be dismissed, if I were that would mean I could be with Thomas, but where would I go and how would I support myself?

I was amazed at my thoughts, was I really in love? And I felt sure I was, our meeting had been love at first sight. I could tell myself this, but alas not the recipient of my affections, but I felt better at the thought.

Walking slowly back to the house I decided to seek out Thomas who would no doubt be in the long gallery working at this time of day. On entering the house once more I realised that I had no idea where the long gallery was, but guessed it to be on the floor above.

Stepping into the hall I looked around me and as no-one was about, quickly climbed the wide staircase. On reaching the first landing I decided which way to turn and took the left-hand corridor as this was the longest side of the house as the front door was not central to the building.

Opening the door I knew I'd made the right choice for I stepped into a very long room with paintings covering the walls. As my eyes adjusted to the light I could see Thomas halfway down the room. I ran to him, my feet noisy on the polished floorboards beneath, as I neared his silent figure he caught me to him and in that moment I knew he felt the same.

'Oh Thomas!' I said breathlessly, 'she can't keep us apart can she?' I looked at him for some reassurance.

'I won't let her, I promise,' he said freeing the pins at the back of my head, my hair falling over my shoulders. I found myself in a compromising position.

'What if someone comes in?' I said with some sense of alarm.

'No-one will come here except perhaps Antony.' As Thomas spoke he ran his hand over my blonde hair.

'Antony!' I exclaimed, twisting my hair back into a knot and replacing the pins to hold it in place as best I could.

Thomas laughed, 'I mean you no harm or dishonour,' he said.

'Is it right that two people from different walks in life be drawn to each other. Me poor, you wealthy?' I asked him seriously.

‘But you have a rich aunt,’ he teased.

‘Indeed I do, my father’s last remaining sister who had no children, she wanted me to go and live with her, but I was intent on finding my own way through life.’ My voice was wistful as I spoke.

‘I’m glad you have,’ said Thomas seriously, ‘for I’ve never before met anyone like you.’ His voice was for once serious although his lovely eyes sparkled with mischief.

‘May I look at the pictures?’ I asked him. ‘For I am very fond of art.’

‘But of course, I’ll guide you round,’ he said with some enthusiasm. I was to learn he was very knowledgeable in his field.

‘It is a very long room,’ I observed, for indeed it was.

‘Yes, it stretches the whole length of the house from the main door to the tower, and see this here?’ He stopped at a bare piece of the stone wall, bending a little he looked through what appeared to be a slit in the stone. ‘Look through here and tell me what you can see,’ he urged me.

There was no need for me to bend as Thomas had done, and looking through the tiny gap in the wall I gasped in surprise.

‘Goodness, I can see one side of the hall and the main door.’

For indeed I could, and even as I looked I saw Alice walk across the black and white tiles and then disappear out of the door causing a slant of light to fall on the polished floor. I idly wondered where she was going without Emily. I looked at Thomas. ‘What a novel idea,’ I enthused.

‘Hardly novel, Abbey. It’s a squint and has been there for over three hundred years,’ he explained.

‘Is the house that old then?’ I said somewhat surprised. ‘It doesn’t look that old.’

‘But it is. I’m very interested in antiquities, houses, churches, books and paintings,’ he said. This was obviously the one thing that he was passionate about and I was pleased that I was getting to know about him.

***

We walked together down the row of paintings, some large, some small and also some likeness, of people I’d never know, miniatures painted with care for a loved one. There was a picture of Kerslake Hall, painted in 1750. Looking at it brought to mind my arrival, was it really only three days ago?

I knew now why the house had seemed so familiar then, for Mr Lang had a copy of the painting hung in his office.

I stopped in front of a very commanding portrait of a young dark-haired woman, ringlets fell each side of her face, her complexion perfect with rosy cheeks. She wore a cream silk gown adorned with small violet flowers and a prettily-painted fan in one hand.

'Who is this?' I asked Thomas, too entranced to look at the brass plaque beneath.

'It is Aunt Henry in her younger days,' he replied, and I was quite taken aback for this young woman was beautiful and I felt a sudden sympathy for the older Henrietta Kershaw.

Now you have told me I can see that Emily has some of her features, especially the dark hair and the small pert mouth.' I could hardly believe that this was the same woman that had berated us earlier.

'Well it is, I can assure you.' And he showed me the plaque to prove it, which read, *Henrietta Kershaw 1854*. 'Now let us talk of ourselves.' He insisted taking my arm and leading me towards the door.

'It's nearly six o'clock,' I exclaimed looking at my fob watch. 'The time has just flown by today and I have to be in the kitchen in the next five minutes.'

'Just time for me to say that we will still go to visit Whitby on Saturday if you are willing.' As he asked the question he gently touched my cheek with the back of his hand.

'Indeed I am, for if I am to be banished from the house I know it will be worth it,' I teased laughing up at him.

'Well then, I shall meet you in the pony and trap outside the gates at 9 a.m.' So saying he took my hand gently kissing the palm which sent a shiver through my whole being.

'I shall be there I promise.' Praying silently that no-one would stop us.

***

Later, making my way to my room after supper, my thought was to find a suitable dress in my wardrobe for Emily's party. After my interlude with Thomas in the long gallery I felt so much happier and had a spring in my step again.

The sun had moved across the sky leaving just a ray of light on the wardrobe which appeared to light my way. Opening the door I looked at my sparse array of dresses hung on the rail, deciding on which one would be suitable and alluring.

I picked out my best dress of pale blue, it was made of a light cotton material with a rounded neck-line, puffed sleeves to the elbow and a slightly flared skirt. Quickly I removed my shabby grey dress and put on the blue one.

The cotton felt cool against my skin and as I looked in the mirror at my reflection I realised that if I could find a haberdashery shop in Whitby I could purchase some silk flowers for the shoulder and waistline of the dress to follow the fashion of the day.

Also a matching flower in my hair could look quite fetching, with this thought in mind I felt so much better and looked forward to Emily's party. I was about to remove the dress when there was a tap at the door.

It couldn't be Mrs Grafton for she would have stepped in without invitation, how I loathed that woman. Opening the door I could see it was Alice and drew to one side so she could enter.

'What a delightful dress,' Alice observed, 'and the colour suits you,' she complimented me.

'Thank you, I intend to wear it to Emily's birthday party,' I explained and told her my intention to stitch the silk flowers on to enhance the dress once I'd been able to purchase some.

'A cream colour would look quite fetching,' said the governess walking across to sit on my bed.

'It's pleasant to have you call on me,' I said. Was there a purpose for your visit?'

'I wish to know your thoughts about Gladys.' At her words I thought of Clara.

'To be honest I have no idea, except that a woman in the village suggested it was Antony Kershaw.' I said innocently.

'Antony, but that is rubbish!' As Alice spoke she stood up pacing the floor quite distraught. I hadn't expected my words to cause such a reaction.

'I'm sorry if I've upset you, that is the last thing I wanted to do,' I uttered, hoping my words would calm her and realising that Alice was a volatile person.

'Antony Kershaw is a good man, he's been very kind to me and he adores Emily,' she defended him.

'And what of his wife? Did she die in suspicious circumstances?' I asked.

'Certainly not. It was a tragic accident. Apparently Pheobe walked around the lake each evening before she retired for the night. This particular day

there had been a lot of rain and she slipped on the mud and fell into the water. It is a very deep lake and Pheobe could not swim. By the time the alarm was raised it was too late.' Alice recounted the tale with some emphasis on the word accident.

'Who told you this?' I asked tentatively.

'Mr Kershaw himself on the day I arrived to take up my position as governess to Emily. He wished to put the record straight for he knows there are many in the village who point an accusing finger at him. This angers me.'

She indeed looked angry I thought and had the feeling that this was a true account of Pheobe's demise. But it didn't explain the deaths of Annie and Gladys. I'd not given it a lot of thought, but thinking about it now someone must have lured them to Kerslake Hall with some false promise.

There were only two men at the Hall now, Mr Kershaw and Thomas. Lord forbid it was him! Then came the thought that Thomas had not been here when Annie died, so unless it was a member of staff like the gardener or handyman the finger did point to Antony Kershaw.

He always did seem like a man with something on his mind, time would tell and I prayed it would be soon, for no female was safe until the culprit was apprehended.

Placing my blue dress back in the wardrobe after Alice had left, and ensuring the skirt of it was straight so it didn't crease, I spied an envelope in the bottom of the wardrobe. Swiftly I bent to pick it up and sitting on the bed I looked at it.

There was no name on the front cover so I opened and read the words on the sheet of paper inside, and this is what it read:

Whoever sleeps in this room and reads this, *I want you to know that I too*, *have heard the steps on the stairs and the scuffling behind the bed*. *The worse thing is the piercing scream that comes some nights*. *I am so fearful as to who it is that I can no longer stay*, *but wish you well*. *This is a strange household and I shall be glad to leave it*. *Maybe you should go also before some harm befalls you*.

Martha.

As I looked down at the words, I realised Martha had been more frightened than I and was she right? Should I leave now? But then there was Thomas.

I tucked the letter in a drawer of the dressing table and tried to forget it. I was so tired after my eventful day, in fact each of my days had been eventful, but I fell into a restful sleep before one o'clock, but was awoken, not by a scream, but by a scuffling sound in the tower, almost as though someone was moving furniture. I listened for some time but the sound ceased and all was quiet.

I drifted again into a peaceful slumber, thinking of Martha's note, and then dreaming of Thomas and his lips on mine. How I wished that soon it would be reality.

6

Saturday dawned and I could see by the sky that it was going to be a glorious day. I decided to wear the mauve skirt and jacket I'd worn on the day of my arrival as I felt no other dress would be suitable for the occasion.

With breakfast over, I took Maggie to one side. 'Should anyone ask for me,' I confided, 'I am spending the day at Whitby. No-one else knows.'

'Well I hope you have a nice time,' said Maggie, eyes like saucers, 'are you going alone, Miss?' she asked as an afterthought.

'No, I am spending the day with Thomas Craddock, only please tell no-one,' I implored her.

'I promise, Miss,' pledged Maggie, and I knew I could trust her.

As I left the kitchen I had the misfortune to encounter Mrs Grafton, who completely spoilt the moment.

'Ah, Miss Sinclair, the Mistress wishes you to read to her this afternoon in her sitting-room at two o'clock,' she informed me.

'I'll be there.' I said, knowing full-well I would not be back, but I was willing to suffer Henrietta Kershaw's wrath for a day with her nephew, and although I wasn't used to lying I felt I had no choice as I didn't want Mrs Grafton to know I was going out.

But I wasn't to get away so lightly. 'You are dressed up,' she said, looking me up and down suspiciously.

'I thought to walk to the village this morning for a breath of air,' I lied admirably.

'Well, be back in time, the Mistress demands punctuality,' the housekeeper warned me.

It was nearly nine, I managed to escape from Mrs Grafton, but felt she was suspicious of my intentions. Quickly I slipped out of the servants' entrance and walked across the front of the house and on to the short drive. Glancing back at the house I could see someone watching me from a side window of the main door. I was sure it was Mrs Grafton, this caused me to quicken my steps for I would not be thwarted.

Hastily, I undid the gate and closed it behind me, the latch clanging as I secured it. Thomas was waiting in the pony and trap, I ran to him and instructed him to move off quickly as I'd been seen.

‘Calm yourself, pretty lady,’ he said urging the pony forward, ‘it will be all right.’ He tried to reassure me, but it was futile. I knew what I was doing was underhanded and I knew that without a doubt I would be dismissed from my position. But if this were the case I may as well enjoy the day.

I really didn’t know what had happened to me, but if it were love then it had certainly caused me to behave out of character.

***

The pony and trap bowled along through the village of Beckmoor, and as we passed Clara’s cottage I thought that I had quite forgotten to speak with Antony Kershaw about her attending Emily’s party. So taken was I with my desire to be with Thomas all other thoughts had flown from my head.

‘A penny for your thoughts, sweetheart,’ said Thomas clasping one of my hands in his.

‘I’ve done a silly thing,’ I answered him.

‘And what would that be other than falling in love with me?’ he teased. Could he never be serious, and strangely I felt quite irritated.

‘I invited Clara White, Gladys’ sister, to Emily’s party next Thursday and I realised I had no right to do such a thing.’ These words caused Thomas to pull the pony to a halt.

‘Gladys White’s sister at the Hall?’ He mocked, ‘Aunt Henry will never stand for it, you little fool.’

‘How dare you call me a fool!’ I lashed back at him, quite incensed. ‘Your aunt may not like the idea, but Emily’s father might. I have yet to broach the matter with him.’

‘I wish you luck.’ Thomas chuckled, urging the pony forward once more.

‘Please take me back,’ I said so suddenly I quite surprised myself. I had at last come to my senses, realising how wrong this was.

‘I’m not turning back now, we are only two miles away and my mother is expecting us,’ he said quite seriously for once.

‘Your mother?’ I exclaimed. ‘You didn’t mention your mother.’

‘I surely didn’t need to. Come on Abigail, smile and enjoy the day,’ he coaxed.

There was nothing I could do, it were as if I were on a slippery path and couldn’t get off. We travelled in silence for quite a while until Thomas pointed out the sea to our right. It shimmered calmly in the sunlight in total contrast to the never ending moorland.

Without warning Thomas pulled up outside a wooden gate and over the privet hedge I could see a delightful pink thatched cottage, an arch of white roses around the door, quite idyllic and picturesque.

'Welcome to Tidwell House,' he said.

'So this is your home,' I answered him, 'it is delightful.' And as I spoke I could see a middle-aged woman walking down the path to greet us.

Thomas chivalrously helped me alight from the trap and then introduced me to his smiling mother.

She was a nice looking woman for her age, a pleasant rounded face, greying hair secured at the nape of her neck with a plumpish figure dressed in an expensive blue gown with ruffles at her neck and sleeves.

We sat under a parasol in the splendid colourful garden, sipping cool lemonade and eating small sponge cakes. It was all very civilised, but somehow unreality set in, so I was startled when Mrs Craddock spoke. 'And what do you make of my sister?' she asked, looking directly at me intent on an answer.

'In truth, I've not seen much of her since my arrival,' I replied, unable to tell this sister of Henrietta's my true feelings.

'She has never been the same since her accident in the carriage thirty-five years ago.' Mary Craddock spoke almost as if relating a much told story. 'She will carry the scars to her grave, it has also scarred her personality. As a young woman she was kind and gentle, but now...' Here she stopped.

'Please don't distress yourself,' I said kindly, for I could see the sadness on the woman's face.

'No I mustn't, for it was all so long ago and nothing can be altered,' she agreed. Now, I heard that you'd like to see Whitby.'

'Yes I would, and I need a haberdashery shop where I can purchase some silk flowers.' I told her.

'No need to find a shop, I have plenty in my sewing room, all different colours and sizes. Please come with me, Abigail.'

So we left Thomas alone in the garden and I stepped into the cottage with his mother. It was cool inside for which I was thankful. In the narrow hallway a picture of Kerslake Hall hung on the wall, no doubt a copy of the one that I had seen in the long gallery. It seemed that anyone with association to the Hall could not escape it and I wondered if I ever would, for the place had got under my skin and I already felt part of it.

Mrs Craddock led me up red thickly carpeted stairs, the place was cosy and inviting, unlike the Hall. She led me into a room which was full of sunlight. There were two tailor's dummies in the middle of the room, one of which held an unfinished yellow gown.

I was led to a large red pot in a corner which stood on a round table. Inside were indeed many silk flowers of different colours and sizes.

'Pick out what you'd like, dear, for I have no use for all of them. I bought them because it is fashionable at the moment to decorate gowns with flowers. I gather this is what you want them for?' Mary Craddock enquired.

'Yes it is indeed, I wish to decorate my best blue dress in preparation for Emily's party next week,' I explained.

'That lovely child will be ten years old, I can hardly believe it. It is so sad about her poor mother. Now, you select your flowers while I go down and keep Thomas company. You will know your way?' she asked me.

'Yes, and thank you, Mrs Craddock.' I said politely, for it was indeed fortuitous.

I looked through the many silk flowers thinking of Alice's words that cream would be nice, but I'd spotted some small pale-pink-coloured ones which I felt sure would enhance the blue of the dress.

I picked out a dozen of them and then selected a large one identical in colour for my hair. I was about to turn away when on impulse I selected a large white one for Clara's dark hair, which brought to mind that I needed to speak urgently to Antony Kershaw.

Placing the flowers in my reticule I made my way back down the stairs, peeping into the open door of what was obviously the living room. It was very homely with matching floral curtains and chair covers.

Making my way back outside and through the garden, I marvelled at the beautiful colours of the flowers and how tall the mauve lupins were in all their splendour.

As I neared the table I could hear Mary Craddock's voice, 'Why do you have to associate with these young girls and women who have no direction in life and very little if not no means to support themselves? It really is beyond me, Thomas. She's a nice enough young woman and very nice looking, but then so is Barbara Middleton and she would marry you tomorrow! Her parents are wealthy and it would be more in keeping. I really don't understand you.' Here she stopped and I listened with baited breath for her son's reply.

‘They are a challenge, Mother, that is all, I have no intention of marrying any of them. So let that reassure you.’ As he spoke I saw him reach across and lay his hand across his mother’s.

I was incensed. So, I was just a challenge was I? And who else had been such to him? Annie and Gladys were brought to mind. Oh no! How could I have been so naïve as to have fallen for this young man’s charms? So far as to think that I was in love with him when all I appeared to be was a dalliance. I pulled myself together and made my way across to where they were sat.

‘Here is Abigail,’ declared Mrs Craddock, ‘did you find what you needed dear?’

‘Yes, thank you so much,’ I said sweetly, smiling at the both of them and in my heart wishing that Thomas were anywhere but in my presence. What a charmer he was, he’d certainly deceived me and I could never forgive him for making me look so foolish.

‘Are you ready to go into Whitby?’ Thomas asked me.

‘Why yes, I think I am,’ I answered, for a while here I thought I may as well see the town and I knew that I would not return in time to Kerslake Hall to read to my employer. What consequence this would have I had no idea but would soon find out.

The road to Whitby was not long and I could very soon see the ruined abbey high on the hill and smell the salt water and seaweed in the delightful harbour.

I managed to purchase myself a pretty turquoise sunshade with a few coppers I had in my reticule. All in all it was a pleasant afternoon and I endeavoured successfully to keep Mr Thomas Craddock at a distance much to his annoyance.

On our way back to the Hall I looked at the ruins of Whitby Abbey and thought that the abbey near Kerslake Hall would never hold such a joy for me after what I’d discovered today. We were silent all the way back and I was sure that Thomas was aware that something was amiss.

As we pulled up at the gates of the Hall Thomas bent across to me, his intention was to kiss me but I moved away from him.

‘You may as well drive us to the main door,’ I told him, ‘for we are both in trouble anyway, me more so than yourself, your dear aunt will probably dismiss me as soon as she lays eyes on me,’ I continued.

‘I don’t know what has changed you today, Abbey, but I am obviously wasting my time, at least if you are dismissed we won’t have to see each other again.’

After this little speech he smiled at me and jumped down to open the gates. The cheek of the man I thought, and what could be gained by berating him; and I wondered for the second time that day how I could have been so foolish as to fall for such a cad as him.

As we pulled up outside the main door I knew that someone was sure to see us and when Mrs Grafton looked out of the downstairs window I knew my fate was sealed. I got down without assistance, my feet crunching on the gravel. I threw a look of disdain back at my companion and headed for the servants’ entrance with Thomas’s words ringing in my ears.

It was nearly six o’clock so I made my way to the kitchen, thankfully encountering no-one on the way. As I seated myself by Maggie she whispered, ‘There’s been a right carry on about you today, Miss,’ she said.

‘Has there indeed,’ I answered quietly, ‘in what way?’

‘Mrs Grafton has been asking us all if we knew where you’d gone, but I didn’t let on Miss, honest. And apparently the Mistress is right put out.’ At these words her voice got louder and all at the table looked at me. What they were thinking I could not imagine.

Supper over, I made my way to my room hoping I would bump into Antony Kershaw to enable me to speak of Clara, but I encountered no-one, not even the hateful Mrs Grafton. I was quite surprised at this as on other occasions she had been ready to pounce on me at the time of my wrong doings and today’s outing had surely beaten them all.

Stepping into my room I removed my bonnet and then tipped the silk flowers out of my reticule on to the bed. I went across to the wardrobe, took out the blue cotton dress and laid it on the bed too.

I glanced out of the window towards the brooding lake, my thoughts with Phoebe, Annie and Gladys, wondering as Alice had done who would be next.

The lake lay calm and still in the evening sunlight as if it held no secrets, almost innocent to the fact as to what had happened in its depths.

So engrossed was I in my thoughts that the sound of a key turning in the lock of my door didn’t at first register itself in my head. As I laid the pink flowers on my blue dress thinking how becoming they were, I suddenly realised what I had heard but hardly given it any thought.

I went across to the door and turned the knob, pulling the door as hard as I could but it wouldn't budge. The awful truth dawned on me that I had been locked in and was a prisoner in my own bedroom.

7

It must have been Mrs Grafton I thought, the cunning woman that she was. On her mistress's instructions she had no doubt waited for me to return to my room after supper and turned the key in the lock, probably with jubilation that I had got my come-uppance.

I paced up and down, then tried to open the door again in the event that I had made a mistake. But to no avail, the door was locked fast. My only hope was Alice, I pounded my hands against the door as hard as I could, hurting my knuckles in the process but there was no response.

After a while I gave up and looked out of the window, watching as the sun fell farther in the sky, casting a pink glow on the still lake.

Even as I looked I could see a man walking on the path, I could tell by his clothes that it was Thomas which brought to mind the day's events. What a horrid day this had been and it was by no means over yet.

I saw Thomas step into the summer pavilion and then I lost sight of him. Had he a tryst with someone I wondered and certainly wouldn't put it past him. The sight of him had renewed my vigour and I proceeded to pound on the door again, but no-one heard me. Where was Alice?

My knuckles felt bruised now and I had to give up, hopefully someone would miss me in the morning. At the thought of all those hours spent in my room I felt utter despair and with my back against the door I slid on to the floorboards leaning wearily against the wood.

It seemed an eternity before I heard light footsteps in the corridor coming in my direction. I found some strength and got to my feet hammering on the door with one hand and at the same time shouting for help.

'Is that you, Miss Sinclair?' It was Maggie, I'd never before in my life been so pleased to hear another being's voice.

'Maggie, please help me, someone has locked the door of my room.' I spoke trying to keep my voice as calm as possible.

'Someone locked you in!' she exclaimed, 'I can hardly believe anyone could be so wicked.'

'Maggie, I want you to fetch Mr Kershaw, he's the only one that can get me out of here,' I said, knowing that Henrietta and her minion would not help me as I was sure they were the perpetrators of this injustice.

‘But Mr Kershaw is drinking his port, Miss. I dare not disturb him,’ she said with some reluctance.

‘Maggie, you have to fetch him.’ I said firmly or I’ll be locked in here all night.

‘I may lose my job, but all right, Miss, I’ll go,’ she agreed.

It seemed an eternity before I heard footsteps again along the corridor. It was a man’s tread, and to prove it Antony Kershaw’s voice came to me through the door. ‘Miss Sinclair, what is going on?’

‘Someone has locked me in Sir, please get me out of here,’ I pleaded with anger.

‘Maggie, fetch Mrs Grafton please, now.’ His voice was more authoritative than I had heard it before.

‘Thank you, Mr Kershaw,’ I said with relief. It wasn’t very long before I heard Mrs Grafton’s voice and then Mr Kershaw’s.

‘Open this door, Mrs Grafton.’

She obviously did as she was bid for I heard the jangle of her keys and the key turning in the lock. When the door opened the three of them stood there like characters in a painting, Maggie looking at me with dismay written all over her lovely face, Mrs Grafton with a sheepish look on hers and Antony Kershaw with a face like thunder, his blue eyes flashing with anger as he looked at Mrs Grafton.

‘Did you do this, Mrs Grafton?’ he shouted at her, Tor you are the only one with the means to do such a thing.’

‘I did, Sir,’ said the housekeeper calmly, ‘on your mother’s instructions.’

Maggie clapped her hands to her mouth, her eyes like saucers once more, looking at us all in disbelief.

‘Go back to the kitchen, Maggie please,’ said Antony Kershaw gently, ‘none of this is your fault, indeed I thank you for fetching me.’ At his words Maggie did as she was bid, but not before she’d dropped a brief curtsey to her master.

‘Mrs Grafton, this is not the way I wish my household to be run,’ he admonished her. ‘You have given loyal service for many years, but I didn’t expect your loyalty to my mother to extend to this.’

‘And where is your mother?’ I said speaking for the first time, ‘for I wish to speak to her, no, I intend to speak to her.’

‘Miss Sinclair,’ Antony Kershaw said turning to me, ‘I know how vexed you must be, but not tonight please.’

‘Vexed!’ I shouted the word, ‘I am seething with anger and can no longer contain it.’ So saying I pushed past them both and picking up my skirts headed for the stone staircase, both the Master and the housekeeper not far behind me.

‘Miss Sinclair,’ Mr Kershaw’s voice shouted after me, but to no avail I moved faster and burst without ceremony into his mother’s sitting room. The room was quite dark with only an oil lamp burning by her chair. Thankfully I could at least see her.

‘What is this Miss Sinclair?’ she shouted at me quite startled sitting up straighter in her chair.

‘How dare you lock me in my room like some naughty child,’ I screamed at her, ‘I’m twenty-five years of age and have done nothing to you. Yet since I arrived here you seem intent on disliking me.’

‘You went against my wishes and spent the day with my nephew,’ she said quietly.

‘Well I can assure you I shan’t be spending time with him in the future, for he is nothing but a charming philanderer,’ I said quite truthfully.

‘I’ll thank you not to speak like that about Thomas,’ Henrietta said harshly, ‘I will not have it.’

‘Well, before you dismiss me, Miss Henrietta Kershaw, I resign, for to stay in this house any longer would be torture,’ I said with triumph, pleased that I had at last answered her back.

‘And where were you today, Miss Sinclair at two o’clock when I requested that you read to me? For after all that is what I employed you for.’ Mrs Kershaw’s words were true and she spoke them in a much softer tone.

‘For that, I apologise,’ I conceded, ‘for I shouldn’t have gone with Thomas, but unfortunately I let my heart rule my head.’

‘Quite out of character I should imagine Abigail, but I accept your apology, you have spirit and I like a girl with spirit.’ I could not believe that Henrietta Kershaw had spoken these words.

‘Please stay, Miss Sinclair,’ Antony Kershaw’s voice cut across our conversation. ‘Don’t be hasty,’ he implored. I turned to look at him and saw Mrs Grafton hovering in the doorway.

‘I’m tired now,’ said the old lady, ‘please leave me for I need to go to my bed. Sleep on it, girl,’ she directed at me, ‘and we shall continue this conversation another time.’

‘Very well,’ I agreed and bade her goodnight. Mrs Grafton stayed with her mistress while Antony Kershaw and I walked together along the corridor.

‘Please accompany me to the drawing room, Miss Sinclair, for I wish to talk to you,’ he requested. So I followed him and entered one of the hallowed rooms of Kerslake Hall.

‘Would you like a glass of sherry to calm your nerves, Miss Sinclair, or perhaps a strong cup of sweet tea,’ he asked.

‘Tea sounds wonderful.’ As I spoke he pulled a cord by the fireplace and in no time at all Maggie appeared, her expression agog as to what was going on.

‘Miss Sinclair,’ the master began, ‘please think carefully about leaving for I would like you to stay. I know Emily has taken to you and please at least remain for her birthday party, for she has told me of her invitation to you.’

‘Mr Kershaw, I have something to discuss with you concerning Emily’s party.’ I spoke realising that this was my chance to mention Clara. ‘I did a very foolish thing the other day and invited Clara White to the party. It was something I did on impulse and I know it was wrong, but I feel it would be good for Emily to have another child to talk to.’

I said the words without taking a breath and waited for his reply. There was a long pause before he spoke.

‘Then let her come, Miss Sinclair. That is if Clara’s parents will agree to it.’

‘Thank you, Mr Kershaw, I shall call and see Mr and Mrs White on Monday,’ I said, relieved that the subject had been received so well.

‘You do know, don’t you, that Clara’s sister was found in our lake?’ he asked me.

‘I do indeed. Are the police any nearer to solving the mystery?’ I bravely said for really it was none of my business.

‘Unfortunately not, but they do think someone held her underwater as bruises have been discovered on her neck,’ he told me quite candidly, placing his cup and saucer back on the tray.

This piece of news alarmed me but I wouldn’t let it show.

‘Would you like to be moved to another room?’ he said suddenly changing the conversation.

I was tempted to agree to this in view of the nocturnal occurrences, but quite surprised myself when I replied, ‘No thank you, it is very kind of you, but I have settled in and am quite happy.’

‘As long as you are sure,’ he replied, ‘for I wish you to be happy here, Miss Sinclair. I value your presence in the house and as for my cousin Thomas, he won’t be here much longer to cause you distraction.’

‘I feel very foolish regarding my association with your cousin,’ I admitted.

‘Let it not trouble you, Miss Sinclair, for he has many strings to his bow and is indeed charming to all the women folk he meets. I’m only sorry that he cast his spell on you, but please think no more of it. Look upon it as another lesson learned in the pursuit of love.’

His words were kind and understanding, but he had more to say. ‘You no doubt know what happened to my wife, Phoebe, for it is difficult to keep anything secret in this household.’

‘Yes, I did hear of her tragic accident in the lake for which I am truly sorry.’ I assured him.

‘And it was an accident, although the residents of Beckmoor would have it that I killed her. To what gain I cannot imagine for all I have is a motherless child, a sad heart and this huge lonely house. Plus my mother who is not the easiest of people to please.’

He rambled on and I had half a mind to tell him of the incidents I’d experienced in the tower but no, I’d leave it until I got to know him better for it may only add to his distress. He continued, ‘And there again I think the villagers confuse me for my cousin who cannot keep away from any pretty lass, young, old, rich or poor but I am not a philanderer, Miss Sinclair, no matter what accusations you may hear about me they are most probably untrue, I trust you believe me?’

‘I do indeed,’ I said honestly for I truly believed he was a good man.

‘Then away to your bed young woman, you must be tired and accept my assurance that the unfortunate incident of this evening will not be repeated,’ he said with sincerity.

‘Thank you, Mr Kershaw,’ I said rising from the comfortable chair, ‘I’ll bid you goodnight.’

As I reached the door his voice stopped me in my tracks. ‘You look quite lovely when you are angry. Sleep well, Miss Sinclair.’ I looked back at him and we smiled at each other. I felt at that moment we had forged a bond and I was thankful for it.

***

Reaching my room I felt quite elated, my blue dress still lay across the bed, the silk flowers strewn across it, all I had to do now was stitch them in place and look my best. But for whom? Certainly not Thomas Craddock and what about the master?

I felt now that I knew him better and quite warmed to him, but I must not be too hasty with my affections or see into things which did not exist.

As Antony Kershaw so rightly said, Thomas was a lesson in my pursuit of love. How astute he had been and not at all judgmental.

Snuggling down in the covers I went to sleep quite quickly only to be awoken a short time later by the piercing scream. I sat up in bed debating whether to go to the tower, but I decided against it as I was too weary, another night would have to suffice when I could unlock the mystery of the woman in white and I prayed also that the mystery surrounding Annie and Gladys's death would be resolved soon.

With these thoughts I drifted into a peaceful sleep, Antony Kershaw's words running through my mind. 'You look quite lovely when you are angry.' I smiled contentedly, not a thought of Thomas in my head.

Next day, I spent all afternoon stitching the flowers on the shoulders and waist of my blue dress. It was a painstaking task but the end result was worth it.

When I finished I hung the dress on the outside of the wardrobe so that any creases would have a chance to fall out. While sewing I thought how quickly my first week at the Hall had passed and of the many things that had happened since my arrival. The mystery woman in the tower, the demise of poor Gladys, teaching in the schoolroom and my unfortunate association with Thomas Craddock.

In view of what I'd learned of him the thought crossed my mind that he could after all be the man the police were searching for, but I dismissed the thought quickly from my mind, after all who was I to judge anyone?

'What have you been doing today, Miss?' asked Maggie at supper. On telling her of my dress for Emily's party she was keen to see it, 'Will you show me tomorrow afternoon please Miss as it's my day off?' she asked with some excitement in her voice as I'd built up quite a rapport with Maggie.

'But of course. I have to go to the village in the morning, but I shall seek you out on my return.' Maggie seemed more than pleased about this.

That night all was quiet in the tower and I enjoyed an uninterrupted sleep. The next morning looking out of the window I could see that the good weather was still with us. I was a little apprehensive about calling at the Whites' cottage, but none-the-less felt I must go as I didn't wish to let anyone else down and Clara was probably looking forward to attending a party.

I decided to walk to the village and so set off after breakfast, no-one else was in sight on the road which cut its way through the moorland to the village. The cottage door was answered by Mrs White who stepped to one side so I could cross the brass doorstep.

'You've come to ask about Clara,' she said as I followed her into the small kitchen-come-living-room.

'I promised I would, Mrs White,' I said, 'how are you today?'

'I'm beginning to feel better.' As she spoke the words I could see that her cheeks looked pinker today replacing the pallor of last week.

'And have you reached a decision about Clara coming to the Hall with me on Thursday?' I asked gently, noting the bed made up under the large scrubbed table in one corner.

'Aye, we have,' said Mrs White, sitting on a kitchen chair by the table. 'Took my husband some persuading I can tell you, but Clara can come on the understanding that you won't let the child out of your sight.'

'That's splendid,' I enthused, 'and I give you my promise that I shall keep Clara safely with me. I'll collect her after school if that's all right with you.'

'Aye, and I trust you'll see her safely home.' Mrs White got up as she spoke and picked a package up off the small dresser. 'This is Clara's best dress, she has no other shoes, I'm afraid,' she said, handing me the brown paper package tied neatly with string.

'Don't worry, I will ensure she looks her best and I shall see Clara home myself,' I promised.

***

When I left the cottage some time later with the brown parcel under my arm, I bumped into Harry.

'How you doing, Miss?' he asked cheekily.

'Fine, thank you, Harry, everything is going splendidly.' Little did I know at that moment that things weren't as splendid as I thought.

Arriving back at the Hall I made my way to the kitchen to look for Maggie. She was sat at the table helping another maid to clean the silver

which was spread out on a white sheet.

'Right, Miss, I'm coming,' said Maggie when she saw me. We walked up the stone staircase which was now so familiar to me. Maggie followed me into my room. I placed the parcel Mrs White had given me on the bed and then looked in dismay at my dress which still hung on the wardrobe. The flowers which I'd so carefully stitched on the day before were strewn on the floor. Some cruel person had systematically cut them away from the dress while I'd been out and my mind flew to Mrs Grafton.

8

‘Oh, Miss!’ said Maggie helping me gather up the flowers. ‘Who would do such a thing?’

‘At this moment in time I have no idea, but intend to find out,’ I said, placing the flowers on the bed once more.

‘I’ll help sew them back on Miss, I’m really quite good at needlework. I’d like to have done it for a living, but Ma says it would spoil my eyesight.’ As she spoke I took down the dress and looked at it carefully, there were a couple of nicks in the fabric on the shoulder but this could be put right.

‘Thank you for the offer Maggie, could we do it in your room?’ I asked, not wanting to leave the dress here again for the same fate to befall it.

‘We could Miss, I share the room with Ruth but she won’t mind.’

***

We stitched together all evening, Maggie working on the waist and I on the shoulder, she was indeed a good needlewoman. From time to time I glanced around the room, almost taken up completely by two beds. I thought my room was sparse, but in comparison mine was a palace. There was just a rail placed in an alcove for their clothes which were few, and an old wooden stand on which stood a cracked washbowl and jug.

‘There, that looks a picture, Miss,’ said Maggie when we’d finished and I had to agree. ‘I’ll put it on the rail, Miss, and no-one but Ruth will see it.’ So I entrusted my dress to Maggie’s safe-keeping.

Thursday, the day of Emily’s party arrived. It was the day I was asked for the first time to read to Mrs Kershaw. Today of all days when I had much to do, but after all, this is why I was here and until now my duties as companion had not been called upon except for that fateful day.

As I crossed the hall on my way to Mrs Kershaw’s room I encountered Thomas, at the sight of him my heart missed a beat.

‘Abbey,’ he said quietly coming across to me, ‘I need to speak to you about the other day. It was my misfortune...’ Here I interrupted him.

‘No, Mr Craddock, it is my misfortune that I risked all for someone so indifferent to my feelings as yourself. Now if you’ll please excuse me, Sir, I have to read to your aunt. I don’t wish to give her any more cause to dismiss me.’

After this little speech I made to go but Thomas gently caught my arm. ‘But I need to explain to you about the other day,’ he implored.

‘I fear there is nothing to explain,’ I told him, wondering as I walked down the corridor what it was he had to say, just maybe I should have listened.

The consequence of my meeting with Thomas caused me distraction while reading to the old lady who was very subdued today. What was it Thomas wanted to explain? He called me a fool and suggested to his mother that I was a challenge. How could he possibly explain that. For the rest of the afternoon I turned it over and over in my mind wishing that I had at least listened to what he had to say.

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After leaving Mrs Kershaw, I hurried up to my room as I still hadn’t unpacked the parcel containing Clara’s dress. Hurriedly I opened it, shook the dress and hung it up. It was blue quite similar in colour to mine with a wide bow at the back.

I knew that Clara would look charming and that we would complement each other perfectly. I hastened along the road to Beckmoor fearing that I would be late, but as I reached the church door, Clara was just coming out.

‘Hello, Clara, are you looking forward to the party?’ I said trying to put her at ease.

‘Yes, Miss, I’ve never been to a party before,’ she replied softly and I could see she was nervous.

‘I wish to see Miss Anderson,’ I told Clara, steering her back through the door and instructing her to sit in a pew and wait for me. I climbed the stairs to the schoolroom, but the greeting died on my lips, for Ann Anderson and Antony Kershaw were in a close embrace. I retraced my steps down the stairs and taking Clara’s hand we walked back out into the sunlight.

On reaching Kerslake Hall, I made my way with Clara to my room. First of all I would get Clara dressed and arrange her hair. As I slipped the dress over her head I thought how pretty she was. I sat her at the dressing table and brushed her hair until it shone and then placed the white flower in her hair. The finished result was wonderful. Maggie brought my dress to me and stayed to assist me.

‘Can I do your hair please, Miss?’ she asked of me.

‘Of course,’ I agreed and sat at the dressing table while Maggie brushed my long blonde locks and then twisted them at the back, securing it at the

nape of my neck with pins, a tendril of hair each side of my face. All that remained was to position the pink flower. Maggie had done an admirable job.

'Stand up, Miss, and let's have a look at you,' she urged, excitedly. I did as I was bid. 'You look fit for a king, doesn't she, Clara?' Clara was sat quietly on the bed waiting patiently for me to prepare myself.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door, perhaps it was Alice, but on opening the door I was surprised to see Thomas standing in the doorway. 'I need to talk to you,' he said, heedless of Maggie and Clara.

'Tomorrow, Mr Craddock,' I promised, 'for you can surely see I have other things to do.'

'Tomorrow then,' he agreed, 'my mother is here by the way, and I have spoken to her. I'll see you in the dining-room.' So saying he left us, with me curious at to what he'd spoken to his mother about.

'Handsome gentleman, Miss,' Maggie cut into my thoughts.

'Yes, indeed he is. Thank you for helping me, if you could just show me to the dining-room now, please.'

I entered the dining-room with Clara clutching my hand. It was Emily dressed in a lemon dress who saw us first and came running over to us. 'Come and see the table,' she said to Clara, taking her hand.

I could see Henrietta Kershaw dressed in a pretty emerald green gown with lace at her throat. It was the first time I had seen her out of her sitting-room. Mary Craddock was talking to her sister, they both looked up,

Mrs Craddock smiling and indicating for me to join them.

It was then I spied Anthony Kershaw in deep conversation with the lovely Alice, who looked a picture in a violet-coloured silk gown. Neither of them noticed my arrival, but Thomas did and he came over to me.

'Sit here Miss Sinclair while I get you a sherry.' As he spoke, out of the corner of my eye I could see Henrietta Kershaw watching us. While Thomas went to get me a drink I sat at a table that was laden with small triangular sandwiches, jellies and iced sponge cakes, there was also a pink cake with candles on.

'Emily,' I called her over and she came running, Clara at her side, 'here is a small gift for your birthday from Clara and I.'

She took the small package from me and opened it.

'A lace handkerchief with my initial on it. Thank you, Miss Sinclair.' And she skipped over to her father, Clara following behind. At that moment

Thomas returned with my drink which I sipped delicately not being used to partaking of sherry.

‘Please meet me tomorrow morning in the rose garden at nine o’clock. Promise me, Abbey,’ he whispered.

‘I give you my promise,’ I said, equally as quietly for Antony Kershaw and Alice were walking across to us.

Alice stood back quietly with that unfathomable expression. I wondered what she was thinking as she looked me up and down.

‘I think it’s time for tea,’ said the master. I turned around to call Clara, but she’d disappeared and so had Emily, they’d obviously slipped out while the adults were talking.

‘Oh, no,’ I uttered, ‘Where would they go? I promised Mrs White I’d keep her with me at all times.’

‘Don’t fret.’ It was Thomas at my side. ‘I will go and look for them, Miss Hayward, if you could try the nursery and Miss Sinclair and I will look outside,’ he instructed.

‘I’m concerned about the lake,’ said Antony Kershaw, ‘but I can’t go out there.’ So it was that Thomas and I walked around the lake together, it was still and serene in the evening sun.

‘I can’t wait until tomorrow,’ he said, ‘now is as good a time as any to explain myself.’

‘It’s not the right time, but I will hear you out,’ I said, all the while scouring the paths of the lake.

‘I hold in you high esteem, Abbey,’ and he stopped walking. ‘I didn’t intend to call you a fool that day but the words slipped out without much thought to your reaction and I guess you heard Mother and I talking in the garden.’

‘How do you know that?’ I asked.

‘Because of your change in manner, am I right?’ His words were meant to be answered.

‘Yes you are correct, I accidentally heard you tell your mother I was a challenge,’ I said with some indignation. ‘There they are!’ I shouted as I saw the girls come out of the summer pavilion, each with a doll tucked under their arm. ‘Emily, Clara,’ I called to them, ‘don’t walk too close to the lake.’ Then I addressed Thomas, ‘We will continue this discussion in the morning if that meets with your approval.’

‘It certainly does under the circumstances, and may I say, Abbey, that this evening, you look enchanting,’ he complimented me.

When the girls reached us I hugged them both with relief, I held Clara’s hand and Emily caught hold of her uncle’s. We are like a young family I thought, out for a stroll in the evening sunshine and I knew beyond a doubt that deep in my heart this is what I longed for.

Thomas smiled at me, I’d like to have known what he was thinking. The remainder of Emily’s party went well, the two children really had taken to each other and when Clara and I left, Emily spoke to her.

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On delivering Clara safely back to the cottage I met Mr White. He was a sullen man, but thanked me and said how he never thought he would allow a child of his to visit Kerslake Hall.

‘That’s the one thing I can’t understand about our Gladys,’ he continued, ‘she knew how I felt about it and ends up murdered in the Kershaw’s lake.’

‘I’m sure the police will find the truth,’ I said, little knowing then that I would be the one to solve the mystery.

Next morning leaving my room to go down to breakfast, I glanced at the tower door and to my amazement realised it was open. I looked around me to see if anyone was about but all was silent in the corridor.

Quickly I made my way to the open door, looking up at the curved stairway I could sense no movement.

Bravely I walked up the stone staircase picking up my skirt as I went. I was nearly at the top step when I hesitated, what would I find? I was on the top step ready to step into the room beyond and when I did I gasped with surprise for the only thing the room held was a full-length mirror on a stand.

The rounded walls of the tower were of grey stone and I shivered at the thought of being locked in here. A candle-holder containing a half burnt candle stood solitary on the deep stone window ledge, a box of matches beside it.

Swiftly I made my way back down the stairs leaving the heavy wooden door ajar as I had found it. Mrs Grafton had said that it was unsafe to go in the tower, but I now knew this to be a lie. Why should she not want me to go up there when nothing of importance was there?

Looking at my fob watch I could see it was ten to eight and that I’d probably missed breakfast. Mrs Grafton came back to mind, was it her I mused, was she the night walker?

At exactly 9 o'clock I entered the rose garden, the sun still shone but surely this perfect weather couldn't hold out much longer I thought. Thomas was late.

Maybe he'd changed his mind, even as I thought it as if to prove me wrong, he stepped underneath the wooden rose arch and into the garden.

Quickly he came across to me and for some reason I glanced up at the window of the tower.

Someone was looking down at us and from this distance I was sure it was the housekeeper.

'Abbey, I'm sorry I'm a trifle late, please sit with me on this bench for I have much explaining to do,' he said, waiting for me to sit down. Then he sat next to me and again my heart skipped a beat. 'To call you a fool was very wrong of me, but I was so concerned as...' Here he stopped.

'As what?' I coaxed him.

'I don't know if it's fair to tell you this, but I have suspicions about my cousin,' he admitted.

'Suspicions of what kind?' I asked.

'I'm unsure, Abbey. All I do know is that he has been seen with many of the young girls in the village and it is not for the want of romance. The subject is too delicate for your innocent ears. I was afraid that to bring Clara to the Hall would be foolish after her sister died here, but as it happened all went well and she is a charming child.'

'Then I forgive you, but I would like to say that I am not generally a foolish person,' I said, my head held high.

'And as for being a challenge, you are, but in the nicest possible way. My mother would have me marry Barbara Middleton, but it isn't what I need. Wealth and fine things are not for me. The scene I envisage is to love someone and to have that love returned, no matter what their position in life.

'Thank you for your explanation,' I said quietly, 'I am willing to accept it and forgive you.'

'Also I apologise for the compromising position I put you in the day you came to me in the long gallery, I could not help myself.' As he spoke I thought back to that day and could feel his hands stroking my hair.

'I'd quite forgotten that,' I lied.

'And one other thing,' said Thomas, drawing me to him, Will you make me the most fortunate of men and agree to marry me?'

9

This proposal quite surprised me and for some minutes I was lost for words, looking into Thomas' sparkling eyes I realised what a kind, endearing man he was and I truly believed he would be loyal. So much for Antony Kershaw's opinion that his cousin had many strings to his bow.

'Thomas,' I said quietly, taking hold of his hand. 'I am most flattered by your proposal, will you please give me time to think it over? And what would your mother say if we are to be married and where would we live?'

The questions tumbled from me one after another and Thomas placed his finger gently on my lips to silence me.

'So many questions, sweetheart. Fear not, for my mother will become used to the idea. After all she does like you and as to your question as to where we should live, at Tidwell if this would be suitable to you, for I love the place and cannot envisage living elsewhere.' Thomas squeezed my hand as he spoke.

'I would be happy to live at Tidwell, it is a beautiful dwelling, but will you wait a couple of days for my answer as this has come as a total surprise,' I pleaded.

'I shall wait with impatience and anticipation.' Thomas agreed.

We sat for some time talking and I mulled over whether to tell Thomas of the night-time visitor to the tower. I made a sudden decision for with love must come trust.

'Thomas,' I proceeded to say, 'do you know who it is that visits the tower in the early hours?'

'The tower?' he said, obviously somewhat taken aback at the question, 'Why no, I don't. Come, tell me about it for I am a good listener.'

So I told him about the steps on the stairway, the piercing scream and the shuffling sounds, 'Also,' I continued, 'quite by chance I looked in the room of the tower and all that is in there is a mirror.'

'I'm quite at a loss,' said Thomas, 'but the mystery needs solving for it is obviously some unhappy soul. May I come to your room tonight and maybe we could go to the tower room together? For I cannot bear the thought of some harm befalling you and I promise,' here he laid his hand on his heart, 'my intentions are honourable.'

We both laughed at this and I felt again the way I did on my visit to Thurston Abbey, this seemed so long ago, but yet in truth it was little more than a week. As we parted Thomas gently brushed my lips with his own. The fleeting kiss was like a feather caressing my mouth, it stirred emotions in me that I had never before experienced and at our parting I felt cheated, of what I could only imagine.

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That afternoon I read to Henrietta Kershaw again. Since the evening that I had been locked in my room the old lady had been sober towards me in manner and in voice even when she said, 'I'm told you are still dallying with my nephew.'

At these words I raised my eyes from the book I had been reading. 'You could do a lot worse and certainly no better than Thomas. What his mother will say if there is talk of marriage between you I dread to think. I'm not for it or against it, but you have spirit and the demeanour of a lady, and after all what is wealth? I have lived in this rambling house all my life and hardly stepped out of it, but it has brought me no joy. I wish you well, Abigail Sinclair.' Her words surprised me.

'Thank you.' I murmured and looking at her I felt compassion, after all it wasn't her fault that Antony's father had died. Also to have lived for years with a veil covering her face could not have been easy, especially when I recalled the portrait of her as a young woman in the long gallery.

As I opened the door of my bedroom I instinctively knew there was someone in the room. Cautiously I looked around the door and could see it was Alice. She was standing by the wardrobe, my blue dress over her arm.

'What are you doing?' I asked of her quite perplexed.

'I wanted to see how you'd stitched the flowers on,' she said quite calmly, 'and as you weren't about I didn't think you'd mind me taking a peek at it.'

'Well I do mind,' I answered, my brain working as I spoke, 'it was you wasn't it?' I said, realisation suddenly dawning on me.

'What do you mean?' she said, laying emphasis on the word *do*.

'*I* mean Alice, it was you who cut the flowers from my dress wasn't it?' I accused her, for I was sure I was correct in this assumption.

'Why on earth would I do such a thing?' she said innocently. This young woman was a very good liar.

'I have no idea why,' I said quietly, 'unless for some reason you are jealous of me.'

‘And why would I be jealous of you?’ she said with some sarcasm. ‘Who would look twice at you in your dour grey dress?’ At these words indignation rose in me.

‘That is very unkind Alice, you may as well just own up to it for I know I am right.’

‘You know nothing.’ she said sharply, her temper was rising and I knew I must remain calm.

‘What don’t I know, Alice? Tell me, for unless I know I cannot help you.’ My voice was level as I coaxed her for to shout now would achieve nothing. There was obviously some underlying problem with this woman, but I wasn’t to be given the chance to find out.

‘As if I’d tell you,’ she retorted placing my dress back in the wardrobe. She then brushed past me to the open door and turned back to say, ‘I wish you’d never come here.’

The words were spoken with such venom and ill feeling that I started trembling, unable to understand Alice’s dislike of me for she had seemed so friendly when I first arrived at Kerslake Hall.

For some time I lay on my bed, the curtains drawn as I had a headache. Henrietta Kershaw’s change of heart was on my mind, also Alice’s sudden dislike of me. Or had it been sudden I asked myself, maybe on my arrival she had befriended me to gain knowledge of my intentions and I recalled her saying ‘you’d not thought of marriage then?’ At this thought I sat up, who did she think I might marry, Thomas or Antony?

Which brought to mind her admission, ‘There is someone I truly love with all my heart.’ Could it be Antony Kershaw or Thomas she was in love with? This caused me to think again of Thomas’ proposal, he and his cousin had each accused the other of being a philanderer.

On the evening in the drawing-room I had been prepared to believe Antony Kershaw, now it seemed I believed Thomas, but who was right? I mulled it over for some time, it was little wonder I had a pounding head.

The fact that I’d seen Antony with Ann Anderson led me to believe he wasn’t entirely honest, for had he not spoken sweet words to me? I’d made my decision, it was Thomas I believed, but I did not get chance to think of his proposal of marriage for I slipped into a peaceful slumber.

Sometime later I was awoken by someone tapping on my door. I sat up and looked around me, the sun had moved across the sky, I must have been asleep for some time.

‘Who is it?’ I called out, getting up and drawing back the curtains.

‘It’s me Miss,’ said Maggie stepping into the room and closing the door behind her, ‘I was right worried when you didn’t appear at teatime, Miss.’

‘Please call me Abbey,’ I said to her.

‘You look awful, Miss Abbey,’ she said.

‘Do I really?’ I asked her with some dismay going to look in the mirror. My hair had partly escaped the pins and my face was white. I poured some cold water in the china bowl splashing my face with it and pinching my cheeks to bring back some colour to my skin, then I released my hair from the pins and started to brush it.

‘I’ll do that for you, Miss Abbey,’ said Maggie.

‘Thank you, but I’ll leave it now, it’s hardly worth rearranging it,’ I said looking at the clock which showed it was nearly nine o’clock. I must have slept for hours and felt quite hungry.

As if by magic Maggie said, ‘I brought you this from the kitchen, I put it in my pocket when Ada wasn’t watching.’ As she spoke Maggie produced some bread and cheese from her pocket.

I devoured it fairly quickly thanking her for thinking of me. What I really needed was a cup of hot tea, but eating had revived me and I was to be thankful to Maggie for little did I know then that it would be a long night.

‘You could come down to the kitchen and I could make you some tea Miss Abbey, it’s Cook’s night off.’ She said when I told her I needed a drink. So without thinking I followed her down to the kitchen, my long blonde hair falling in waves down my back. It was only when we encountered Mrs Grafton that I realised and suddenly felt very vulnerable in the housekeeper’s presence.

‘My mistress wishes to speak to you in her sitting room,’ she said, ‘I was on my way to fetch you. And what are you both doing skulking around the place at this time of night.’ As she spoke she looked at Maggie.

‘I’m going to make a pot of tea for us, Mrs Grafton.’ Maggie said with spirit, almost defying the housekeeper to stop us.

‘Then make it and get back to your room. As for you, Miss Sinclair. It will not do for you to walk around the house with your hair flowing behind you.’ As she walked away I almost giggled at her words. In fact Maggie and I did laugh like a couple of naughty children.

‘Please make the tea, Maggie, while I go and see what Mrs Kershaw requires of me, and I’m sorry I was irritable just now but I had just woken

up, forgive me?' I asked.

'Of course, Miss, I'll see you in the kitchen,' she said.

As I approached Henrietta's sitting-room I could hear raised voices, the door was slightly ajar and I heard Mrs Kershaw's voice.

'You will not marry her she is beneath you.' Holding my breath I waited to hear the reply.

Thankfully it was Antony and not Thomas who spoke, 'If I wish to marry Miss Anderson, you will not stop me. All my life you have domineered me and I have done your bidding, but over this I will not be moved,' he said emphatically.

'I forbid you to bring her to this house,' said Henrietta harshly.

'But it is my house, mother and I shall bring who I like here and that is my final word.'

As he spoke I scurried back along the corridor and joined Maggie in the kitchen for a cup of tea, all the while thinking that Henrietta Kershaw was losing her grip on this household, including the master, and he it would appear was to be married. Very obviously love was in the air.

Thomas kept to his word and came to my room at twelve-thirty that night. I'd had the foresight to tie back my hair with a blue ribbon. As I let him in he said, 'Fear not lovely lady for I come to your room with good intentions and only to assist you in solving the mystery of the tower,' and I laughed. The thought crossing my mind that he would make a good husband for he managed to cause merriment all the time.

At a quarter to one we sat together quietly on the bed waiting for the footsteps. No mention had been made of marriage and I felt quite despondent, then realised it wasn't really the right time to talk of such things. My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps. We both got to our feet and quickly made our way to the door of the tower being as quiet as possible.

Thomas held my hand, the corridor was silent and I fell a few steps behind him feeling quite nervous. The tower door was ajar and we gently eased it back so we could pass through.

The light of the candle from above lighting the stone steps before us. I lifted my skirts as I followed Thomas towards the curve in the stairway. It was then that the piercing scream came. Close to it was far worse than I'd heard it in my bedroom, I clapped my hands over my ears as I could hardly bear it.

When it stopped the sound of it still echoed faintly round the tower, Thomas moved forward and beckoned me on. We stood almost touching in the final step, with the woman in white before us her frame almost obscuring the narrow mirror.

Even as we looked she held the candle high and turned slowly around. I gasped when I saw the twisted face before us, it was then she saw us. I looked mesmerised by the pink scars on her cheeks and could see she only had one eye. I looked at the bright red rouge on the twisted mouth and knew without a doubt it was Henrietta Kershaw.

'So you've seen me now,' she said, a sob escaping her lips. 'Now what will you do, hate me more?' And the tears started to roll down her cheeks.

'We don't hate you, Aunt Henry,' said Thomas with compassion in his voice, and in that moment I was certain that I loved him.

'I've lived with this for thirty-five years. Some nights I just have to look at myself hoping that at some time I would find myself beautiful again, but I still see the same scars and my heart is heavy for I want the old me back.' As she spoke the candle wavered in her hand and Thomas gently took it from her and I could see that the old lady's hair was a beautiful silver grey falling over her shoulders. The more I looked at her the less I noticed her twisted face and could see the poor tormented soul that lay behind it.

'Come, Aunt Henry,' said Thomas gently, let me take you back to your room.'

'I will do that, Sir.' We turned around to see Mrs Grafton on the stairs, a candle in her hand and I could now understand her loyalty to the poor creature who stood in the tower.

'How did you know, Thomas?' His aunt asked of him.

'Abbey, I mean Miss Sinclair, has heard you most nights since her arrival,' he explained.

'And how is that, Abigail?' the old lady directed at me, but Mrs Grafton gave me no chance to answer.

'I put her in the room next to the tower, hoping she would succumb to it as the others before her and leave. I'm sorry, Mistress, but you don't need anyone else when you have me.'

'Jealousy is a terrible thing, Beatrice Grafton,' began Mrs Kershaw, then she turned her attention to me.

'Take heed of my words, Abigail, for they will stand you in good stead.' At her words my mind flew to Alice. Thomas took his aunt's hand and led

her to Mrs Grafton.

Before they descended the stairs Henrietta Kershaw turned back and looking at me said, ‘Value your beauty Abigail for one day it will be gone.’ With those words Mrs Grafton took her mistress back to her room.

I wept and Thomas gently laid my head on his shoulder smoothing my hair. I could see our reflection in the mirror, we were united and I knew that I not only loved him, but was destined to be with him.

Was it a shock for you also?’ I asked him when I’d calmed down.

‘Indeed it was, for I had never seen her face, I shall speak to Antony later and suggest that this mirror be removed for the only purpose it is serving is to distress my aunt each time she comes up here,’ he told me.

Later, back on my own in my room, I looked out of the window thinking of Henrietta, poor lady. The full moon glimmered on the lake almost dividing it in two. The beauty of it called me and against my better judgement I decided to walk around it and sit in the summer pavilion with my thoughts in the moonlight.

10

The servants' entrance was locked, but the key had been left in the door, I turned it gently although I knew that no-one was likely to be around at two-thirty in the morning. My only concern was that someone would lock the door again before I came back in, but I didn't intend to be long.

After the discovery Thomas and I had made in the tower I needed some fresh air before I tried to sleep. Thomas had gone back to the long gallery to finish some notes he was making.

Everything looked different at night and I could hear the hooting of an owl somewhere nearby on the moor. I could see the outline of the summer pavilion towards which I was heading. I stopped suddenly as I thought I heard another footstep on the path, but looking around I could see no-one was there. It had obviously been an echo of my own. I moved on marvelling at how the lake shimmered with white light, but in some parts seeming black and deep and mysterious.

I shivered, apprehension taking over me and I stopped again, uncertain of whether to go forward or to retrace my steps. I shivered again, but decided to proceed to the summer pavilion, for after all what harm could possibly befall me at this late hour.

A small area of grass surrounded the small building and I stepped noiselessly across the springy damp turf, my shoes feeling damp as I stepped on to what appeared to be a marble floor. In the centre of the floor was a small round table surrounded by four white intricately carved seats. I sat on one and realised it was made of some kind of heavy metal as it felt cold to the touch.

It was certainly a lovely spot as it commanded a view of the lake and the house which was outlined by the light of the moon. To look at Kerslake Hall from here on a quiet, warm, still early morning the building appeared tranquil and calm. I glanced at the tower and could hardly believe I had entered it with Thomas only a couple of hours before.

The whole episode now seeming unreal to me, I could heard the water lapping gently against the ground and shivered again as I thought of what had happened in its depths. Rising to my feet I moved out of the pavilion.

As I stepped on to the grass a figure loomed suddenly before me and my heart started racing, but I could see it was only Alice and my heartbeat

steadied itself.

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked, my voice quivering, for although a warm night I suddenly felt very cold and wished I wore a shawl over my shoulders.

‘I could ask you the same question.’ Alice’s voice was calm and as the moonlight fell on her face she looked almost ethereal as if she were made of alabaster.

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ I explained, ‘and the lake looked so beautiful tonight.’

‘Yes,’ Alice said dreamily, ‘it is rather lovely. I couldn’t sleep either and saw you from my window walking along the path so I thought to join you and apologise for my behaviour earlier.’

‘Thank you for your apology,’ I said, my voice quite steady now.

‘Shall we walk together back to the house?’ asked Alice in a quiet friendly manner.

‘Yes,’ I agreed.

‘Please could you walk next to the lake as I hate the water and cannot swim,’ she admitted.

‘But of course. For even though I can’t swim I have no fear of water.’ Were the words I spoke true I wondered as I looked into the lake’s murky depths.

We continued walking in what seemed like a companionable silence then the moon was hidden momentarily behind a cloud and I suddenly felt my whole body being pushed to the ground. Something caught my side and I suddenly realised we were at the spot where Phoebe had died and it was her plaque that had caused me such pain.

For seconds I couldn’t imagine what had happened to me, then I felt Alice push me further to the ground and I realised with horror that my head was hanging over the lake. I could feel the cold water seeping through my hair. I looked up at her unable to comprehend fully what was happening.

‘It’s you!’ I said foolishly. ‘You who murdered Annie and Gladys, but for what reason, and now why me?’ A sob escaped my lips and I felt Alice push my head under the water. She was strong but I was stronger, I fought against her hands and within seconds came out of the water, gasping and spluttering for air.

‘No-one will have him but ME!’ Alice screamed. She looked like a mad woman and all the beauty had gone out of her face.

‘Who are you talking about?’ I managed to gasp, my lungs near to bursting point.

‘The master of course!’ As she spoke I could feel her weight on my body. I just needed to take her off guard, get her to talk I thought to myself.

‘But I have no interest in Antony Kershaw,’ I said quietly, my strength suddenly returning.

‘Don’t lie!’ she screamed, ‘I heard you in the drawing-room together, he said you were lovely and he tried to gain an encounter with Annie and Gladys, I couldn’t bear that so I lured them here on the pretence that they could be a maid here at the Hall.’

Her grip on me was relaxing. I took my chance and pushed her off me with all my strength and scrambled to my feet. My legs would hardly run although I made the effort but Alice ran faster and caught at my legs pulling me off my feet once more. As she went to hold me down I rolled over and the next thing I heard was a splash in the water, horrified I could see Alice thrashing about in the lake.

‘Please help me,’ she called, ‘I can’t swim, I shall drown.’ I lay on the side of the lake and stretched out my arm to her, but she couldn’t reach it. Try as I might to grasp her hand it was to no avail. ‘It is deep,’ were the last words I heard from her before the lake enveloped her whole body.

I heard someone running on the path, suddenly I looked up into Thomas’s face and felt him gather me in his arms, when mercifully I slipped into unconsciousness. Maggie was the first person I saw on waking. She sat on a wooden chair, her anxious face looking down at me.

‘Miss Abbey, you’re awake,’ she declared with obvious joy, ‘you’ve slept for twenty-four hours, everyone is right concerned about you. I’ll just tell someone you’re awake.’

As Maggie left I struggled to sit up and realised I was in a large bed in unfamiliar surroundings. The horror of my tussle with Alice came back to me and I sank back again on the plump pillow. Oh Lord, I thought, I give thanks that I’m alive and what of Alice. This thought agitated me.

Maggie returned with Thomas, my beloved Thomas. He sat on the chair and reaching for my hand clasped it securely in his own.

‘Sweetheart,’ he said gently, ‘can you recall what happened?’

‘Only too well.’ I answered with a voice that didn’t seem my own. ‘Is that rain?’ I asked, for as I looked at the long window draped with red curtains I fancied I could hear rain splattering on the grass.

‘Yes it is my love, but think not of the weather. Can you tell me what happened?’ he asked stroking the back of my hand with his free one.

‘How... how did you know that I was by the lake for it was you who came to me, wasn’t it?’ I stammered, the full picture coming back in my mind.

‘I saw you walking with someone as I looked from the long gallery window, you were quite clear in the moonlight, then as the cloud overshadowed the moon I lost sight of you briefly and when the light returned I could see you both on the ground. Fearing someone had fallen in the lake I hastened down to you, but it was too late to save Alice,’ Thomas told me.

‘Is she dead then?’ I asked quietly.

‘Yes I am afraid so.’ He squeezed my hand as he told me.

‘She tried to kill me,’ I admitted, a sob escaping my lips. ‘She held my head underwater. She also killed poor Annie and Gladys,’ I told him, tears of relief streaming down my face.

‘That explains why your lovely hair was wringing wet, I must tell my cousin who is with the police at this moment. We did think there was something strange about it all. What possessed you to walk out at such a time?’ asked Thomas.

‘It was the moonlight, everything looked so pleasant, I thought the fresh air would help me sleep, but the lake will now only hold dread for me whether by sunlight or the silvery light of the moon.’ As I spoke I looked across Thomas’ shoulder and gave an encouraging smile to Maggie who looked quite worried.

‘Try to put it from your mind, Maggie will get you some hot broth while I speak to Antony.’ As Thomas left me he gave my hand a loving squeeze, but I knew that no matter how hard I tried the thought of that night would take a long time to fade from my memory. I would keep feeling my head under water and see Alice thrashing about in the cool lake.

When I was strong enough I got out of bed and with Maggie’s help went to look from the window, the sun was shining again and thankfully I was at the front of the building. I would have to leave this place as soon as I was able.

11

When that day arrived, I asked Maggie if she would kindly gather my things together in my valise for me, to which she agreed. I'd seen little of Thomas since the day I awoke, nothing had been said about his proposal of marriage and I was beginning to think I'd dreamt everything good and bad since I'd arrived at Kerslake Hall.

Maggie brought my packed valise to me, my best blue dress and petticoat over her arm.

'Two people have requested to see you,' she ordered, and so I did as I was bid, slipping the blue dress on and thinking of Alice as I did so, and how she'd cut off the silk flowers in a frenzy of jealousy.

'And who wishes to see me?' I asked Maggie, straightening the skirts of my dress and thinking how loose it was at the waist. I'd obviously lost weight, but who wouldn't after the ordeal I'd been through.

'Mrs Kershaw and Mr Craddock in that order, Miss Abbey,' Maggie told me as she brushed and arranged my hair on her insistence.

So I walked towards the main staircase at Kerslake Hall. As I reached the top of it I could see that I was on the opposite side of the long gallery. Seeing the door I went to open it and stepped inside looking at the paintings on the wall recalling how Thomas had loosened my hair that day which seemed so long ago.

I walked down to the portrait of Henrietta Kershaw and stood for some time looking at the lovely face which looked back at me and I thought of the old lady's words that night in the tower, 'Value your beauty Abigail, cherish it for one day it will be gone.'

As I made my way back to the door, I took a look through the squint in the wall and could see Thomas crossing the hall to what I now knew to be the drawing-room and in my mind could see Alice crossing the hall on that other occasion.

Alice, who had turned out to be a murderess. I shuddered at the very thought of myself lying under the still water of the lake and made my way back to the stairs, descending them slowly to the black and white hall below, the hem of my blue skirts brushing the carpet beneath my feet.

Tapping on Mrs Kershaw's sitting-room door, I recalled the day of my arrival and my employer's acid tongue. Since then in a few short weeks I

had learnt much about her and could forgive her.

‘Come in,’ called a much softer voice. I opened the door and entered the room, sunlight did not flood the room with its rays at this time of day so I did not feel at a disadvantage as I had on that other occasion.

‘You look well, Abigail. A little thinner it is true, but after all you have been through could any one of us be surprised.’ As Henrietta Kershaw spoke I looked at her, gone was the veil and she wore a cheerful red dress which suited her silver grey hair.

Like anyone else I would see through the scars and twisted face to see the person beneath. The woman I now looked at was far different to the sharp, bitter old lady who had been there before. ‘I thank you and my nephew,’ she continued, ‘for I have decided to make the most of my life and hideaway no longer.’

‘That is good to hear, Mrs Kershaw,’ I said honestly.

‘I understand you wish to leave us,’ the new Henrietta observed.

‘That is true, for after my experience at the lake,’ here my voice trembled, ‘I sadly cannot stay.’

‘I shall be sorry to see you go,’ said Henrietta, ‘for you stood up to me and helped me to see myself as I had become over the years, but trust me when I say you have a good life ahead of you and you’ve not seen the last of me, I promise.’

What she meant by this I didn’t know, but would no doubt find out soon. ‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘Come closer to me for I have something for you,’ said the old lady. I did as Henrietta bid and she handed me an emerald necklace and the box to go with it. ‘I want you to have this, for it was my mother’s.’

‘But Mrs Kershaw,’ I gasped, ‘I cannot take something so precious from you.’ As I spoke I looked at the sparkling gem at the end of a gold chain.

‘I insist you have it, there is a reason, and this is my gift to you. Be happy, Abigail.’ With these words I felt I was dismissed.

Walking along the corridor I placed the lovely necklace in its box. Maggie stood in the hall with my valise and some other luggage at her feet.

‘But that isn’t all mine,’ I exclaimed. ‘No Miss, it isn’t, but that’s not for me to explain. Mr Craddock wishes to see you in the drawing-room.’ Her voice was full of excitement and I was more than curious.

The drawing-room door was open, I pushed it wider still and could see Thomas standing by the fireplace, a bright sun streamed in and the room

seemed so different from that evening when I had sat in here with Antony.

‘You are better, sweetheart,’ Thomas said, coming across to me and shutting the door. ‘Can we now talk of love and marriage?’ he asked, his blue eyes twinkling at me.

‘Thomas I thought you’d changed your mind.’

‘Never,’ he replied, handing me a small box. Now, answer me, will you make me the most fortunate of men and agree to marry me?’ he said solemnly.

‘Yes, oh yes!’ I said, looking at him as I spoke and all I wanted to do was fall into his strong arms and feel safe for always.

‘Open it then,’ he urged, looking at the small green box in my hand and I realised it matched the one I held which Henrietta had handed to me earlier. On opening it I could see it held an emerald ring which was surrounded by a circle of small sparkling diamonds.

‘It is so beautiful, and matches the necklace your aunt has just given me,’ I enthused. ‘You are very obviously in collusion over this.’

‘We are indeed,’ he agreed, ‘the ring and the necklace were my grandmother’s.’ As he spoke he placed the pretty ring on my finger and kissed it. ‘So, our betrothal is sealed, and our love?’ he questioned. My heart was racing but not with fear this time but untold happiness.

‘Thank you so much, Thomas. I am the most fortunate of women.’ And we laughed.

‘One other thing, sweetheart. If it is favourable with you I am moving us to Tidwell today, along with Maggie, who implored that she be allowed to be your maid if you agreed to marry me.’

At his words I felt such happiness for I had become very fond of Maggie and to live in the peace and tranquillity of the cottage would be I was sure like residing in heaven.

The brougham was waiting outside for the three of us. Maggie was smiling as if she’d never stop, there was a spring in my step again and Thomas looked delighted.

As we drove out of the gates I looked back at Kerslake Hall and I knew I would never see the brooding lake again. But many times Emily would stay with us at Tidwell and Aunt Henrietta would visit, also Antony and Ann after their marriage.

As we stepped through the small wooden gate of Tidwell House, Mary Craddock stood under the roses at the doorway in greeting, while Maggie

carried my small valise up the path. Thomas drew me to him. ‘Welcome home Abbey, and I love you,’ he said.

‘I love you too,’ I murmured as we walked up the path together hand in hand and I knew that our lives were just beginning.

THE END

BOOK 7:
GYPSY HEART

Chapter 1

I stretched my arms above my head then pulled back the heavy yellow brocade curtains in my bedroom and looked at the pleasant May day scene before me. The sun was rising, casting a warm glow over the sea and lining the distant clouds on the horizon with a bright pink light that held the promise of a beautiful day. On the adjacent cliffs, with Monks Bay between us, I could see the imposing grey stone house of Treverrick, which in the early morning light appeared far softer and more tranquil than it would do in an hour or so, its many chimneys disappearing and at one with the sky. I knew that the white walls of our home, which I had shared with Aunt Phoebe and Uncle Zachariah since I was a baby, would also be bathed with a pink translucent light.

'Katherine,' my Aunt's voice called me from below the stairs. 'Please come down, we have something for you.'

I moved away from the window and checked my appearance in a full length mirror which stood on the dark polished floorboards in one corner by the window of my room. In the half light of morning, my dark wavy hair appeared darker still as it fell loosely around my shoulders, 'hair as black as a raven's wing', as Uncle Zac would often say in his quiet, gentle voice. My shining eyes were grey, set in an unblemished fair complexion apart from the small brown mole to the right of my nose. Stepping back, I ensured that my pale purple gown, with capped gathered sleeves and a skirt with an insert of lace falling to my feet, was tidy, for Aunt Phoebe was a stickler for perfection over dressing. She had insisted on us wearing purple in the morning as a sign of respect for Queen Victoria, who had died the previous January. I had often longed to run across the cliff in gay abandon, as many times I felt restricted by protocol. Little did I know that today, my life would be changed irrevocably and that I would soon be my own person.

Descending the narrow polished wooden staircase, I held my skirts so as to avoid tripping over them. The grandfather clock in the narrow hallway showed the time as five minutes to seven, as light started to filter through the long window alongside the heavy oak front door. It was all so familiar to me and I made my way instinctively to the large kitchen, with its long, well-scrubbed wooden table, which is where I was sure my Aunt and Uncle

would be. Before I reached the low wooden door, our maid, Aggie, stepped into the hall stopping me in my tracks.

'They ain't in there, Miss, for some reason they be in the parlour. I really don't know quite what's going on.' She sniffed and walked on, her blond curls bobbing beneath her white mop cap. She turned back to say 'Happy Birthday' as an afterthought as she climbed the stairs. Retracing my steps, I walked towards the low door at the bottom of the stairway, my hand on the round brass knob. I hesitated as I heard Aunt Phoebe's strong firm voice.

'It is only right that she should have it and that is an end to it, Zachariah Johnson.' At these words, all was quiet, so I entered the room. My Aunt and Uncle were standing at the table, which stood beneath the large window, the sun already casting a strip of light across the heavy oak dresser opposite, with the blue and white china standing as it had always done for as long as I can remember. Nothing had changed in twenty years, except that Aunt Phoebe had started to grey at the temples, her startling violet eyes fixed on me as I stood there, almost matching the purple gown she wore. Something was different today. I couldn't explain it, but a heavy atmosphere of uncertainty hung in the air. My dear Uncle shuffled from one foot to the other, the morning light shining on his bald head and rounded figure, while my usually confident Aunt wrung her hands in front of her with a nervous gesture.

'Many happy returns, Katherine,' she said walking towards me and embracing me. 'Well say something, Zachariah,' she said impatiently to her husband.

'I wish you Happy Birthday also, my dear,' he commenced, pausing to cough. 'We have something for you,' he continued, indicating with his hand an object, not large, not small, which sat on the table covered with a white tray cloth.

'Well look at it child, please,' said Aunt Phoebe with some impatience as I stood there looking from one to the other. Slowly I walked to the table and lifted the tray cloth from the object beneath. I gasped with delight. It was a rectangular box, but no ordinary box. I ran my hand gently across the beautifully decorated lid on which lay glazed porcelain pink roses with little rosebuds escaping each side to the edge. Each corner of the box was gilded intricately like lace with tiny hearts of pink porcelain interspersed here and there and on each side of the rosewood box was a small miniature decorated with richly coloured flowers.

‘Lift the lid, child,’ my Aunt encouraged. Slowly, I did as I was bid and could see the interior was as rich as the lid, lined with pink silk velvet, on which lay a string of creamy pearls with a diamond clasp and other small items, including a gold needle case. I looked at my Aunt and Uncle.

‘Thank you so much. I have never seen anything so exquisite and the pearls!’ I was overcome with the richness of the whole gift. ‘They are quite lovely,’ I enthused, lifting them from the box with trembling hands, attempting to place them around my neck.

‘Let me help you,’ said Uncle Zac, at last moving from the spot he had been transfixed to since I had entered the room. The pearls in place around my throat, I hugged them both and gently closed the lid of the box. The room was suddenly quiet, Aunt Phoebe breaking the silence.

‘Tell her Zachariah, go on,’ she urged in her dominant forthright manner.

‘Tell me what?’ I asked, somewhat confused.

‘The pearls are a gift from us, but they’re...’ Here he faltered momentarily. ‘The keepsake box and its contents are your birth right.’

‘What do you mean?’ I questioned, now more perplexed than ever.

‘It is an object handed down in the family and we thought that your twentieth birthday would be a good time to present it to you,’ Aunt Phoebe explained.

‘I see,’ I said quietly, not really seeing at all, but at that moment, looking at the delightful object on the table, I was just thankful that it now belonged to me.

‘Now that is cleared up, let us partake of breakfast together,’ my Aunt said cheerfully, suddenly seeming more herself, in truth, everything seemed normal again, even Uncle Zac who took my arm as we made our way to the kitchen.

‘The gypsies are back again, Mistress,’ said Aggie, as she placed the toast rack in front of us. ‘In the field behind Treverrick, they are,’ she continued, folding her arms and standing over us awaiting my Aunt’s reply. Aggie was older than me by nine years. She had been with us here at Northcliffe House for ten years. While her manner was abrupt, she had a good heart and was loyal.

‘It is the right time of year, Aggie, now continue with your tasks my dear while we finish breakfast,’ Aunt Phoebe said to her firmly and as Aggie did as she was bid, my Aunt turned her attention to me while buttering her toast.

‘We have another pleasant surprise for you, Katherine,’ she said quietly with a sparkle in her eyes.

‘Another, what is it, Aunt, please tell me?’ I exclaimed.

‘We are to dine at Treverrick this evening for it is Constance Trevartha’s birthday also and they are to have a small gathering in celebration. The invitation arrived last week while you were out walking. You can wear your new cream gown for the occasion.’ Aunt Phoebe didn’t stop for breath. ‘Daniel and Nicholas will be there my dear, now what do you say?’ she asked of me.

‘That is indeed a wonderful surprise, Aunt,’ I replied meekly, for while I had in the past, on several occasions, enjoyed afternoon tea at Treverrick, in their opulent drawing room, the thought of my Aunt’s matchmaking filled me with dread. I wished to find my own husband and should I remain a spinster, so be it.

‘Splendid,’ enthused my Aunt, ‘now I suggest you take a walk in the morning air and bring some colour to those pallid cheeks.’

Back in my bedroom I placed the keepsake box on my dressing table, once more admiring the beauty and perfection of it. I unclasped the pearls from around my neck and lifted the lid of the box to replace them on the pink silk, as I thought about my uneventful life so far.

I had learned to dance and ride horses, amongst other gentile pastimes, at the Academy for Young Women in Truro where I spent three years from the age of sixteen. While it was beautiful living here on the coast of Cornwall, where would I meet the husband I envisaged?

I could understand Aunt Phoebe’s desire to manoeuvre a match for me with a son of Treverrick, but today I would not think of such things. It was my birthday and I would go walking, a thing I loved to do for it gave me a sense of the freedom I craved. Gently I shut the lid of the keepsake box, vowing to discover its contents later.

My bedroom was not a large room, but comfortable none the less, the feather mattress on my small bed with the pale yellow crocheted cover inviting me each evening to snuggle down for the night. I had never spent a restless night in that comfortable bed. Little did I know that was all to change. Going to the wardrobe I took out the purple cape which matched my gown, draping it around my shoulders and tying the ribbon at the neck. Quickly I looked into the mirror, twisting my hair into a knot at the nape of

my neck and placing my purple and white bonnet on my head. I was ready to go, anxious to be out in the sunlight and breathing in the salty sea air.

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Stepping out of the door onto the path, lined each side by a lawn, I walked to the gate stopping to look out over the sea. The sun had risen higher and the water now appeared as a mass of sparkling diamonds. Walking to a field on the right I went to greet my brown mare Minnie, who hung her head over the gate, waiting for some show of affection as she did each day. I rewarded her with a sugar lump and then walked down the narrow path on the cliff, heading for Monks Cove. The tide was out at the moment, water lapping gently on the sand over the rocks, but in a couple of hours, the sandy cove would be swallowed up in a torrent of water and the waves would be pounding against the cliffs. Treading on the firm sand of the cove, I could see someone on the far side heading towards me. It was a man. I muttered an oath as I had wished to be alone, however I carried on walking, every now and then stooping to pick up pebbles and nonchalantly throwing them in the water. The stranger drew nearer and stopped about a foot in front of me. His hair was black as coal, curling around his neck and black glittering eyes surveyed me from a handsome tanned face. He wore a white blouson shirt open at the neck, which accentuated his dark skin. I didn't know what to say, my colour deepening as I realised that I was gazing at him boldly.

'Good morning, lovely lady, it is a glorious day.' He spoke in a rich deep voice.

'It is, indeed,' I managed to utter.

'And all the more glorious for me to have encountered you,' he said honestly.

'Why, thank you,' I replied, quite cross with myself for stumbling over a few simple words.

'May I be so bold as to ask you who you are?' he questioned, holding my eyes with his own as he spoke.

'You may be bold, Sir,' I laughed, feeling more confident by the second. 'My name is Katherine Johnson and I live at Northcliffe House,' I offered, waving one gloved hand in the direction of my home, which now looked like a white miniature house in the distance.

'Do you ride, Katherine Johnson?' the stranger asked suddenly, taking me by surprise.

‘I do, indeed. I have a lovely gentle mare called Minnie,’ I told him.

‘Then you shall ride with me tomorrow to Lands’ End,’ he instructed. ‘I shall meet you by the Chapel field at ten o’clock tomorrow morning. Let us hope for a fine day.’

Before I could answer, he had turned on his heel, retracing his steps leaving me wondering what had happened to me in such a short space of time. I didn’t want him to go and I felt lonely without him there. My desire was to run after him but decorum prevented it, then I realised I had not asked his name. For some reason he no longer seemed a stranger.

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All day thoughts of him filled my head and I knew that on the morrow, I would do as he had bid and ride with him for I longed to be in his company.

‘You are day dreaming today,’ Aunt Phoebe observed that afternoon, ‘but it is your birthday and you are no doubt looking forward to this evening.’ I hadn’t the heart to tell her that the last thing I wanted to do was dine at Treverrick that evening. All I wished to do was converse with the handsome stranger. Then the thought came to me that he may not keep our assignation, and hot tears pricked my eyes.

Reluctantly, I prepared myself that evening with Aggie’s help, my new cream coloured gown with a strip of pink roses on one side, slipped over my head and fell smoothly in place, the bodice decorated also with small pink flowers. Aggie arranged my dark hair with tendrils falling each side of my face and then she secured two pink flowers to one side of my head.

‘Just the pearls now, Aggie, thank you,’ I said, lifting the lid of the keepsake box, longing at that moment to look through the contents, but knowing I would have to wait until the morrow.

‘Miss Katherine!’ Aggie exclaimed as she clasped the pearls around my neck, ‘what a beautiful box, would that I had one like it.’

‘Yes, I am extremely fortunate, it is beautiful, isn’t it?’ I agreed, closing the lid once more. ‘Now I must meet my Aunt and Uncle downstairs, for I am sure they are impatient to leave,’

We walked to Treverrick, as no carriage would traverse the field we had to cross. It was a warm evening and as we walked I glanced down at the cove, thinking briefly of my meeting with the stranger that morning. Treverrick looked larger and more formidable, each step we took towards it. As we walked up the short drive, I stopped to look at the front of the rambling grey building which commanded a view of the sea, its leaded windows glinting

like a row of glowing candles in the light of the evening sun. Involuntarily, I shuddered thinking how I'd loathe to live here, I much preferred our cosy white house on the adjacent cliff, which from here, looked like a dolls house awaiting our return. We stepped into the vast stone flagged hall which appeared cold and uninviting, with suits of armour standing against the walls, seeming grey and harsh in the half light. The huge fireplace was cold and still and I shuddered again. The only thing with any appeal was the wide curving staircase with a polished banister and red carpet, almost beckoning me to the upper floor. Our capes removed and carried away by an elderly man-servant, we were shown into the drawing room by a young maid wearing a black dress and starched white cap and apron.

'Mr and Mrs Johnson!' a loud enthusiastic voice exclaimed. 'And young Katherine, although not so young now, indeed, a beautiful young woman and it is your Birthday as well as mine. How charming you look. Now let me introduce you to my sister Patience.'

The two virtues stood together, Constance Trevartha, once a Treverrick, overshadowing her shy retiring sister, who I believed was a Miss and had only lately returned to Treverrick. Constance wore a loud emerald green dress full of lace, ribbons and flowers of various colours, just as overpowering as the woman herself. Patience, on the other hand, wore a pale grey dress trimmed delicately at the neck and wrists with cream lace. She nodded her dark head in acknowledgement of us. The sisters were both surprisingly young, although I guessed Patience to be the younger of the two.

'Now Katherine, come and say hello to my two sons, Daniel and Nicholas, as you've not seen them much of late,' Constance said, leading me towards the two brothers who were standing to one side of the opulent marble fireplace. Everything about the room was full of splendour, from the rich maroon curtains at the windows to the sparkling crystal chandelier, which hung from the white decorated ceiling.

'Welcome to Treverrick,' said Daniel, who after the vibrancy of my stranger was insipidly handsome with a soft, silky brown moustache and a goatee beard, which matched his thin mousy hair. Nicholas however, had matured nicely and was more arresting. He had his mother's dark hair and was clean-shaven. He also possessed the smile of an angel. I smiled back at him, thinking that maybe I would enjoy this evening after all, when there

was a commotion behind me. The door burst open and a rich voice I recognised said good humouredly, ‘Forgive me for being late.’

I turned to face the late comer our eyes met across the room. It was none other than my stranger on the beach.

Chapter 2

‘Who was that young man?’ I asked Aunt Phoebe at breakfast next morning.

‘Which young man?’ my aunt replied, her toast hovering at her mouth but never quite reaching it.

‘The stranger,’ I queried insistently, knowing full well my aunt knew who I was talking about.

‘That is Kane,’ my aunt said, her toast being laid back on her plate. ‘He is a gypsy and I would ask that you have nothing to do with him.’

‘If I am not to have anything to do with him, why was he at Treverrick last night?’ I protested, ‘For the family seemed to welcome him with open arms.’

‘They welcomed him because he saved their son Daniel, a couple of years ago, from a watery grave,’ my aunt explained, ‘and now, each time the gypsies come and camp behind the big house, Kane is invited to take dinner with the family, but that does not mean that you can associate with him and that is my final word,’ she finished emphatically.

So what would my aunt think, I mused, if she knew I was meeting this handsome stranger this very morning? As I made my way to feed the hens in the back yard, I knew that I would not adhere to my aunt’s wishes. I scattered the corn from the galvanised bucket, which I held tucked under my arm, feeling suddenly very much alive and carefree. I’d even changed into my oldest pale green cotton gown, the skirts feeling cool around me for it was extremely warm already and not yet nine o’clock. I hummed as I distributed the seed, casting it over the patchy ground, the hens peck-pecking away and suddenly my bucket was empty. Swinging the handle over my arm, I looked out over the sea which shimmered in the early morning light, my mind on the handsome stranger called Kane, knowing that I could hardly wait to see him, see those black eyes which spoke to me even if his mouth did not.

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A short while later, I was astride Minnie, bareback, my senses acute, as I made my way to the Chapel field. I had heard Aunt Phoebe’s voice calling me.

‘Katherine, where are you going dressed like that and no saddle? Katherine!’ she shouted, but I chose to ignore her, for today, I would do as I wanted and not as I was bid. Kane was not there and disappointment surged through me. I could feel the May sun beating down on my forearms and at the neckline of my cool gown. I looked around me and even as I looked, I could see Kane riding towards me, at one with his huge black horse.

‘Katherine,’ he greeted me as he pulled his mount to a halt alongside me. There were to be no formalities with Kane and I welcomed it. Minnie trotted sedately alongside Thunder, as I’d learned Kane’s horse was called. I felt the breeze on my skin and in my hair, hair that was as black as Kane’s own. For the first time I felt free, away from stuffy drawing rooms and protocol. Kane and I needed few words between us as we rode in a companionable silence until we reached the clearing behind Treverrick.

‘Does the sight before you please you?’ Kane asked as we pulled up our mounts. What lay before us was a circle of four brightly painted caravans, with men and women sat on steps, the men smoking pipes and the women preparing what looked like vegetables, in the open air. A fire had been lit in the midst of it all, the pale plume of blue smoke spiralling gently towards the sky.

‘Yes,’ I answered him, ‘it does please me, for I have never seen such a calm scene before in my life.’

‘Would you like to meet my Mother?’ Kane asked, his eyes sparkling. I hesitated for a moment before replying.

‘Yes, that would be nice,’ I told him. We both reined our horses to a tree, me feeding Minnie a sugar lump and reassuring her as I whispered in her ear. Kane took my arm as if it were the most natural thing to do, and I gave no resistance as he led me over to the most brightly painted wagon where at the top of the steps, each side of the door, red and green scrolls had been painted, each bearing the names ‘Tessa and Jed’. As we got nearer, the woman looked up and smiled. She was beautiful, with coal black hair falling in waves to her waist. Although her teeth were yellowing, it did not detract from the dazzling smile she gave us as she stopped what she was doing and stood up to greet us.

‘And who might this be?’ she asked of Kane.

‘This, Mother, is Katherine and I shall marry her.’ His words took me completely by surprise and I felt the colour suffuse my cheeks.

‘There now, you’ve embarrassed the dear child, Kane,’ she said, taking my arm. ‘You really should think before you speak, Son,’ she admonished him.

‘I have thought of nothing else since yesterday,’ was Kane’s reply.

‘Take no notice Kate, and come with me.’ As she spoke, Kane’s mother led me up the steps of the wagon and the name by which she called me seemed so right I did not challenge it. The interior of the caravan was smaller than I’d imagined it to be, but furnished to perfection. Two beds, one above the other, occupied the whole back of the wagon where pristine white sheets, edged with the most exquisite crochet work, peeped over the top of woollen blankets. Everything was so clean and the woodwork highly polished. A glass cabinet held a delightful porcelain tea service, the pink cups embellished with pink roses, which caused me to think of the keepsake box and home. What would Aunt Phoebe say? I mused, taking in everything around me. The truth was, I didn’t care. Although I’d been happy all these years in the white house by the sea, I couldn’t help but feel as if I belonged here, and had waited for this moment all my life.

‘Do you like what you see, Katherine?’ said Kane from the bottom of the steps, interrupting my thoughts.

‘Of course she does, don’t you, Kate?’ said Kane’s mother. I don’t know what I’d expected from a gypsy encampment, but it certainly wasn’t like the picture I’d built up in my mind. Tessa, if indeed she was called Tessa, was dressed simply in a black poplin skirt with a white blouse open at the neck, which revealed her tanned skin. A black belt, interwoven with red and yellow flowers, encircled her tiny waist. So simple, yet so lovely, was my thought, as she led me back down the steps.

‘Here’s a knife,’ she said, handing me the small black handled tool, ‘you can help me peel these potatoes for supper, Kate,’ and as she spoke, I did as I was bid, sitting alongside her on the bottom step of the wagon. As I looked around, I could see that each caravan had high wheels with the main body of each wagon perched on top, but each one was as beautifully painted and carved as the other. As I looked, a man tossed a large piece of wood on the fire, sending the smoke even higher and the sparks flying around it.

‘Where do you draw your water from?’ I asked Kane’s mother.

‘From the stream over there,’ she told me, eyeing me with amusement and pointing to a small stream, which ran alongside the clearing. The potatoes done, Tessa picked up the bowl we’d placed them in and tucking it under

her arm, beckoned me to follow her. She led me to the caravan behind her own, where I could see a large cauldron pot sitting on the ground by the steps. It was already nearly filled with a variety of food. The young woman who sat on the steps, acknowledged me with a smile and my thought was that she had to be Kane's sister, for the resemblance between Tessa and this young woman was uncanny.

'This is my daughter, Maddy,' said Tessa, as if reading my thoughts and as she spoke, she laid the bowl of potatoes on the ground by the cauldron.

'Hello, Maddy,' I acknowledged the pretty girl. 'My name is Kate.'

'And our Kane has a wish to marry her,' added Tessa, who threw back her head and laughed.

'Why do you laugh so?' I asked her, quite put out by her merriment.

'Because Kane has never wanted to marry anyone,' explained Maddy, 'isn't that right, Mother?'

'It certainly is, but then, he's never before spoken of it either,' said Tessa seriously.

'And would you marry my brother?' asked Maddy. The question had me at a disadvantage, for I had only met Kane yesterday, but I trembled at his nearness and felt I had known him a lifetime already.

'I cannot answer that,' I said quietly, 'not for the moment at least.' The conversation was abruptly cut short, when a young man, who was obviously Maddy's husband, arrived with a pail of water.

'Is it ready?' he asked, nodding in my direction.

'We have yet to cut up the potatoes,' Tessa said, 'and please say hello to Kate.'

'Welcome,' said the young man, who I was later to learn was named Isaac. The three of us, Tessa, Maddy and I, set to cutting up the potatoes and mixing them with the other ingredients in the large pot and when we'd done, Isaac poured the contents of his bucket over the food and lifting the cauldron by its handle carried it to the fire, where the men folk set up a pole with a branch to hang the cauldron on where it was left to cook.

'Will you join us for supper?' asked Tessa.

'Thank you for asking me but I shall have to return home or Aunt Phoebe will worry as to where I am, if I am not there for lunch. On the morrow, I can visit again, if that is alright?' I asked.

'Don't leave it too long for we shall be moving on in a few days,' replied Kane's mother and my heart sank at her words, for I had not even thought

of them leaving, which they would do for sure, for they were travellers.

‘I shall return tomorrow,’ I promised.

‘Will you indeed?’ a voice said behind me, and I turned to see Kane watching the scene before him, a scene I already felt part of. His coal black eyes were sparkling and he held one strong hand out to me which I took willingly.

‘I have to go home,’ I told him as I felt his hand gently squeeze my smaller one.

Farewells were said and before I knew it, I was astride Minnie once more as Kane accompanied me to the Chapel field where we both pulled our mounts to a halt.

‘I can ride with you to your home,’ Kane offered.

‘It would be better to say farewell here,’ I told him, thinking of Aunt Phoebe’s words only a few hours ago, so we said goodbye and as I watched Kane and Thunder disappear in the distance, my heart ached but for what? Kane or the life in the encampment, or both.

The hallway was cool as I headed for the kitchen, unaware of time and wondering if I had missed lunch. As I opened the kitchen door, I could see my Aunt and Uncle were seated at the table, with Aggie hovering by the kitchen range. Aunt Phoebe stood up when she saw me.

‘Where have you been, young woman? Lunch is already late for we have waited for you, in vain it would seem,’ my Aunt berated me.

‘I apologise for being late,’ I said meekly, taking my seat at the table.

‘I’ve never known you so wilful,’ observed Aunt Phoebe as she continued, ‘and I thank you not to ignore me in future when I call to you. Your Uncle and I pray it is a solitary incident, don’t we Zac?’ she said, turning to look from me to my poor Uncle. ‘Please speak Zachariah.’

‘Let it be a solitary incident, Katherine,’ he pleaded, taking my hand and squeezing it, causing me to think of Kane.

‘There,’ said Aunt Phoebe, seating herself. ‘Now let us eat our lunch. Serve the soup, please Aggie, for thank the Lord, we are all here now.’ Aggie ladled the soup in the bowls and as she served mine, I could see her looking at me with sympathy in her eyes and I knew that in Aggie, I would have an ally.

The day lingered unbearably. My only thoughts were of Kane and his family, wondering if they were yet partaking of the meal I’d helped to prepare. I retired to bed early, pleading a headache, whereas all I really

wanted was to be alone with my thoughts. As I entered my room and lit the lamp on my bedside table, I spotted the keepsake box and decided to look through the contents. As I lifted it down, I could barely believe it was only yesterday my dear aunt and uncle had presented it to me. The glazed roses and rosebuds lay perfectly on the lid, looking as if they were ready to pluck. Where the light from the lamp fell, it looked as if they had been washed with raindrops. Gently, I laid the box on the table by the lamp and sitting on the bed, I inspected it more closely. It was a deep box and yet the interior had not seemed to be such. The intricate gilding carried on from the top of the beautiful box down each side of the lid and the base, all in the same theme of lace scattered with the tiny fragile looking pink porcelain hearts. The four oval shaped motifs on each side were edged with fancy gilding and each held a painted picture of a different flower. I looked at each in turn. The first was a red rose in full bloom and as I turned the box around, I could see pink dog roses, red daisies and blue forget-me-nots. All were beautifully crafted with vivid colours.

As I opened the lid it swung back resting on perfect brass hinges. I took the pearls and placed them gently on the table, then lifted out each item in turn. The first thing I held in my hand was the lovely slim gold needle case. Removing the top, I could see it held three sewing needles of various sizes. Putting the lid back on, I placed the case on my bed and took out the next three items in turn, which indeed, matched perfectly. There was a hair comb made of silver, decorated with tiny pink beads. The pillbox and tiny hand mirror were of silver also, with the same ornamentation. I placed each item in turn on the bed. A silver thimble was the next object I held in my hand and slipping it on my finger, realised with some amazement, it was a perfect fit. The last thing to lay in the exquisite keepsake box was a length of pink satin ribbon. I lifted it out and ran it through my fingers, to and fro, wondering all the while who this box had belonged to before me and reaching the conclusion that whoever it was, she was a lover of sewing, the pink ribbon a length not needed and so saved for another occasion.

Returning each item to lay once more on the pink satin, I then held the box with the lid open, still marvelling at its beauty. Closing the lid, I returned it to stand once more on my dressing table saying out loud, ‘who did you belong to?’, my thought being that I probably would never know.

I was thirsty, so I made my way back down the stairs just as the Grandfather clock in the hall was chiming the hour of ten o’clock. Opening

the kitchen door, I could see Aggie sitting on a chair by the fire, which burned in the black leaded range. All was still and quiet, a gas lamp burning on one wall, casting a soothing light.

'It's unusual to see you so late, Miss Katherine,' observed Aggie.

'It's a drink I'm seeking,' I told her and as I spoke, the woman got to her feet and poured me a glass of lemonade.

'If I may say so, Miss, I felt sorry for you earlier on today,' said Aggie. 'It must be frustrating for you to be so restricted each hour of the day.'

'It is indeed, Aggie,' I agreed with her.

'Where were you, Miss, if you don't mind me asking? I've never known you late before,' she said, taking her seat once more by the fire.

'If I tell you Aggie, please don't breathe a word to anyone,' and I took an impulsive decision to trust this young woman, for at least I would have someone to talk to.

'I promise, Miss, on my life, I do,' she vowed, and I chose to believe her.

'I was at the gypsy encampment,' I divulged, whether rightly or wrongly, I had yet to find out. Aggie didn't speak for a few minutes and I waited with bated breath for a response.

'If that's what pleases you, Miss, who am I to say anything against it?' the girl said. 'But remember, they'll be gone before you know it and without warning.'

As I lay in my comfortable, familiar bed that night, tossing and turning, I thought of Aggie's words and felt they were a caution. Then I thought of Kane and knew I would throw caution to the wind and wished with all my heart I was lying between those white sheets with the deep crocheted edge in Tessa's caravan.

Chapter 3

The next morning, still dressed in my purple gown with a white apron, my hair loose and tumbling down my back, I was collecting the eggs in a wicker basket when Aunt Phoebe called me.

'Katherine, please come indoors for we have a visitor.' Her voice was shrill and full of excitement and left me wondering who the illustrious visitor could be.

'I'll finish gathering the eggs first,' I shouted back to her and uttered an oath for I wished to be on my way to see Kane's family.

'You'll come now, please child,' Aunt Phoebe instructed and the tone of her voice would broach no argument so I did as I was bid. Going through the kitchen door I laid my basket on the table.

'They be in the dining room, Miss Katherine,' Aggie told me, so I walked along the hallway and could indeed hear voices as I approached the door, which was slightly ajar. The strange voice was a masculine one and my heart skipped a beat in case it was Kane, but the thought soon vanished, as I knew without doubt my Aunt would not entertain him in the dining room or the kitchen for that matter. As I entered the room, the sunlight obscured my vision momentarily and as my eyes adjusted, I could see it was Nicholas Trevartha sitting on the settle by the fireplace and my heart sank.

'Good morning Miss Johnson,' the visitor said rising from his seat and indicating that I should take his place, which I ignored.

'Hello, Mr Trevartha,' was all I said, for I did not wish to encourage this young man. He was handsome, right enough, but did not have the masculine charm of Kane in fact I felt nothing at all at the sight of him and in truth, wished him gone.

'I'll arrange for coffee to be brought in for us,' Aunt Phoebe suddenly said. 'Pull up a chair, Zachariah,' she instructed my Uncle, who immediately sat on one of the dark wood, high backed dining chairs and I realised that thankfully, my dear Uncle was going to be my chaperone. There was an awkward silence as my Aunt left the room and I decided to sit on the settle, as I felt conspicuous hovering near the doorway. I realised, that this was not a good move when having seated myself Nicholas sat beside me.

‘What brings you here, Sir?’ I asked of him, looking him straight in the eye and all I could think of was escaping to make my way to the gypsy encampment.

‘I’ve come to ask if you would do me the honour of walking out with me,’ Nicholas explained, just as my Aunt came back into the room, with Aggie close at her heels, carrying a large tray laden with a coffee pot and cups and saucers.

‘Now, isn’t that nice of the young man?’ Aunt Phoebe cajoled me as she sat on another dining chair. ‘That will be all, thank you Aggie, you may leave us,’ my Aunt told an intrigued Aggie, who I could see was loathe to go. ‘Well answer the young man,’ urged Aunt Phoebe and I knew I had to be honest.

‘I am flattered by your request, Mr Trevartha, but at this moment, I will have to say no,’ I commenced and noticed that my Aunt looked aghast at my reply, the silver coffee pot in mid-air as she berated me.

‘Katherine, how could you be so rude? I really despair of you these past couple of days. I feel sure if Nicholas had asked you a few days ago, you would have agreed to his charming request.’ As she spoke, I knew that my Aunt’s words were true.

‘I am so sorry,’ I said rising to my feet, ‘but I am not feeling quite myself today, if you will all excuse me please,’ and I lifted my skirt, fleeing from the room and as I hurried along the corridor to the kitchen, I could hear Aunt Phoebe’s voice calling me.

I rushed past a bewildered Aggie, out into the open once more, my heart pounding as I headed for Monks Cove, practically running. I realised that I was indeed running away from all that I had known and loved, heading for the unknown and who knew what, but Kane and his family, in those brightly painted wagons, were the only thing I could think of and it dawned on me that to be with them was all I desired.

Walking across the beach, and breathing in the tangy salt sea air calmed me, and I realised that I still wore my white apron. This realisation caused me to throw back my head and laugh, my black hair still flowing down my back to my waist. It was a glorious day, the sun shining on the sea, with a heat haze in the distance, which hovered over the water on the far horizon. The sky was a deep blue, with here and there, tiny white fluffy clouds scudding across it. It was indeed, a perfect morning.

I looked to the other end of the beach, but today there was no handsome stranger walking toward me. I felt a great sense of disappointment, but I would walk to the clearing behind Treverrick and once again be completely carefree and alive. As I reached the edge of the encampment, a small dog bounded towards me and sat at me feet and I bent to fuss him, stroking his head. He was mainly white, with small black patches here and there and very appealing.

'Domino!' one of the men called to him, and he bounded back as I made my way to Tessa and Jed's caravan. As I reached it, Tessa appeared at the top of the steps.

'Kate!' she exclaimed. 'So you've returned and I guess you wish to see my son. He is with his Father, collecting kindling and will, no doubt, be pleased to see you. In the meantime, will you share a coffee with me?' This request caused me to think of Aunt Phoebe and the silver coffee pot and I felt a pang of guilt, which quickly passed. Tessa and I sat, this time, at the top of the steps, drinking coffee from tin mugs and it was good, good to be in the open air.

'Katherine,' a voice called and I knew straight away, it was Kane. He appeared at the bottom of the steps and my heart bounced so hard in my chest, I thought Tessa would surely hear it. 'You are a wonderful sight to behold, even with your pinafore on,' and he laughed, just like I had on the beach.

'Hello, Kane,' I managed to utter.

'You could not keep away then,' he observed.

'It would seem not,' I told him.

'Do not be so bold with the girl,' Kane's mother chided him, 'you will frighten her away.'

'Never!' said Kane emphatically. 'She is one of us now, aren't you, Kate?' At these words, I didn't quite know what to answer, so I said quietly, 'I do love it here.'

'A good answer,' Kane observed, 'would you like to walk with me and Domino?'

'I would indeed, but have no bonnet to wear and don't wish the sun to burn me any more than it has already,' I told him.

'I have a straw bonnet you can borrow, Kate,' offered Tessa and as she spoke, she got to her feet and went into the caravan, coming out a minute later with a wide brimmed straw hat which was decorated with colourful

flowers of blues, reds and yellows. We had some merriment as I tried it on. It fitted perfectly and would keep the midday sun from my face.

'So you will walk with me, Kate,' so saying, Kane put his hand out to me and I negotiated the steps toward him, taking the hand he offered.

'It will be a delight to walk with you and Domino,' I told him. As we walked past the fire, which burned gently in the clearing, I noted a red haired man bending over, stacking small pieces of wood behind one of the wagons. As I watched, he stood up straight, stretching his back.

'So this is the *gorgio*,' he said, somewhat gruffly to Kane.

'This is Katherine, Father,' Kane told the man who looked nothing like my companion and whereas Kane was tall, his Father was no taller than myself. I looked at Kane saying,

'What does he mean by a *gorgio*?'

'It is our language for a non gypsy girl. Don't take too much notice of my Sire's gruff manner, for he means no harm,' Kane said gently, but I could not help feeling alarmed at the man's manner and what seemed like hostility.

'I take it you are going walking?' Jed said, bending once more to stack some logs.

'We are taking Domino with us,' said Kane, whistling for the small dog to follow us. As we walked hand in hand, which seemed strange but pleasant to me, for I was more used to taking a gentleman's arm. I could see the horses grazing on the grass behind the clearing and then we stepped into a small wood where the sun fell intermittently between the trees. We walked in silence, except for the snapping of twigs beneath our feet, while Domino ran on in front of us, barking as Kane threw him a stick to fetch. As we stepped out of the small wood, we found ourselves in a meadow. The grass was quite long, but we followed a path, which had been formed by many feet walking this way. All I could see were red poppies growing in abundance all over the meadow and I felt so happy and carefree I laughed out loud and caused Kane to stop walking.

'Why do you laugh, Katherine?' he asked in a serious tone.

'Because I am deliriously happy,' I told him, squeezing the hand which held mine and having explained, we walked on.

'Turn back and look behind you,' urged Kane as we reached the far end of the meadow. I turned and realised we had walked up quite a steep incline, although it had not seemed like it at the time. The view behind us was

delightful, red poppies swayed in the summer breeze and I could see the wood and almost behind it, the grey walls of Treverrick, which served to remind me of Nicholas' visit this very morning and a cloud suddenly passed over my happiness.

'You are not so happy?' Kane queried, a worried tone in his voice.

'Of course I am,' I told him gaily, 'for what more could I want than the sunshine, summer breeze and to be walking with you?'

'What more, indeed,' Kane said, smiling once more and we walked on for what seemed no distance and yet we walked over field after field, until we could see the sea behind us, as calm as a millpond, appearing golden in the sunlight.

'We must turn back, Katherine, for we have walked quite a distance,' and as he spoke the words, I realised how hot my feet were and how I longed for a drink. As if reading my mind, Kane drew from his pocket a bottle filled with water and handed it to me. The liquid quenched my thirst and I handed the glass bottle back to Kane who drank also, just as a butterfly flew and hovered around us.

'It is a Red Admiral, Kate,' said Kane who had obviously seen the butterfly and my interest in it. 'See, it is black with a vivid flash of orange-red and a splatter of white spots.' Even as he spoke, two more started to encircle us, wending themselves in and around us.

'It is like a butterfly dance,' I said to Kane, entranced by the movement of the butterflies and as I spoke, Kane unexpectedly put an arm around me and twirled me around on the spot as we danced as one with the three Red Admirals. I was breathless when we stopped, but even more breathless at Kane's words.

'Marry me Katherine, my little one.'

'My Aunt and Uncle would never allow it,' I told him sadly.

'We can marry at the camp tomorrow,' said Kane insistently.

'I cannot without Uncle Zachariah and Aunt Phoebe's permission,' I told my suitor.

'Then I shall ask them, for that is the thing we do, us travellers,' he told me.

'And where will we live?' I asked, practicality suddenly taking over.

'In our own *vardo*,*'* Kane told me.

'And what is a *vardo*?' I asked him, quite perplexed.

‘It is the gypsy word for caravan, little one,’ and Kane laughed as he spoke, pulling me toward him, the butterflies resuming their dance around us and I was suddenly happy and carefree again, as we whirled around in the field, with the sea in the distance and the sun high in the sky and Domino racing around us.

As we walked back, hand in hand, our footsteps quicker than they were, we derived a plan that Kane would come to Northcliffe House that evening and ask Uncle Zachariah for my hand in marriage, but I knew in my heart, that Uncle Zac would not give his blessing for such a union and then what would I do, I asked myself, not wishing to tell Kane my fears, but he had sensed it, for he said, ‘If your Uncle will not agree, will you marry me anyway?’

I had to stop and think before I answered and weigh up all the facts and the fact was that I wanted nothing more than to marry Kane and share his life travelling the country, carving wooden pegs for a living and weaving baskets, and what if Uncle Zac wouldn’t give his consent? At this thought and in answer to Kane’s question, I stopped in my tracks amongst the poppies.

‘Do you believe in love at first sight?’ I asked of Kane.

‘I do now,’ was his answer. ‘If you’d have asked me a week ago, I would have said no.’

‘Then let us marry without any consent,’ I suggested passionately, ‘for once the deed is done, it cannot be gone back on.’ Little did I know then of the hurdles that would present themselves to us, Kane and I.

‘If this is what you really want, but I would feel happier if I asked your Uncle,’ Kane admitted seriously.

‘No,’ I said emphatically.

‘Very well,’ agreed my future husband and he pushed the straw hat back from me face and bent to kiss me briefly on the lips, a kiss which was like the touch of a butterfly.

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There was great excitement amongst the women of the camp. Tessa and Maddy both hugged me and danced around me with the other two women, who were older, but still very agile.

‘And what will you wear?’ asked Maddy.

‘I shall wear my cream coloured skirt and orange short sleeved blouse,’ I said, thinking of the Red Admiral butterflies, ‘and I’d like a circle of

poppies in my hair.'

'Perfect,' said Tessa clapping her hands.

'And what of a priest?' I asked, thinking now of more practical things.

'We don't need a priest,' said Kane's voice behind me.

'No priest. Then who will marry us?' I said, somewhat aghast.

'We marry ourselves, in front of everyone here,' explained Kane, 'but first, we both jump over a besom made of flowering broom and then, after we have made our vow to one another, we share and break the cup of love.' At Kane's words, I must have looked crestfallen, for Tessa put an arm around me.

'If you are to be one of us, Kate, then you will need to abide by our way of life.' She said kindly.

'But of course,' I agreed, smiling once more.

'No good will come of it, bringing a *gorgio* into the family,' said a gruff voice and turning, I could see it was Jed and I gave him a dazzling smile, at which, he watched me for a moment, and went off on his business.

It was agreed the marriage would take place at twelve noon and as Kane walked with me to the Chapel field, my feet sore from all the walking we had done, I gave some thought to what I was doing and had a brief niggling doubt, but then, looking at Kane's handsome face, I knew that I did not wish to go back on my word and after all, it was I who had urged him not to ask my dear Uncle's permission but surely, I thought, when the marriage was done, nothing could break it.

Aggie was in the kitchen when I walked through the door as I sank myself into the chair by the range.

'Whatever ails you,' said Aggie, concern in her voice, 'you look worn out, Miss Katherine, and I have to warn you that your Aunt isn't well pleased that you missed lunch.'

'I am just tired, Aggie, for I have been walking and I have had nothing to eat,' I told her.

'Have you been with those gypsies again?' said Aggie, glancing at the closed door before she asked the question, but I had no chance to reply as Aunt Phoebe burst through the door from the hallway.

'Have you lost all your sense of decorum and time, young woman?' she said addressing me as I sat wearily on the chair. 'Your hair is loose and looking as if it needs a good brush and your dear face burnt from the sun.' My Aunt suddenly softened her voice. 'What is wrong with you, child,

please tell me. Is it a young man?' At my Aunt's words, I was so tempted to tell her the truth, but I spotted Aggie frowning at me in warning.

'I'm sorry, Aunt Phoebe. I have walked so far,' I explained with a half-truth.

'Get Katherine a bowl of warm water for her to soak her feet in and a sandwich please, Aggie,' my Aunt instructed and then looking at me she continued, 'and I suggest that tomorrow you stay home and rest for you look fair worn out.'

Later that evening, in my room once more, after spending a couple of hours helping Aunt Phoebe mend some sheets while Uncle Zac polished the boots, I set to wondering where I would sleep tomorrow night and rumblings of doubt flickered again through my mind. As I looked around my familiar room, I questioned as to what I was about to do tomorrow was right. My eyes alighted on the keepsake box and I knew I would have to take it with me. What else? I asked myself. I would need clothes and how could I possibly take it all with me tomorrow? There was only one answer. I would need to come back after the ceremony and enlist Aggie's help. The thought of the ceremony caused me again to question what I was doing, but then Kane's handsome face and gentle lips came to mind and any doubts I had vanished. Falling into a blissful slumber, my thoughts were of Kane and the beautiful butterfly dance.

Chapter 4

I was awoken late next morning by a tapping on my door and as it opened I could see it was Aggie with a tray laden with tea and toast.

'Good morning Miss,' Aggie said to me. 'Mistress said not to expect this every day.'

'What time is it?' I asked as the girl put the tray on my lap and drew back the curtains. As she did so, I could see with some amazement that the sun was already quite high in the sky and I made to remove the tray and its contents but Aggie stopped me.

'No Miss, you eat your breakfast and drink your tea while you tell me what is going on,' she said with some authority in her voice.

'What time is it Aggie?' I repeated the question.

'It is nine o'clock, or thereabouts,' she answered.

'Nine!' I exclaimed, 'I should be feeding the chickens.'

'Your Uncle is doing it,' Aggie told me, 'now what is going on? For I know there is something afoot and whatever it is, you can't hold it to yourself, so tell me,' she urged. I drank the tea and took small bites of toast, mulling over as to what I should tell this young woman and then I made a sudden decision.

'I am to marry today,' I told a stunned Aggie.

'Marry!' she exclaimed. 'What do you mean, Miss Katherine?'

'I am to marry Kane today in a gypsy ceremony,' I explained further.

'But Miss Katherine, you surely cannot do this without the Mistresses' knowledge,' our maid said, obviously aghast at the thought.

'I can and I will Aggie, for it is what I desire,' I told her honestly.

'Then I'm coming with you. You will need a familiar face for certain,' Aggie offered, at which words, I didn't know what to say.

'But I don't wish to get you in any trouble, or lose your position here at Northcliffe House.' As I spoke, I realised it was the first thought which came to mind.

'No one will know unless you tell them, Miss, for it is my afternoon off and if we walk together then your Aunt will not be suspicious,' she replied.

'Thank you Aggie, I accept your offer and be sure, I will not breathe a word of your involvement in this,' I assured her.

Aggie left with the tray after we had arranged to leave the house together at eleven thirty, telling Aunt Phoebe we were going for a walk to Monks Cove. I scrambled out of bed and poured some water from the pitcher into my china wash bowl, the orange flower decoration causing me to think of the butterflies. It strengthened my resolve, as I thought of Kane holding me close and whirling me around in the sunlight.

Slipping into my pale orange blouse which was adorned with white lace on the bodice, with small buttons at the front which did up nearly to the neckline and the short puffed sleeves decorated also with the lace, I thought to myself, I am preparing for my wedding. When the cream coloured skirt was in place, I then secured a cream belt around my waist which accentuated my small waistline.

Looking in the mirror at the result, I gasped, for with my hair loose, I looked every inch a gypsy and not a gorgio. To rectify the matter, I decided to tie my hair back in a knot at the nape of my neck leaving the top of my hair flat so that the poppy circle, which Maddy was making, would sit comfortably on my head. Before leaving my room, I looked out of the window at the familiar view I had seen each morning on waking for nigh on twenty years and a tear escaped my eye and just as quickly, Kane's face appeared in my mind and the sadness I'd felt for a moment was gone.

Far better, I told myself, that I married someone I loved, than share the rest of my life with someone, just for the sake of marriage and security, which is what my dear Uncle and Aunt would have me do. I took one last look at the sea and the blue sky, hardly believing that so much had changed for me since the morning of my birthday. As I walked past my dressing table, I took a glance at the keepsake box, vowing to return for it later. I picked up a small brown reticule and placed a lace edged handkerchief in it. At the door, I turned back for one last look, then making my way down the stairs and stepping into the hallway, I could see that the grandfather clock showed the time of quarter to eleven.

'Your Aunt and Uncle have gone over to Treverrick,' Aggie told me as she joined me in the hallway.

'What time do they intend to come home?' I asked, quite alarmed by this piece of information, as I knew that Uncle Zac and Aunt Phoebe may see us walking towards the clearing at the back of the big house.

'About twelve, Miss, so we'd best leave now,' suggested Aggie and I could see that she was out of cap and apron and wore a delightful pale blue

cotton dress, the material of the skirt falling gracefully to her feet.

'If we are both ready, then your suggestion is a good one,' I agreed. We made our way swiftly to Monks Cove, for once on the beach, we would not be observed, but on reaching the cove, I could see, frustratingly, that the tide was already in, the sea thundering against the rocky coastline beneath us. We both stopped in our tracks.

'The tide,' I whispered, more to myself than Aggie, 'I should have thought of it earlier. We shall need to walk across the cliffs, there is nothing else for it.' So, Aggie and I set off across the cliffs, me afraid all the while, that my Aunt and Uncle would see us and my plans would be thwarted, but safely at the edge of the clearing, I breathed a sigh of relief, sure now that all would be well.

'Who is this?' Jed asked gruffly looking at Aggie, as we stood in front of the caravan.

'It is my maid,' I told him, my voice strong, as I looked him in the eye.

'Maid,' Jed scoffed. 'Once you are wed to our Kane, you will no longer be needing her.'

'I am aware of this,' I responded to his unkind manner, 'but I thought to have someone of my own to witness my marriage.' At these words, Kane's Father flung his head back and with hands on hips, laughed uncontrollably.

'What's up, Jed?' asked the familiar voice of Tessa as she appeared at the top of the steps.

'Nowt,' her husband answered her, walking off towards the stream, a pail in one hand.

'What has amused my husband so?' Tessa asked of me, coming down the steps. She looked beautiful today, was my thought, as I looked at her. She wore a full skirt of many colours, red being the prominent one, with a white lacy blouse, a red belt at her waist, which boasted a silver buckle and a red crocheted shawl across her shoulders. Her hair shone in the sunlight, the black waves cascading down her back, with large gold hoops decorating her ears.

'It would appear he is amused because I wished Aggie to witness my marriage,' I told her, bringing Aggie, who looked quite bemused by all of this, forward to meet Kane's Mother.

'Take no heed of him,' advised Tessa, 'he hasn't a romantic bone in his body that one,' she told me, just as Maddy appeared with a headdress of poppies.

‘Will this do you?’ she asked, smiling at her handiwork.

‘It is perfect,’ I assured her. ‘Thank you so much. May I try it on?’

‘No,’ interrupted Tessa. ‘It is to be placed on your head just before the ceremony.’

‘Where is Kane?’ I asked, looking around.

‘He is in the wagon getting dressed for the occasion,’ Maddy told me and even as we spoke of him, Kane appeared at the top of the steps. My heart missed a beat at the sight of him and any doubts I may have had vanished as I looked at him. He was dressed in black breeches with a white open necked shirt over which he wore a colourful waistcoat of many colours.

‘So,’ said Kane. ‘My delightful bride has arrived, thank heaven.’

‘I have indeed,’ I responded, my voice quavering with emotion. Kane had agreed only yesterday, that he believed in love at first sight and so did I. My whole being was full of love for him and to be united with him in marriage was all I desired.

‘And who might this be?’ Kane asked, reaching the bottom of the steps and casually encircling my waist with his arm.

‘I am Aggie, Sir,’ spoke our maid for the first time, for she had been silently watching the scene before her.

‘Aggie is indeed our maid and also a good friend to me,’ I explained to Kane, ‘and she has come to witness our union.’

‘Welcome, Aggie,’ Kane said in a friendly tone, so different to his father. ‘Now, if we are all ready, let us proceed.’

‘Just five minutes,’ interrupted Maddy, ‘for we need to place the poppy circle on Kate’s head.’

‘Very well,’ agreed Kane. ‘While you do what you have to, I shall gather everyone together.’ With Tessa and Aggie’s help, Maddy secured the poppy headdress on my head, fastening it with grips.

‘There,’ said Tessa. ‘Let us have a look at you,’ and the three of them stepped back to survey how I looked.

‘You look every inch a bride,’ offered Aggie.

‘She does, indeed,’ agreed Maddy, ‘and the poppies match her blouse perfectly.’

‘Are you ready?’ Tessa asked me and as she spoke, I could feel myself trembling with anticipation.

‘Yes,’ I said nervously and so saying, the three of us walked to the far end of the clearing, Tessa’s arm through mine. As we reached the gathering

awaiting the marriage ceremony, it was a sight to behold. The men folk all wore colourful waistcoats like Kane and the women, colourful skirts and shawls. In the centre was the bough of yellow, flowering, fragrant broom. All was silent as I took my place beside Kane. As I reached his side, Kane took my hand and looked at me, his dark eyes sparkling and I smiled up at him.

'You look captivating,' were his words and I knew he meant what he said. It seemed Jed was to oversee the ceremony as he appealed for everyone to be silent.

'You are both to jump over the flowering broom and then plight your troth to one another in your own words and all here, will witness your giving of one to another.' Kane looked down on me.

'Are you ready, little one?' he whispered.

'I am indeed,' I told my handsome husband to be, never envisaging, at that moment, all the problems which would thwart us along the way.

'Lift your skirt up a little,' called Tessa and I did as she suggested, gathering my skirt up at the front in one hand, then with the other hand in Kane's we jumped over the beautiful yellow broom together, after which, standing facing each other Kane made his vow to me, his beautiful eyes looking into mine.

'I plight my troth to you, Katherine, with love and a promise that I shall care for you the rest of our days. May we be happy and blessed with children. This is my pledge to you.' At his words, tears sprung to my eyes and then it was my turn and I realised, with some dismay, I had not given a thought to what I was to say, so I let my heart guide me as I spoke almost in a whisper.

'I too, plight my troth to you, Kane, in the presence of all here. My heart will always be full of love for you, as it is today and I pledge myself to you completely, on this our wedding day.' I had almost whispered the words, but knew that every one of them, as Kane's had been, were true.

'Now,' said Jed, 'take this to the stream and collect some water,' he said to me, handing me a pail. So doing as I was bid, I went to the stream and bent over, placing the bucket in the cool water, which trickled over tiny pebbles and slowly, entered the pail. I lifted it out and took it back to the waiting circle of people.

'Pour some into this cup,' instructed Jed and I did as I was bid, noticing it was one of Tessa's porcelain cups with roses on. When I'd done, Jed took

the pail from me.

‘Now both drink from the cup,’ called Tessa and as Kane and I did as we were bid, the people present, all started to gently clap. We linked our arms, Kane drinking first and then myself, looking into each other’s eyes.

Kane suddenly dropped the cup to the ground for I could hear it smash to smithereens beneath us. I was quite alarmed by this, but realised it was part of the marriage ceremony.

‘We have exchanged vows to one another and each drunk from the cup of love and are now united for ever, as man and wife,’ said Kane, as he stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. The clapping got louder and one of the women shouted ‘Kiss your wife,’ and everyone else took up the chant. Kane smiled at me and tipping my chin upwards, bent and kissed me on the lips, his mouth hovering on mine, as gently as a butterfly’s wings. I responded to his kiss and everyone shouted ‘Congratulations!’ in unison and I was somehow separated from my husband, everyone hugging and kissing me, including dear Aggie who had tears running down her cheeks.

‘Kane is a very handsome man and a very gentle one,’ Aggie whispered to me, her arms around my neck. ‘I wish you both happiness’ then Aggie was gone and Kane took my arm, leading me into the small wood.

‘I need to talk to you, little one,’ he said, stopping beneath a tree where sunlight filtered through the branches, shining on both of us, which I deemed as a sign of good luck.

‘There is nothing wrong?’ I questioned, suddenly afraid.

‘No nothing, I assure you,’ said Kane, tilting my chin up so I was looking at his face. ‘It is just that you will need to go back to your home for a few days while I negotiate for a new vardo for us.’

‘But I had thought to be with you,’ I said, tears springing to my eyes.

‘Do not be upset, Katherine, for I love you. We are now husband and wife and I have your interests at heart. I would not want you to endure sleeping in a tent,’ Kane explained.

‘Will it be long?’ I asked him, tears starting to trickle down my cheeks, ‘for I cannot bear to be without you.’

‘It will take but a week or two and then we shall be together, I promise. Now dry your tears,’ he said, gently brushing them away with the back of his hand.

‘Very well,’ I agreed, for what else could I do?

As Kane and I walked back to the clearing hand in hand, I could hear a lively piece of musing being played, on what must have been a fiddle. As we drew near I could see it was Jed providing the music, and the gathering of my new colourfully dressed family, including Aggie, were dancing, the women lifting their skirts above the ankles, their feet swiftly moving on the spot to the music. Tessa spotted us.

'Come Kate, join us,' she said taking my hand and drawing me into the circle. Watching the others, I gathered my skirt up, my feet starting to keep time to the vibrant music, and I felt at once invigorated, happy and in love all at the same time. The dance came so naturally to me, and as the men folk joined us we stepped around each other, the men clapping their hands in rhythm with the sound coming from Jed's fiddle. As the music stopped I collapsed laughing and breathless into Kane's arms.

'Now for some refreshment,' suggested Tessa.

We all sat in a circle on the ground around the slowly burning fire. Tessa and Maddy handing us all a crystal goblet containing a reddish brown liquid. I could see Aggie on the other side of the circle accept a glass and continue talking to the older couple, laughing at something the still handsome man said to her. I was so happy and then the thought of parting with my husband momentarily marred my good spirits just as Jed said, 'Raise your glasses to Kane and Kate, may they be happy for an eternity.' As he spoke, all present lifted their goblets and then drank, Kane and I doing likewise. The pleasant liquid slid smoothly down my throat, warming my whole mouth and lips as I drank.

'What is it?' I asked Kane.

'Dandelion and Burdock wine,' he answered. 'Do you not like it Kate?'

'Of course I like it, Husband, it warms my soul as you do,' I told him. After a brief interval, in which time Kane and I laughed together and snatched small, brief kisses amidst our gaiety, we ate food from the cauldron on porcelain plates with silver forks. The concoction of food was delicious and with the wine, warmed my whole being. Suddenly I felt delightfully sleepy, leaning against Kane's shoulder I gently kissed his neck, snuggling up to him as he slipped his arm protectively around me. I felt safe and loved at his very presence, having no doubt in my mind that today I had done the right thing by becoming Mrs Kane O'Brien.

While the other women, Aggie included, washed the dishes in the stream, Kane and I stepped up to Tessa and Jed's vardo. As my husband held me

close in his arms, me entwining my arms around his strong neck, I looked around at the perfection of the interior of the caravan and could hardly wait for Kane and I to have our own home, for home it would certainly be. As we stood together for some time, our arms around each other, Kane suddenly moved me from him, bending towards me, his mouth seeking mine I knew this was farewell for the time being at least.

All too soon it was time to go, go back to Northcliffe with Aggie and leave all this behind, but if Kane was true to his word, in a couple of weeks we would be together forever. We parted with Kane whispering sweet words of love in my ear and asking me to be patient, but my heart ached at leaving him and I told him so.

'My heart aches, also,' was his reply, 'but what is a couple of weeks compared to a lifetime?' and I knew his words to be true and I tried to be happy, but as he kissed me farewell, I had an irrational foreboding that our life would not go as Kane and I planned.

Aggie and I left the encampment, turning around every now and then, to see Kane raising his hand in farewell, his beautiful waistcoat standing out above all else together with the thought of his lips on mine.

'Thank you, Aggie,' I said to her as we approached the whitewashed cottage.

'I enjoyed it, Miss and I am so pleased I came with you,' she told me, 'and Miss,' she whispered as we approached the side door, 'if there is anything I can do for you and Master Kane, please tell me,' at which words I squeezed her arm.

I went straight to my bedroom, asking Aggie to plead a headache for me. I'd reluctantly removed the circlet of poppies before I left the encampment and given it to Maddy for she had made it and as I lay on my bed, my head filled with the words Kane and I had spoken that day, it felt as if it was all a beautiful dream and that I was not truly married to Kane, whom I loved with all my being, but I had to cling to the thought that we would soon be together and I would nestle in his arms again.

With these positive thoughts, I fell into a peaceful slumber, only to be awoken by a commotion downstairs. I could hear someone banging at the front door and Aunt Phoebe's voice calling to Aggie to answer it, but of course, it was Aggie's afternoon off. I quickly jumped off the bed, tidied my hair and smoothed my skirts then made my way to the hall. Aunt Phoebe was already opening the door as I stepped into the hallway.

‘Can I help you?’ I heard her say.

‘I need to speak with Kate,’ a voice said and one that I recognised with some alarm, as Maddy’s.

‘There’s no Kate here,’ said Aunt Phoebe with some indignation as she made to close the door, but running towards her, I stopped my Aunt by catching hold of her arm.

‘What are you about, Katherine?’ my aunt said sharply.

‘I think the young woman is asking for me,’ I told my bemused Aunt.

‘She asked for Kate,’ my Aunt said, ‘and you are, always have been and always will be, Katherine.’

‘I know, but some do call me Kate outside of the house,’ I explained to her and as I spoke, Aunt Phoebe opened the door wider and I could indeed see Maddy standing there, a shawl draped over her head.

‘Kate,’ she said urgently, ‘you must come.’

‘Whatever is wrong?’ I asked, concern in my voice.

‘Your husband has had a fall and he is asking for you,’ Maddy told me, at which words, as I tried to catch her, Aunt Phoebe fell to a faint on the floor.

Chapter 5

‘Fetch the smelling salts, please,’ I instructed Aggie, as the girl came into the hallway to see what was amiss. By this time, I had raised Aunt Phoebe’s head onto my lap and I could see she was starting to come around. When Aggie arrived with the smelling salts, I passed the bottle to and fro beneath my Aunt’s nose and before many seconds, she raised her head and looked at me.

‘What shame have you brought on our house, Katherine?’ she half whispered as she struggled to her feet. I realised the front door was still open and Maddy still stood on the doorstep.

‘Please come in,’ I told the young woman.

‘You would ask a gypsy into our home, Katherine?’ my Aunt said as she got to her feet and made to close the front door in Maddy’s face, but I put a restraining hand on my Aunt’s arm.

‘Please, Aunt Phoebe, let the young woman in for she is my sister-in-law,’ I implored her.

‘I do not understand any of this,’ my Aunt said, making for the dining room, ‘but have your way and come to me with an explanation,’ she added wearily. Maddy stepped into the hallway and I closed the front door behind her.

‘What is wrong with Kane?’ I asked her with some urgency.

‘He fell from the top of the caravan steps and banged his head as he fell,’ Maddy told me.

‘Is he badly hurt?’ were my next words, my heart pounding in my chest.

‘He was drunk and probably never felt a thing, but since he came round, he has done nothing but ask for you and was insistent that if I didn’t fetch you, he would come here himself.’ I was bemused at Maddy’s story, for Kane seemed fine when Aggie and I had left. This thought caused me to think with some alarm, of Aggie and looking around, I could see she had disappeared.

‘Why was he drunk?’ I asked stupidly.

‘Because,’ said Maddy, ‘he didn’t want you to leave him.’

‘But he insisted I did. If it had been my decision, I would have stayed,’ I said emphatically, and now Aunt Phoebe knew of my betrayal of her trust and as I thought it, unwilling tears trickled down my cheek. Was it a

betrayal, I asked myself, just as Aunt Phoebe called to me, ‘Where are you, Katherine?’

‘We must go to her, if you are willing,’ I told Maddy.

‘I shall come to support you, for it won’t be easy,’ perceived Maddy and I realised, with a sinking heart, she was doubtless right. As we entered the dining room, I could see Aunt Phoebe sitting on the settle, a handkerchief at her nose. I pulled two of the dining chairs out from under the table for Maddy and I to sit on. The whole scene took me back to earlier that day, when Daniel Trevartha had sat on the settle and I wasn’t married to Kane. Had it really only been a few hours ago, I asked myself? I noticed Maddy had removed the shawl from her head and had placed it around her shoulders.

I smiled at her, just as Aunt Phoebe spoke.

‘What have you to say for yourself, Katherine?’ she asked, her voice strong once more and authoritative.

‘I am in love, Aunt,’ I told her, my voice as strong as hers.

‘And what does a young woman of your age, know of love?’ Aunt Phoebe said, derisively.

‘I know what I feel for Kane,’ I answered her. ‘I felt it the instant I looked at him.’

‘You talk in riddles, child,’ my Aunt told me, ‘and because of this instant love, you decided to marry him and not in front of a priest, I’ll be bound, but if you had, the marriage would be illegal, for you would have needed our permission as you are under the age of twenty one.’

‘No, not in the presence of a priest,’ I admitted, ‘but a wedding ceremony nonetheless, as real to me and as sacred, as if I had wed in the village church.’ By now, I felt my voice rising and realised that I was angry, angry that anyone, including my Aunt, could doubt the love Kane and I had for one another, a love that was as real as the poppies which grew in the meadow.

‘So you went against my wishes, as I did not want you to associate with this Kane,’ my Aunt said harshly.

‘It’s probably because you told me not to have anything to do with him, that I didn’t tell you,’ I told her honestly, ‘for fear of what you would say.’

‘I’d rather you had told me and I could have put a stop to it, before you married in the wood,’ my Aunt retorted.

‘But I have married him and need to go to him for he is asking for me,’ I said.

‘If you are wed, then why are you still here, Katherine?’ My Aunt’s question was a good one and I had no ready answer for it, but Maddy answered for me.

‘Kate is here because my brother, Kane, has to negotiate for a caravan of his own.’

‘So you are to spend the rest of your life living in a caravan and travelling the country in all weathers, after all we have taught you and for all the care we have bestowed upon you, this is how you treat us, your Uncle and I? I could weep, Katherine,’ my Aunt said, rising to her feet.

‘So I can go?’ I said, rising to my feet also.

‘No, Katherine, you cannot, I forbid it. Now go to your room and until you are over this *love*, as you call it, you will not be allowed beyond the gate, on your own,’ Aunt Phoebe said, with the usual authority in her voice, ‘and be thankful that your Uncle is at Treverrick playing cards, for he need never know, nor anyone else for that matter.’

‘You cannot do this,’ I pleaded with my Aunt, hot tears stinging my eyes and threatening to fall, because of all I had envisaged, it had not been this.

‘I can do this, for I am your guardian and you are under the age of twenty one and I have a duty to save you from this foolishness, for that is all it is. Now go to your room and I shall show this young woman out, so she can take the news to her brother, that you are to have nothing more to do with him,’ at which words, Aunt Phoebe took hold of my arm and steered me out of the room and towards the staircase. ‘And if your brother,’ Aunt Phoebe said, addressing poor Maddy, ‘should attempt to come here, he will be shown no kindness. Tell him to stay away from Katherine and Northcliffe House.’

Back in my room, I flung myself on the bed and sobbed. A short while later, I heard a key being turned in the lock. Swiftly, I got off my bed and ran to the door. Turning the doorknob, I shook the door, but to no avail, I was locked in, probably for the night. There was nothing to do but try and get some sleep and devise a plan for tomorrow. I got ready for bed, thinking all the while of Kane and the loving words he had spoken to me only this afternoon and before I fell into a restless slumber, I vowed to see Kane on the morrow, but next morning came and I realised it would not be as easy as I thought, to slip away.

On reaching the kitchen for breakfast and taking my place at the table, Aunt Phoebe said, ‘You and I are to walk to the village this morning, Katherine.’ My heart sank at her words.

‘Very well, Aunt, after I have fed the chickens,’ I agreed amenably.

‘You are to no longer feed the chickens,’ Uncle Zac told me, ‘for your Aunt has some notion you should be pursuing more feminine pastimes.’

‘But I love that job,’ I said aghast and looked at Aggie, but she gave nothing away although her eyes were on me all the time.

‘No,’ said Aunt Phoebe. ‘We need to groom you for marriage, hopefully, to a Trevartha. Daniel is, no doubt, keen on you and your Uncle and I would ask that you walk out with him, as he requested yesterday.’ These words were like a dagger in my heart and Aunt Phoebe was very calm about everything this morning and I grasped that she had had all night to work out a plan to keep me away from my beloved Kane. I made to object to this but stopped, thinking that maybe, to go along with my Aunt, would in the long run, give me a better chance of escape, a better chance of freedom and being with Kane.

‘Very well,’ I told my Aunt, ‘I will walk out with Daniel, but I can’t promise that anything will come of it.’

‘Give it time, child,’ she told me, looking me in the eye, ‘for time is needed for love to blossom, isn’t it, Zachariah?’

‘You know about these things, my dear,’ said my poor Uncle, ‘for love is women’s work.’ At these words, Aunt Phoebe looked at him with a look like thunder.

‘I want you to stay in the kitchen with Aggie while I get changed,’ my Aunt instructed me as she got to her feet, ‘and then we will go to your room and decide what you are to wear. Come Zac, for you are to feed the hens.’ I was thankful when they were gone, for I needed to speak to Aggie.

‘Do you see what my Aunt is doing to me?’ I whispered to her.

‘I do, Miss Katherine and my heart goes out to you, but what can be done? The Mistress asked me this morning, if I knew of what you were up to yesterday,’ the young woman said, with worry in her voice.

‘Don’t worry, Aggie, I shall say nothing of your involvement, as I promised you,’ I told her, ‘but I need you to go to Kane and tell him I love him and he must wait until I can free myself from Aunt Phoebe.’

‘I will go, Miss, when you are all out and I’ve done my jobs around the house,’ Aggie agreed, ‘for I can see how much you and Kane love each

other. Would that I could find someone to love me,' she added, dreamily.

'Thank you, Aggie,' I said ecstatic at the thought that Aggie was my link to Kane, who was, no matter what Aunt Phoebe would have me believe, my husband.

'I knew you would see sense,' said Aunt Phoebe, as we looked through my wardrobe for a suitable gown to wear.

'Please don't lock me in again, Aunt,' I pleaded, 'for I promise I will not leave the house at night.'

'Your promises mean little to me anymore, young woman,' at which words, I felt a pang of guilt, 'but I will not lock the door this night if I am sure I can trust you. We will do some sewing this evening, and start to stitch you a nightgown towards your trousseau, for I have a bale of white lawn cotton, which will be perfect. You will not retire early to bed, but go when I do and I shall come in and say goodnight at no given time.' Her words served to make me realise how seriously my Aunt viewed this predicament I had caused for her and also served to make me aware that there would be no easy escape from Northcliffe House without a chaperone. I felt a spark of joy at this thought, for surely, in a day or two, my Aunt would trust me to walk with Aggie to Monks Cove. Yes, I would work towards this plan. As much as I disliked deceiving my Aunt and Uncle, my love for Kane was more important than anything I had ever had in my life.

After dinner that evening, I was anxious to see Aggie alone and fervently prayed my Uncle and Aunt would leave us, if only for a moment. As she served dinner, Aggie kept looking at me and smiling encouragingly, which led me to believe she had met with some success at the encampment, which made me long, even more, to know. As Aunt Phoebe rose from the table, I said quickly, 'May I help Aggie with the dishes please Aunt?'

'You may, for half an hour, while I arrange things for our sewing. It will, at the very least, keep you occupied,' she agreed and I felt myself tremble with anticipation. When alone, I had no need to ask Aggie, she was bursting to tell me.

'I've got a note for you, Miss Katherine, from Kane himself.'

'And how is he after his fall?' I asked anxiously.

'He has a bump on his forehead, but nothing more,' Aggie told me.

'The note, please, Aggie, for I shall burst if I do not see it.'

Aggie fumbled in her pocket, retrieving the message from Kane and saying, 'Should anyone come in Miss, hand it back to me the moment you

hear the rattle of the door.'

'I will, I will,' I agreed and as Aggie pressed the paper in my hand, I realised I was trembling. Going over to the window, I unfolded the piece of white paper and read.

Dear wife,

I shall return for you soon as promised. Be comforted by thoughts of the butterfly dance and dream of only me, as I shall dream of you.

Your Husband,

Kane.

I re-read the words several times, tears dropping from my cheek to my lips, feeling like the gentle touch of Kane's kiss.

'We must hurry or your Aunt will return,' Aggie coaxed me and re-folding the precious piece of paper, I handed it reluctantly, back to her.

'Please place it under my pillow when you have a chance, will you Aggie?' I asked her.

'Yes Miss, I will for you,' she agreed.

'And Aggie, I'm hoping, no praying, that my Aunt will allow me to walk with you in a couple of days, to Monks Cove,' I told her.

'Let us hope so, Miss,' she replied, squeezing my hand.

A couple of days passed, days filled with walking with Aunt Phoebe to the village and taking afternoon tea with various genteel ladies and in the evenings, stitching my new nightgown. My Aunt did not lock my bedroom door again and I did not betray her trust by slipping out of the house in the moonlight, but on the third day, at breakfast, I had to broach the subject of walking with Aggie.

'I have a desire to walk to Monks Cove Aunt, for I miss my daily visit to the beach,' I said quietly.

'You know I cannot allow it,' said Aunt Phoebe, firmly.

'But surely, if I walked with Aggie as a chaperone, you would have no objection,' I coaxed, after which, there was a pause and I could see my Aunt was unsure as to what answer to give and then she said.

'I don't see why not, if you have Aggie with you,' she agreed. Such was my joy at her answer I got to my feet and kissed my Aunt on the cheek.

'Thank you,' I told her, suddenly feeling free once more.

'You won't mind, will you, Aggie?'

'No, Miss,' the girl said, 'we shall go when I have tidied up.'

Back in my room, I practically danced with delight at the thought of my forthcoming walk with Aggie, at the same time feeling the pang of guilt. But no, I said to myself, feel no guilt, you are being held like a prisoner, when all you want is to be with the man you love. I prepared myself carefully for the walk, nothing too elaborate so as to prevent my Aunt from having any suspicions. I dressed in a pale pink gown of cotton, which near the hem boasted a panel all around, of small white daisies with sprigs of pale green leaves. The elbow length sleeves were decorated in the same fashion near the edge. Looking in the mirror, I could see, thankfully, that I wasn't overdressed and thought I would wear my small straw bonnet to keep the sun from my cheeks, which caused me to think of Tessa and the lovely straw hat she had lent me on a day, which seemed so long ago now. I tied my hair back into a knot at the nape of my neck and I was ready. Before leaving my room, I hid the note from Kane in the keepsake box, under the small silver hand mirror, praying it would not be found. Stepping into the hall, I placed the straw bonnet on my head, just as Aunt Phoebe came from the kitchen.

'You look charming, Katherine,' she complimented me. 'Let us hope you meet Daniel on your walk and by the way, we are invited for dinner at Treverrick tomorrow evening, child.'

My Aunt's words would normally have filled me with a small dread, but today, I was bursting with happiness inside, so I kissed her on the cheek and said, 'I shall look forward to it Aunt.'

'There, you are already your old self again, thank the Lord,' was her reply, 'and hopefully, there will be no more talk of marriage and love, except with a suitable beau.' Her words caused me to feel another pang of guilt, which swiftly passed as Aggie came into the hall and we set off for Monks Cove. As we stepped outside, I went over to Minnie, my faithful pony and gave her a sugar lump.

As we walked through the gate, I heard my Aunt call from the doorway, 'Please be back in time for lunch, young woman.'

'I will,' I called back to her, raising my hand to wave.

As we reached Monks Cove, I breathed in the sea air and stretched both my arms in the air, for at last, I was free.

'The tide is out, Miss,' said Aggie.

'It is indeed,' I told her with gaiety in my voice as I linked my arm through hers. We walked along the sand, lingering to throw pebbles into the

calm sea as small waves chased each other to the shore. Aggie and I started a game as to who's pebble would go furthest to sea, among much laughter as Aggie won.

'We best go on, Miss Katherine,' suggested the young woman and agreeing with her, we walked arm in arm, from the beach toward the encampment, laughing as we went, but our laughter turned to dismay as we caught sight of the clearing. We both stopped in our tracks, looking at each other and both running towards it, stopping at the edge. Tears of frustration ran down my cheeks, for the clearing was empty, apart from a pile of ash from where the fire had burned. No caravans. No dog. No fire and no Kane.

'Don't take on so,' said Aggie, placing her arm around me. 'He said he would return for you.'

'I know,' I sobbed, 'but when? When?' and I repeated the word over and over.

'He'll be back for you, you know it,' said Aggie. 'Think of the note he wrote to you.'

'You're right,' I said, calming down. 'Please walk with me, Aggie, through the meadow.'

'But of course, Miss,' she said and as we walked through the clearing, all sorts of memories whirled through my mind, brightly painted vardos, Kane's laugh, us holding hands as we walked, then, as we passed the spot where we jumped the besom of flowering broom together, I thought of Kane's words, '*I plight my troth to you*' and I stopped to say, 'He surely would not desert me, Aggie.'

'No Miss, he would not, for if I ever saw love on someone's face, it was his,' she assured me, and so we walked on through the wood, the sunlight every now and then falling upon us, just as it had that day for Kane and I and as we stepped out of the wood on to the edge of the meadow, my heart ached as I looked at the bright orange poppies swaying gently in the mild summer breeze, which brought to mind the headdress of poppies Maddy had fashioned for me and another lonely tear slipped out of my eye onto my cheek below.

'It is very lovely,' commented Aggie, 'and I can see now where Maddy got the poppies from.' We walked together along the well-trodden pathway until we reached the top of the incline and I turned back to look. The view was the same as the other day, the wood, the grey walls of Treverrick, but no gaily painted wagons and my heart lurched with disappointment.

‘We should go back,’ urged Aggie quietly, ‘for if we are late for lunch, Mistress won’t let us walk out together again.’ There was sense in the words Aggie spoke, but I needed to walk to the next field.

‘Just a little further,’ I urged ‘then we will head back.’ At the top of the next field, we could just see the sea in the far distance, a sparkling blue in the morning sunlight. I stopped and Aggie did likewise, then we headed back to the poppy meadow, me thinking all the while of Kane, in my mind, seeing his white blouson shirt open at the neck, his tanned skin and coal black hair, but above all, his almost black sparkling eyes looking down at me. As I thought it, a red admiral butterfly flew around me, fluttering slowly round and round, transporting me back to that magical day of the butterfly dance, when Kane had asked me to marry him. I reached out to the butterfly and it landed fleetingly on my hand and then resumed its dance around me. I had a curious thought that Kane had sent it to reassure me and amongst the poppies, with the butterfly around us still, I sobbed in Aggie’s arms when I should have been laughing in Kane’s.

Chapter 6

‘Don’t look so solemn,’ said Aunt Phoebe to me as we were getting prepared to go to Treverrick the next evening. ‘You have been quiet all day.’ I looked in the mirror at my gown, a dress of peach, the skirts of which swirled around me as I moved. Two panels of peach lace had been inserted cleverly in the skirt and the bodice fashioned to appear as if a short sleeved jacket was worn over it. How I wished I was wearing it for Kane.

‘Speak to me Katherine,’ urged Aunt Phoebe.

‘I cannot go to the big house this evening, or any evening,’ I told my Aunt. I had been thinking about it all day and at the last minute, realised that I could not agree to walk with Daniel, for I was a married woman and bound to Kane, in body and spirit.

‘I despair of you, child. I take it this is all because of the gypsy Kane, who you would have me believe is your husband?’ my Aunt said, the disdain she felt all too apparent in her voice.

‘It is because of Kane,’ I admitted quietly.

‘I wish you to get this nonsense out of your head now!’ Aunt Phoebe admonished me.

‘I cannot Aunt. I am sorry, but I love him,’ I told her, for what seemed the hundredth time.

‘How on earth can you love someone you hardly know and think that you are married to him? It is too preposterous for words,’ she berated me.

‘Whatever you say will alter nothing. You very obviously do not understand.’ My voice was firm as I spoke.

‘Understand?’ My Aunt repeated. ‘Understand what, exactly, that you are married to a gypsy? After all your Uncle and I have taught you about what is right and what is wrong, I cannot believe that you are putting me through this, Katherine. It is as if I were in a nightmare and cannot wake from it.’

‘I am sorry,’ I began.

‘Sorry?’ my Aunt interrupted. ‘If you were sorry, child, this would all be forgotten, but I can see it is not. I am going down to ask your Uncle to proceed to Treverrick without us and give apologies for our absence, yours and mine and then we are going to have a talk, young lady,’ with which words, she left my room, leaving me on the brink of tears.

But no, I thought to myself, I will not give her the satisfaction of seeing that I am upset. I walked over to my dressing table and lifted the lid of the keepsake box, which for some reason calmed me. I would like to have reread Kane's note, but knew I had not the time, so slowly I shut the lid, just as I heard my Aunt call to me.

'Come down please, Katherine, this minute.' Knowing there was no escape, I left my room and made my way down the stairs to see my Aunt standing in the hallway below, waiting for me.

'We will go into the drawing room,' she said unexpectedly, for this room was normally only used for special occasions and Christmas celebrations. I followed my Aunt through the door and shivered on the threshold, for the room was cold and uninviting without a fire burning in the large black leaded fireplace. Everything was still and unreal, from the settle and armchairs of green coloured velour, to the large glass fronted china cabinet which held all my Aunt and Uncle's treasures, things which were never used, such as the porcelain dinner service, decorated with brightly coloured flowers and butterflies. At this thought, I had a pang of sadness as I thought again of Kane and our butterfly dance.

'Sit down please Katherine, I am not an ogre,' said my Aunt impatiently, so I went over and sat on the edge of one of the armchairs and looked at my Aunt. She wore a pale grey dress, the skirts boasting a small train. Black velvet ribbon hung in a bow from the bodice and a jacket of the same material finished the outfit off, with short sleeves decorated with white muslin flounces. Until my birthday, I had looked up to her, but now realised that she was a very harsh woman and had never showed me any affection. At this moment, I despised her, for her total lack of understanding.

She sat in an armchair opposite me and began, 'Are you not happy here?' It was a question which I thought unfair, but strived to answer honestly.

'You know as well as I, Aunt Phoebe, that I have always been happy here with you and Uncle Zac. I acknowledge that you have always been good to me and given me a good home, but,' here I faltered.

'But what, Katherine? Please go on, for I am interested to know how you feel,' my Aunt said in her domineering voice, a thing which had never irked me before, but now jangled at my nerves.

'But,' I continued, 'there would have come a time and fairly soon, when I would have married and left Northcliffe to live with my husband. It is the normal way of things.'

‘But this, young woman, I’m sure you will agree, is far from normal.’ Her voice got louder with each word and she looked at me with eyes of steel.

‘Have you ever really loved anyone?’ I asked her suddenly, at which question, she looked down at her lap and then raised her head, her gaze steady as she looked at me once more.

‘How dare you ask me such a question, Katherine,’ she said, her voice quivering with anger.

‘But I need to know the answer,’ I persisted.

‘And what would you gain from such an answer, tell me, for I am interested to know?’ my Aunt said quietly.

‘I would gain the knowledge as to how you understand my situation, from the answer you would give me,’ I said, looking her steadily in the eye, ‘for if the answer were to be yes, then you would know what I feel for Kane, but if the answer is no, then you would have no notion of how I feel.’

‘This is getting us nowhere,’ said Aunt Phoebe, rising from the chair and going to look at the contents of her glass cabinet.

‘I guess, Aunt, that the answer is no,’ I dared to say and at my words, her whole body swung around so as to look at me.

‘You go too far, young woman,’ she said menacingly.

‘I think,’ I continued, ‘that Uncle Zac would have more understanding than you.’

‘How could you, Katherine, after I have raised you from a babe in arms?’ Her voice faltered as she spoke.

‘And what of my Mother?’ The words slipped out, for we had never before spoken of my real Mother,

‘Your Mother, child, was a harlot and a temptress and it would seem you are to take after her,’ she flung at me, with spite in her voice.

‘So,’ I said, ‘I have learned something, you hate my Mother.’

‘I don’t wish to talk of it any more, do you understand?’ she said, a sob catching her voice as she spoke.

‘I shall ask Uncle Zac,’ I warned her.

‘No!’ The word was emphatic and there was a fear in her voice, which I had never detected before.

‘What are you afraid of, Aunt?’ I asked her gently.

‘Nothing,’ was her answer, her voice composed once more. ‘Go. Go to the man you profess to love.’

‘Does this mean that you give Kane and I your blessing?’ I asked.

‘Indeed not,’ she said adamantly. ‘I shall never give my blessing on such a union, nor accept it either, till the day I die.’

‘I shall go to my room now, Aunt Phoebe and in a day or two I shall leave Northcliffe, with the hope that one day, you will accept my love for Kane and our marriage,’ I said, rising from my seat.

‘What sort of marriage do you think you have, child, with no priest and you being brought up to attend church and follow the ways of the righteous? I would have thought that you would find it a travesty as well as I.’ Her words followed me up the staircase and when I reached my room, I set to thinking that maybe my Aunt’s words were true. I sat on my bed for some time, expecting to hear the key turn in the lock of my bedroom door, but it did not. After mulling things over, I decided to seek out Aggie and ask her honest opinion of my marriage at the encampment that day. Thankfully, Aggie was sitting on the chair in the kitchen by the range.

‘Whatever is going on Miss?’ she asked as soon as I appeared. ‘Mistress has taken to her bed with a headache and I thought you were all going over to Treverrick, and you looking so pretty and all.’

‘I could not go, Aggie, for my Aunt wished me to agree to walk out with Daniel and I cannot. You, of all people, must know my loyalties lie with Kane,’ I questioned.

‘I know, Miss. It is all very difficult for you,’ Aggie said truthfully.

‘Tell me, Aggie,’ I proceeded. ‘What do you honestly think of our wedding in the clearing that day?’

‘It were beautiful, Miss and so romantic,’ she said dreamily.

‘That is so, Aggie, but in all honesty, would you do it?’

‘I would if I was to marry someone as handsome as Mr Kane,’ she said getting up from the chair and indicating that I should be seated.

‘But it isn’t legal, is it Aggie?’ I asked, knowing I was asking myself the question as much as I was the young woman.

‘Maybe not, Miss, but it is the gypsy way,’ Aggie said, sensibly.

‘But my Aunt will not accept it, or give us her blessing. What shall I do, Aggie?’ I entreated of her.

‘There is a place, Miss,’ she began.

‘A place? What sort of place?’ I interrupted.

‘A place where you can get married without your parent’s consent, as long as you are over sixteen,’ she told me.

‘And where is this place?’ I asked, most intrigued.

‘It’s in Scotland, Miss,’ she enlightened me.

‘Scotland!’ I exclaimed. ‘How on earth are we to get to Scotland, if indeed I can find Kane and also, if he would agree to it?’

‘He would, if he truly loves you,’ Aggie said gently, ‘and it would give you peace of mind and maybe pacify your Aunt.’

‘How do you know this?’ I questioned her.

‘Because, our Martha and one of the farm hands eloped there when she was seventeen,’ Aggie told me.

‘And what did your parents think of this?’ I asked the girl.

‘They had no reason not to accept it as our Martha and Jim had a piece of paper to prove they was wed,’ she told me.

‘And where is this place?’ I asked, quite intrigued, for if it was a legal marriage, no one, including my Aunt, could doubt it.

‘If my memory serves me right, it was a village called Gretna Green.’ As she spoke the words, a plan was forming in my mind.

‘Thank you, Aggie. All that remains is to find Kane so that I can broach the subject of this village to him and if as you say the wedding would be legal, it may solve our problems.’ Excitement surged through me at this thought. ‘How can I find Kane? Please tell me, Aggie, for my heart aches for him.’

‘He will come back for you,’ she assured me. ‘One day soon, you will be in his arms again.’

Back in my room after Aggie and I had shared a cup of tea, I settled myself in bed, praying that Aggie was right. Under my pillow lay the note Kane had written me. I knew the words by heart, words which warmed my heart. ‘*I shall return for you, as promised*’ and with this thought, I sank into a peaceful slumber.

Aunt Phoebe wasn’t at breakfast next morning, but dear Uncle Zac was.

‘Can I feed the hens today, please?’ I asked him, ‘I miss it so much.’

‘Of course, my dear, while your Aunt is indisposed, there will be no harm done,’ he agreed.

‘Thank you, Uncle.’ How I wished I could tell this dear man what had transpired between Aunt Phoebe and myself last evening, but then I recalled the fear in my Aunt’s voice and decided against it. I didn’t want to be the one to open old wounds. So, I found myself once more in the sunshine, scattering the corn to the chickens and gazing out to sea.

Aggie and I walked each day to Monks Cove, but no Kane. Every morning we scoured the beach hoping to see him but to no avail and each day, my spirits sank and I went back to Northcliffe with a heavy heart and little optimism.

'Don't fret, Miss Katherine,' Aggie would say, placing an arm about my shoulder, 'he will come back, for sure.'

So life went on at the cottage. Aunt Phoebe stayed in her room most of the time, instructing Aggie about the household chores and not once, according to Aggie, did my Aunt mention me. What Uncle Zac thought of all this I had little idea, for he seemed cheerful enough and still at ease with me.

Two weeks later, Aggie and I made our way as normal to Monks Cove, when I had a sudden desire to walk on to the clearing.

'Do you think that's wise, Miss?' the young woman said.

'Wise or not, I need to go.' Some inner sense told me I should, so we walked, both very hot in the blazing sun, me carrying a pretty parasol decorated with purple flowers. Eventually we reached the clearing and to my amazement and delight, Tessa's vardo was once more standing there, the colours more vivid than I remembered, but all was still and quiet causing me to wonder if it were a figment of my imagination.

'Oh Miss,' murmured Aggie, 'your instinct was right.'

As we walked towards the caravan, I felt butterflies in my tummy at the thought of seeing Kane once more.

'Tessa!' I called up the steps and miraculously, she appeared in the doorway.

'Kate!' she exclaimed. 'How lovely to see you. Kane has gone looking for you.' As she spoke, she made her way down the steps and I put my arm around her.

'I'd given up,' I told her, 'thinking that you wouldn't come back for me.'

'It is only Kane and I,' she told me. 'He's talked of nothing but you and we had to come back as soon as we could. Now, go on with you and find your husband,' and so saying, she pushed me gently away from her.

Aggie and I walked back to the beach, me praying all the while that Kane hadn't gone to Northcliffe in search of me and wondering how I was going to broach the subject of Gretna Green to my beloved, but it proved to be an easy task. We reached the far end of the beach, throwing pebbles and now

and then looking to see if Kane was anywhere to be seen, for I was convinced he would walk back to the clearing this way.

The tide was starting to come in and Aggie was playing a game of jumping to the seashore and jumping back before the tiny waves trickled over her shoes, when suddenly she took hold of my arm and said, 'Look over there, Miss, I'm sure it is your husband.' I looked in the direction Aggie was pointing to and sure enough, it was Kane, striding towards us. My feet felt rooted to the spot.

'Go to him, Miss,' urged Aggie and at her words, trembling with excitement, I started to run, each second getting nearer to the man I loved and then I was in his arms and he picked me up, twirling me around and around.

'Stop, Kane. Stop!' I shrieked, laughing all the while, my heart full of warmth now and I realised I should never have doubted him.

'Kate. Kate,' he whispered as he held me close to him. 'How I've longed for this moment.'

'I too,' I told him in a whisper.

'You knew I'd return for you,' he said putting me at arm's length. 'How beautiful you look,' and his strong arms encircled me once more. We stood there for some time, me nestling so close to him, I could feel his breath on my cheek.

'Tell me how you've been faring since I've been away from you,' Kane said suddenly.

'Not too well, is the honest answer,' I told him, 'for my Aunt will not accept that we are wed.'

'We both knew it would be difficult,' was his answer. 'Will you come away with me now?'

'I will, Kane, for I love you, but I need to be at peace with my Aunt and Uncle,' I told him.

'Then we shall both go and speak with them together?' was his suggestion.

'No!' I said emphatically, 'for it would be to no avail. My Aunt even thinks of my dear Mother as a harlot, which breaks my heart.'

'This is not good news, little one. Tell me, what would you have us do to resolve this?' he asked gently.

'Aggie says there is a place in Scotland known as Gretna where we can marry legally without my guardian's consent. Would you agree to this?' I

asked him, my hands on his shoulders as I faced him, looking at his handsome, rugged face as I spoke.

‘Little one, I would do anything to make you happy,’ was his answer, ‘and the sooner the deed is done, the better.’

‘But it would take us weeks to get there in the wagon,’ I said, my heart sinking, for I wished to resolve this as soon as possible, to enable Kane and I to start our lives together in harmony, for as much as I disliked Aunt Phoebe’s reaction to all this, I felt I owed it to her and my Uncle, to do the right thing, for their peace of mind.

‘Please do not take on so, Kate, we will travel up to Scotland as quickly as possible stopping only a night here and there,’ he soothed, ‘and once there, we can be married in the correct way to please your Aunt and Uncle.’ At this bit of news, I clapped my hands with glee and called Aggie over to us.

‘We are to go to Scotland,’ I told the young woman who had been so kind to me.

‘That is the best news ever, Miss Katherine,’ and she spoke with genuine delight in her voice.

‘We must part once more, Kate, but only until tomorrow, when I ask that you come to me and we shall set off on our journey to Gretna,’ Kane told me, gathering me in his arms once more.

‘I hate to leave you,’ I told him, planting a kiss on his cheek.

‘It will only be for a night, I promise and maybe Aggie will help you with your belongings, if she is agreeable,’ he said, looking at the young woman.

‘That is alright with me,’ agreed Aggie. ‘We will come to the caravan tomorrow morning.’ So it was, Kane and I said our farewells to each other and as we parted, and I walked along the beach with Aggie, he called to me.

‘Never forget our butterfly dance.’ His words brought tears to my eyes, as I looked back at his receding figure, I longed to run to him once more, but there were things to be arranged and I knew, that for all our sakes, I must be patient. That night in bed, all I could see was Kane, a meadow full of orange poppies, Red Admiral butterflies and my husband and I dancing together. With these thoughts, I fell into a contented sleep, longing for tomorrow.

Chapter 7

Next morning, dressed in my dove grey dress made of cotton so as to be cool as the sun still shone in a cloudless sky, I sought out my Aunt, who I guessed would still be in her bedroom. I needed to see her and talk with her before I left. Reaching her room, I stood for some seconds composing myself then, pulling myself up straight, I tapped gently on the door of Aunt Phoebe's room.

'Come in,' her voice called and doing as I was bid, I tentatively opened the door. Aunt Phoebe was dressed in a purple gown and sitting in her armchair. The whole room was dark and dreary as the sun had not yet reached this side of the cottage and the heavy dark wood furniture made things seem even more gloomy, but the heavy brown curtains were drawn back letting in the early morning light.

'I do not wish to see you, Katherine,' my Aunt said as she looked at me, 'for you remind me too much of your mother.'

'Was my Mother really that bad?' I asked in a scathing tone.

'She was indeed. I had no time for her and now, after all you have put me through, little if any time for you,' she told me, not even looking at me.

'May I ask you one question?' I said with a strength I didn't feel.

'Just one question, Katherine, then you are dismissed.'

'Is my Mother dead and did the keepsake box belong to her?' It was something I desperately needed to know and once gone from here, I may never know the answer.

'That is two questions,' my Aunt said, unkindly, 'now which one would you like me to answer?' I thought for a moment before answering her.

'Is my Mother dead?' I asked again.

'Yes,' was all my Aunt would say.

'I am to leave today and start a new life with my husband,' I began. 'Can you see it in your heart to give me your blessing, Aunt Phoebe?'

'No child, I cannot. Now go, for at least once you are gone, I can come downstairs and won't have to see you to remind me ...' Here she stopped.

'Remind you of what, Aunt?' I said, tears springing to my eyes and I longed for Kane and his gentleness. 'You mean my Mother, don't you?'

'Please go, Katherine and never darken our door again.' At these words, I fled from my Aunt's room, the tears which had threatened falling down my

cheeks, when I ran headlong into Uncle Zac.

'There, there, child,' he said kindly. 'Whatever has upset you so?'

'It is my Aunt,' I told him, sobs catching my throat at each word I spoke.

'Come downstairs with me, Katherine and we'll get Aggie to make us a strong cup of tea and you can tell me what this is all about.' His words calmed me and I followed him to the dining room where he left me for a moment to see Aggie. I looked around at everything which was so familiar, thinking of the morning of my birthday and sobs wracked my body once more for how could Aunt Phoebe be so unkind to me and to think she'd hated my Mother, a Mother I'd never known, a Mother who had never held me and watched me grow and then I set to wondering if my Mother would have given her blessing to Kane and I and I knew instinctively, the answer to that question was 'yes'. I sat on the settle and Uncle Zac returned. Sitting next to me he placed an arm around my shoulder.

'Now tell me what all this is about,' he said quietly, as I dabbed at my eyes with a white lace handkerchief.

'I'm in love for the very first time and it's a feeling so strong, I cannot change it or deny it, Uncle Zac,' I told him.

'And why should you change it, or indeed, deny it?' he said kindly.

'Uncle, I have married the object of my affection and Aunt Phoebe will not give us her blessing.' At these words, my Uncle sat back and leant his head against the back of the settle.

'And who have you married child? For I know nothing of this,' he said calmly.

'It is Kane O'Brien, a gypsy,' at which words, the colour drained from my Uncle's face and all was quiet for several minutes.

I was just about to speak, when Aggie bustled in with the tea, depositing the tray on the table. She looked at me with troubled eyes and said, 'Would you like me to pour, Miss Katherine?'

'Thank you Aggie, but I shall do it,' I told her as I got up and walked across to the table and poured the tea into two china cups, adding sugar to Uncle Zac's, for he had a sweet tooth. I then walked over to him and handed him the cup and saucer. I noticed his colour had returned and looking at him, I was suddenly taken back ten years when my dear Uncle had been a good looking man of slimmer proportions.

'Are you alright, Uncle?' I asked him, concern in my voice, for I could tell that my news had affected him deeply.

‘You words came as a shock, Katherine, that is all. Let us drink the tea and then we will talk,’ he said.

‘You won’t berate me as my Aunt did, will you?’ I pleaded with him and he laid a hand across one of mine.

‘No child, I shan’t berate you, have no fear,’ he said quietly and finishing his tea and placing the cup and saucer on the occasional table before us he continued. ‘I take it this was a marriage of the gypsy kind.’

‘It was indeed, Uncle. Please tell me I have your blessing,’ I beseeched earnestly of him.

‘First of all, tell me what your Aunt has said to upset you so,’ he asked of me.

‘She says my Mother is a harlot and a temptress and I am the same and because of it she doesn’t wish me to darken her door again,’ I told Uncle Zac quietly, the tears threatening to fall again. Observant of this, my Uncle once more placed his arm around my shoulder.

‘Your Mother was a sweet, kind person and you are very much like her. Take no notice of your Aunt’s spiteful comments. Things have a habit of returning to haunt us as we get older.’ Although I didn’t quite understand what Uncle Zac had said, the fact he had said my Mother was sweet and kind, was enough for me.

‘Have you ever loved, Uncle?’ I asked him and for some moments, he was quiet, with a thoughtful, faraway expression on his face.

‘Yes, I have loved Katherine, very deeply in fact,’ he said gently.

‘So you understand how I feel?’ I asked, with anticipation of his answer.

‘I understand completely, Katherine,’ he told me, at which words, I hugged him.

‘So you will give us your blessing?’ I asked, looking at his dear face.

‘I give you both my blessing,’ he agreed and the tears started to fall again, but this time, with joy, for I could leave Northcliffe today with a happy heart, and then I stopped, for what would Uncle Zac think of my going today.

‘I am to leave today, Uncle,’ I told him.

‘Then I shall come with you to see you on your way, Katherine,’ he replied. ‘But I shall miss you, for you are the light of my life and I shall look forward to your visits.’ At these words, my heart sank.

‘But my Aunt will not welcome us here,’ I said sadly.

‘She will, given time child, I promise you,’ he told me and I knew his words were to pacify me and send me on my journey with a happy heart. We both rose from the settle and I had a sudden thought.

‘Tell me, Uncle, did the keepsake box you gave me on my birthday, belong to my Mother?’ I asked of him.

‘It did, indeed,’ he said, turning me towards him. ‘Treasure it always, Katherine, for it is all you will ever have of her. Now, let us get you on your way with the man you love.’

My heart sang at Uncle Zac’s words and I sped up to my room to gather some things together in my portmanteau. I knew I could not take all my clothes, but I neatly folded most things I would need, including the cream skirt and orange blouse I had worn to wed Kane, for I would wear it at Gretna, and then I thought, would we now need to renew our wedding, as my Uncle had given his blessing, but I dearly wished for Aunt Phoebe’s blessing too, for then my happiness would be complete.

The last thing I packed with my clothes, was the precious keepsake box, all the more precious now that I knew it had belonged to my Mother and as I lifted it down and held it in my hands, I thought how a Mother I had never known or been able to love, had held this exquisite box as well as me and marvelled at its beauty as I did now. I found some tissue paper and wrapped the precious box carefully, before placing it amongst my clothes and then I was ready, ready to start a journey with the man I loved and who loved me just as deeply.

I took one last look around my room then looked from the window once more at the view before me. The sun was now quite high in the sky, sending sparkling jewels scudding across the water and then I thought of Minnie. I could not leave Minnie behind. Quickly, I picked up the portmanteau and hurried from the room to seek out Uncle Zac and say farewell for the time being, to Aggie.

‘Uncle Zac,’ I said, finding him in the kitchen, ‘what will I do about Minnie?’

‘Don’t fret, Katherine, I shall take her over to Treverrick, to the stables there, and when you are camped here, you can ride her, as Kane does his horse, Thunder,’ he told me. At his words, I realised that I had quite forgotten Thunder. I turned to Aggie who was peeling potatoes at the sink.

‘Dear Aggie,’ I said to her as I hugged her, ‘Uncle Zac is coming with me so I will not need your help today, thank you.’

‘I know, Miss,’ she said sadly.

‘But come if you wish,’ I told her, seeing how upset she looked. ‘That will be alright, Uncle, won’t it?’ I asked him.

‘Indeed,’ he said. ‘I will put it right with your Aunt when we get back.’

At his words, Aggie smiled once more and untying her apron, slipped it over her head and placed it on a chair.

‘Well, let us go, child,’ Uncle Zac urged me as he headed for the back door.

‘No, Uncle, I wish to leave by the front door,’ I told him.

‘As you like, Katherine,’ he agreed amiably, picking up my portmanteau. As we walked through the hallway, I looked up the stairs with some vane hope that Aunt Phoebe would appear to wish me well, but the staircase was empty and still. As I passed the grandfather clock, it started to chime the hour of ten, as if in farewell and I felt a tear slide down my cheek. I passed the dining room door where so much had happened of recent days and then I was stepping through the front door, for what I thought would be the last time.

I fussed Minnie and told her I would see her soon and then followed Uncle Zac and Aggie out of the gate. Glancing back at the cottage, I saw movement in an upstairs window and I knew it was my Aunt Phoebe watching me go. At least she had bothered to look, I thought, which cheered me somewhat and then without another look back, I proceeded to the clearing, with Uncle Zac carrying my baggage and Aggie’s arm through mine.

We had to walk over the cliffs as the tide was already in at Monks Cove and when we were half way across, I could see a figure striding towards us, in the distance. Realising it was Kane, I picked up my skirts and ran towards him, as he quickened his steps and ran towards me and at last, his arms were around me and I knew we would never be apart again.

‘I thought you weren’t coming,’ he whispered as he stroked my hair.

‘I have good news,’ I said. ‘My dear Uncle has given us his blessing.’ Even as I spoke, Uncle Zac and Aggie caught up with us.

‘Thank you Zachariah,’ said Kane, putting me gently from him.

‘You know each other!’ I exclaimed.

‘Yes, we have met at Treverrick on many occasions,’ Uncle Zac told me, ‘and I know that Kane is a good man and will take care of you.’

‘And you have no qualms at my status in life?’ Kane asked.

‘None,’ replied my Uncle, and I was happy that the two men in my life knew each other. We walked on and as we walked, my husband and Uncle talked and so did Aggie and I.

‘You will not get into any trouble when you go back,’ I said to Aggie, stopping for a moment, ‘for my Uncle will ensure that all will be well, I promise you.’

‘I shall miss you,’ Aggie told me.

‘And I, you,’ I answered honestly, ‘and I thank you for all your loyalty.’

‘Come Miss, let’s be happy, for we will see each other again before too long and I hope all goes well at Gretna.’

Our farewells said, we had to run to catch up with the men folk who had nearly reached the clearing. I could see that the wagon was ready to go, with the horse already harnessed to the vardo.

‘I will leave you here, Katherine,’ my Uncle told me. ‘Kane tells me you are to go to Gretna to marry our way, but I have told him I will give my consent to your marriage here if it will spare you a long journey.’

‘Thank you, Uncle,’ I said as I put my arms around him.

‘We will talk about what is best to do.’ Kane’s words drifted across to me and I released my dear Uncle.

‘If we did marry here, would my Aunt accept this, do you think, Uncle Zac?’ I asked him.

‘When I return home, I will talk to your Aunt,’ he promised me, ‘but I can’t say what her answer will be, as she is a very stubborn woman, as you well know, Katherine from your recent experience with her.’

‘I know, Uncle, that you will do your best.’ I said the words knowing they were true.

‘In view of the new circumstances and our need to talk, little one, we will stop here for the night,’ Kane suggested, ‘and on the morrow, we will come to see you at Northcliffe, Zachariah.’

‘I shall welcome you,’ agreed Uncle Zac, ‘but I can’t speak for my wife,’ he said, sadly.

‘Until tomorrow then, Uncle,’ I said kissing him and Aggie, both on the cheek and I watched as they walked towards the cliff path, feeling uncertain about everything except Kane’s love for me and mine for him.

Tessa welcomed me and agreed to spend a further night in the clearing, when Kane explained what Uncle Zac was prepared to do.

‘You know it will mean marrying in a church,’ Kane’s Mother told him.

‘I do indeed, Mother, but I am prepared to do whatever is possible to make Kate completely happy,’ Kane told her.

‘I don’t know what your father will say, but I am agreeable to anything which makes you both happy,’ she said, kissing us both on the cheek. ‘Now while Kane unharnesses Monty, we will light a fire, for we shall need to eat later,’ Tessa suggested.

So Tessa and I collected wood for a fire which we successfully got going, while Kane unharnessed the horse. I learned, that underneath the wagon was a large cupboard known as the ‘pan box’, which was like a larder and held the provisions. Tessa and I fetched out some vegetables to prepare for the cauldron and I could see that the larder already held bread, tea and coffee and various items. I found this all very interesting and I knew I had a lot to learn about the Romany way of life, but also knew, instinctively, that I would love it. After we had put the cauldron over the fire and the horse was grazing on the grass behind the vardo, Tessa suggested we unpack my portmanteau, as it would be in the way later.

‘Come,’ she said to me and I followed her up the familiar steps into the wagon. Undoing my baggage, I first lifted out the keepsake box, gently unwrapping the white tissue paper.

‘That is beautiful!’ Tessa exclaimed with incredulity in her voice. ‘Where did you get it Kate?’ she asked with interest.

‘My Aunt and Uncle gave it to me on my birthday,’ I told her. ‘My Uncle said it belonged to my Mother.’

‘May I look at it, please?’ asked Tessa. Carefully, I passed the precious box to her and she sat on the locker seat, gazing at it. ‘May I open the lid?’ was her next question.

‘Of course you may,’ I agreed, for I could see that Tessa was as enraptured as I was, so she opened the lid gently and examined the contents, a lone tear trickling down her cheek.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, wiping the tear from her cheek, ‘but I love beautiful objects and this is exquisite,’ she said, using the same word I had to describe the keepsake box which I was very proud to own. ‘Well, let us get your clothes in the chest of drawers,’ she said suddenly, handing the box back to me. ‘We will store this safely in the chest of drawers also.’

My clothes and the keepsake box put safely away, Kane suggested that we walk to the meadow so we could talk of our future. I agreed with joy in my heart, for I longed to be alone with him. Holding hands, we walked through

the small wood where birds sang from the trees and as we stepped into the meadow, the sight of the poppies still swaying in the breeze, brought back to me our butterfly dance and our gypsy wedding which was so sacred to me, I didn't really wish for another. As far as I was concerned, that day in the clearing, when we had jumped the broom and made our troth to one another, was the most lovely way of marrying, that I could possibly imagine.

'You are thoughtful, little one,' observed Kane, stopping on the path we walked between the poppies.

'I'm thinking, that if I had my way, our wedding would be the only one we would have,' I confessed to him.

'But we need to please your family, Kate, do we not,' he said sensibly.

'I guess we do,' I said, quite downcast at the thought, for all I wished was to be a proper wife to my gentle husband.

'I wish to lie with you at night and not walk with you in my dreams,' Kane said, turning me to him, 'and if it means peace of mind for me as much as you, then I'm prepared to wed your way.'

'You are so understanding, Kane, it is no wonder I love you so,' I told him.

'Then what are we to do, little one. Is it Scotland or here?' he said, giving me the choice to make.

'I think here,' I said, making a sudden decision, 'for although we have the banns to call for three weeks, it will be quicker than travelling to Scotland and my Aunt may condescend to join us and see us united with her own eyes and hopefully accept it without any further question.'

'Then that is what we shall do,' he told me, bending to kiss my lips, just as a butterfly flew around us. I knew it was a good omen and I had hopefully made the right decision.

That night, as I lay next to Tessa on the top bed in the wagon, listening to an owl hooting somewhere in the woods, with Kane asleep in his tent, I mulled over as to what else could thwart Kane and I in our quest for happiness, but I was at least, lying at last between the lovely white sheets with the crocheted edging, in a vardo.

Chapter 8

I awoke next morning to the sound of birds singing from the trees and I recognised the blackbird's song in particular, sweet and pure and a joy to listen to. Tessa no longer lay beside me and the curtains were still pulled to, to prevent the morning light seeping into the wagon. I lay for a while, listening to the blackbirds song, hardly believing that I had at last spent a night in the vardo. Negotiating myself from the top bed, I looked at the bottom one and could see what Tessa had meant yesterday. It was not as long as the one I had slept in and was indeed only suitable for a child or children and I mused as to whether Kane had slept in it as a child. Dressing myself in a turquoise coloured cotton skirt and white short sleeved blouse, I opened the door of the vardo and made my way down the steps. Kane and Tessa were sat in the clearing eating bread and butter, Kane getting to his feet when he saw me.

'Good morning, Kate,' he greeted me coming across and kissing my cheek. 'Did you sleep well?'

'I haven't slept so well since I met you,' I replied laughing, as I looked at his handsome face.

'I will get you a towel,' called Tessa, 'for you will need to freshen up.' I washed in the stream, taking note of the cool water running on its way across small boulders. What an idyllic scene I thought, as I dried myself with the towel Tessa had supplied me with. I felt so happy and free I could have danced on the spot, but refrained from doing so as Kane called me over to take some breakfast with them. Tessa indicated for me to sit by her on the grass as she handed me a plate and I set to eating the bread and butter, realising I felt quite hungry. As I sipped the steaming hot coffee that Kane had poured me from a receptacle, which hung over the fire, Tessa spoke to me.

'Tell me about your family, Kate,' she said.

'There is little to tell,' I told her.

'Well tell me what has happened to you in these past twenty years,' she persisted.

'I never knew my mother,' I began, 'nor know who she was or where she came from, in fact, we've never spoken of her until this past week.'

'So you have no idea who she was?' Kane asked.

‘None.’ I told him. ‘All I know is that Uncle Zac and Aunt Phoebe raised me from a babe in arms to the young woman you see before you now.’

‘And have you been happy, Kate?’ asked Tessa.

‘Yes I have, although the past year I have felt restless and wished for some excitement and purpose in my life,’ I said.

‘And now you have found it,’ said Kane laughing.

‘I have indeed and it is all I could have wished for,’ I told him truthfully. Our eyes locked together for some seconds.

‘Are your Aunt and Uncle your true kin?’ began Tessa. ‘That is to say, are you related to them through your Mother or indeed your Father?’

‘My Father,’ I replied quietly. ‘I have never given any thought to my Father,’ and as I spoke the words, I realised it was true. I had never once, until this moment, questioned as to who my Father may be, or indeed thought of him.

‘So do you think you are related to the couple who you call Aunt and Uncle?’ Tessa said.

‘Do you know Tessa, I have no idea at all,’ I told her, turning to look at this lovely woman who I felt I had known all my life, as she laid a gentle hand on my arm.

‘And have you always lived at Northcliffe?’ Kane asked.

‘For as far back as I can remember, yes,’ I replied, ‘except for the time I spent at the Academy for Young Ladies in Truro.’

‘Why were you there?’ Tessa began, ‘although I can imagine.’

‘The truthful answer is, my Aunt wished me to marry well and was always hoping I would marry one of the Trevartha family,’ I said, as much to myself as to Tessa and Kane.

‘So you have thwarted her plans,’ observed my husband.

‘I have indeed,’ I laughed as I spoke. ‘Thankfully, you walked my way and I no longer have a dread of etiquette and grand dinner parties and living at Treverrick, a place I dislike immensely.’

‘You are here now and that is all I could wish for,’ Kane told me intently. ‘Now let us drink more coffee and then we must make our way to see your Uncle and Aunt if that is possible.’

‘I dread the thought of it,’ I told him honestly, thinking of Aunt Phoebe’s hostility to me only yesterday. ‘I very much doubt that my Aunt will see either of us,’ I warned him.

‘You will have me by your side, so have no fear, little one,’ Kane reassured me, as he helped me to my feet.

‘May I help you with anything?’ I asked Tessa.

‘No indeed not. You two young people go and arrange your marriage, for the sooner the better,’ Tessa told me.

‘I just have to feed Monty,’ Kane said.

‘May I go on ahead across Monks Cove, please,’ I asked him.

‘You love it there, don’t you,’ my husband observed.

‘It is the tranquillity I love and the sound of the waves lapping on the beach,’ I told him.

‘You go on ahead,’ he told me. ‘And don’t look so worried.’

‘I thought you may think that I didn’t wish to walk with you,’ I explained.

‘Never have such a notion, for I know you wish to be with me, as much as I wish to be with you,’ Kane assured me.

So I walked happily to Monks Cove on my own and once on the beach, throwing pebbles in the water, I set to thinking of all that had happened in recent days. Had I really been wilful and gone against all that my Aunt wished for me and I realised that the answer to this question was ‘yes’. My dear Uncle understood as I expected he would, but my Aunt was hard hearted and as we had discussed this morning, Aunt Phoebe had plans for me which I had indeed thwarted, but my love and loyalty for Kane, mattered to me more than anything else and at least I was trying to appease my Aunt’s anger by marrying as she would wish, in a church, but my wedding to Kane and our butterfly dance in the meadow were the two most beautiful things that had happened to me in my life so far.

Kane made me jump by placing his hands gently on my shoulders and turning to face him, he held me closely in his arms, kissing my hair which I realised, I had not tied back. Alarmed at this thought, I withdrew from Kane’s embrace.

‘What is the matter?’ he said with worry in his voice.

‘My hair,’ I uttered, ‘I haven’t tied it back.’

‘And nor should you,’ he told me gently, ‘for it is part of your beauty.’

‘But my Aunt will be aghast that I am wandering around the bay with loose hair for all to see,’ I explained.

‘It will be fine,’ Kane assured me, but as we walked towards Northcliffe, my thought was that Kane had never before been on the receiving end of my Aunt’s wrath. The first thing I noticed as we approached the cottage,

was that Minnie was gone and I pacified myself at the thought that she was being well cared for at Treverrick. Approaching the front door, I felt myself trembling, recalling Aunt Phoebe's words of only yesterday '*never darken our door again*' but my Uncle had agreed to us coming and after all, it was his home as much as it was my Aunt's. Kane lifted the heavy brass knocker, the sound of which would now be reverberating through the hallway and up the stairs. It suddenly seemed a lifetime since I had left here yesterday. The door opened slightly and I could see it was my Aunt who peered out at us.

'Aunt Phoebe, we have come to see you and Uncle Zac,' I said meekly as my Aunt opened the door a little wider.

'I told you yesterday, never to darken our door with your presence again,' she said harshly and I turned to look at Kane.

'Did Zachariah tell you of our plan to marry in the church here?' Kane said politely.

'He did,' my Aunt answered, 'but I still do not hold with it and if my husband is to be foolish enough to give his consent, then so be it, but do not expect me to go along with it and that is all I have to say to you. Good day,' and she went to close the door, but thankfully, at that moment, my Uncle appeared behind her.

'No, Phoebe,' he said forcefully, taking hold of the door and pulling it open wider.

'How could you, Zachariah?' she bemoaned. 'After us being married all these years and this is how you treat me. I wonder what Katherine would think if she only knew the truth.'

'What does Aunt Phoebe mean by that?' I asked, quite perplexed.

'It is nothing child,' my Uncle assured me. 'Now leave this to me,' he said, stepping out of the front door and closing it behind him.

'What did my Aunt mean, Uncle?' I asked him again.

'It is nothing, Katherine, just a notion she has. Now let's forget it and go to the church to see Parson Greenaway,' he suggested, in his normal kindly manner and I realised, I had never before known my Uncle to speak so to Aunt Phoebe.

'Do you think your wife, will in due course, accept my marriage to Katherine?' Kane asked Uncle Zac, as we walked across the cliffs in the opposite direction from Treverrick and to the lovely little church, which had been built overlooking the sea and a small beach covered with golden sand.

‘She will, you have my word on that,’ my Uncle told Kane and then we walked in silence, I with my arm through Kane’s, my black hair lifting gently each time the warm breeze blew through it and Kane now and then looking down at me, with understanding mirrored in his lovely eyes. As we walked down the lane, which led to the church, I stopped and so did my husband and Uncle for it was truly a glorious sight to behold, the small grey stone church with its squat tower and a backdrop of sea and sand. As we stood looking at the scene before us, I could hear the waves crashing lightly to the shore and see the seagulls circling above.

‘What a delightful place,’ Kane acknowledged, ‘and as lovely a place as I could wish to marry you, Kate.’

‘It is indeed,’ agreed Uncle Zac. ‘Now let us hope the Parson is here,’ and at my Uncle’s words, we made our way along the narrow path, which led to the main church door. Uncle Zac opened the door and stood to one side for Kane and I to enter. As we stepped onto the flagstone floor and Uncle Zac closed the door behind him, it took some minutes for our eyes to adjust to the darkness, in comparison to the sunlit day outside.

‘This is the first time I have stepped into a house of God,’ Kane whispered to me and I could tell by his manner, that he was quite overawed by it as we walked down the aisle to the Vestry, in search of Parson Greenaway. We were in luck as he was there, donning his vestments. He looked up from what he was doing.

‘Good day to you, Mr Johnson and Miss Johnson and you Sir, welcome to our church,’ he said, looking at Kane. ‘How can I help?’

‘Katherine and Kane wish to marry, Parson and I am here to give my consent, as Katherine is only twenty years of age.’

‘I thought it may be a wedding when I saw the young couple,’ beamed the Parson, who was a slender, kindly man of about forty five years, with blonde hair, curling at the nape of his neck.

‘And when had you hoped to marry?’ enquired the Parson, going over to his small desk in one corner of the Vestry and reaching for a large book which was obviously a diary of church business.

‘In three weeks, if possible, Parson,’ I said quickly, at which words, he turned and raised an eyebrow, looking at my stomach. ‘Oh no,’ I said quickly, realising what he was thinking and feeling quite embarrassed at the thought.

‘We wish to marry soon, to enable us to travel,’ explained Kane to the perplexed looking Parson.

‘Travel,’ he said. ‘Are you a military man, then?’ he asked with interest.

‘No. Kane is a gypsy,’ I said, without any thought.

‘A gypsy,’ he reiterated, his eyebrow raised even higher. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t know how I stand with this request,’ he said, shutting his diary with a flourish.

‘Please, Parson. There is no harm in it and Katherine is a good Christian girl, as you know and these lovely young people are in love,’ pleaded my Uncle.

‘I’ve no doubt they are and a fine couple they make,’ he said understandingly, ‘but I don’t know how I stand on marrying someone who is not of the Christian faith,’ he explained.

‘Won’t my faith do for the both of us?’ I said, stepping forward. ‘Could you at least read the banns while you find out how you stand?’ I suggested, desperately wishing this to be resolved.

‘Well I could, Miss Johnson, as I know you and your Uncle so well,’ he agreed, ‘but I would ask that both you and Kane attend the reading of the banns each Sunday morning for three consecutive weeks.’

‘Thank you, Parson,’ I said with relief, for if he hadn’t agreed, this would have been another obstacle to overcome.

‘I will pencil in a Service of Marriage for you for June the fourteenth, if that is acceptable.’

‘It is, indeed,’ said Uncle Zac with joy.

‘I will need you to sign a Consent form Mr Johnson, please and I wish these young people to take away this Prayer Book with the Marriage Service in and read it fully,’ he instructed.

‘Indeed we will, Parson,’ agreed Kane.

‘And where are you both residing?’ was the Parson’s next question.

Kane and I looked at each other, me thinking this could be another complication.

‘In the clearing behind Treverrick,’ Kane told him bravely.

‘Both of you?’ questioned the Parson, raising his eyebrow once more.

‘Yes Sir,’ I said honestly.

‘This won’t do. No indeed not,’ he said. ‘First of all, let me speak to Mr ...?’

‘Kane O’Brien,’ obliged my husband and at the thought, I wondered how high Parson Greenaway’s eyebrow would rise if he knew we had already jumped the broom.

‘And how long have you resided in the, eh, clearing?’ was the Parson’s next question.

‘Four weeks,’ said Kane.

‘Well, that is at least in order. Now Miss Johnson, tell me, why you are not living at home?’ he asked of me.

‘It is only one night she has spent in the wagon with her intended’s Mother, I hasten to add. She will be coming back home today.’ At Uncle Zac’s words, he looked at me beseechingly not to argue.

‘A little holiday,’ murmured the Parson. ‘Well that I can understand. So I shall see you all in church on Sunday morning?’ the Parson asked and we all nodded in agreement.

‘Thank you,’ I said to the Parson as we left. ‘We really do love each other and wish to do the right thing.’

‘I’m sure you do, young lady,’ he murmured.

I was thankful when we stepped back out into the sunlight and as we walked back down the church path, my step was light for I knew that in three weeks, Kane and I would be able to start our journey together in earnest.

‘I thought you meant it, Uncle, when you said I would be coming back home today,’ I said.

‘I do mean it child. Until the ceremony, you are to come back home with your Aunt and I.’

‘But Uncle, my Aunt will not allow it and will make my life so unpleasant I will need to leave again,’ I protested.

‘Katherine,’ he said, stopping and taking my hand, ‘you are to do the right thing and come home. Your Aunt will think more of it than if you were to stay with Kane and his Mother in the wagon. Think about what I say,’ he urged me.

‘Your Uncle is right,’ Kane agreed. ‘If you want your Aunt’s blessing, then this is the best course to take. I agree with your Uncle.’

‘Very well,’ I told them both, ‘but if Aunt Phoebe is unpleasant to me, then I shall leave.’

‘Don’t be a defeatist, child. We have to coax your Aunt round to our way of thinking and this is the best thing to do, what is right and if you and Kane

truly love one another, then you can wait another three weeks to be together.'

'But I can see Kane, can't I?' I asked with alarm.

'Of course you can,' agreed my Uncle. 'You won't be a prisoner, I assure you.'

'There,' said Kane. 'All is sorted out,' he said happily, taking my hand. As we walked back to the clearing and the wagon to collect my possessions, with my Uncle and the man I loved, all I could think of, was that Kane and I were to be parted again. I prayed Aunt Phoebe would agree to my going home and her words '*how would she feel if she knew the truth?*' were imprinted in my mind as I returned to Northcliffe.

Chapter 9

My Uncle and I went into Northcliffe through the back door. My heart missed a beat when I saw Aunt Phoebe making pastry with Aggie.

'Miss Katherine!' exclaimed Aggie. At her words, Aunt Phoebe looked up and saw us standing there, me feeling shame faced, which I hadn't expected to feel.

'Zachariah,' she said with her usual forceful tone. 'Why have you brought Katherine back with you, knowing how I feel?' she asked my Uncle as she went across to the sink to wash her hands.

'Katherine is to stay here in her home, until she marries Kane O'Brien,' my Uncle told his wife in a firm tone, as he placed my portmanteau on the floor and put a protective arm around me, for which I was grateful.

'I will not have the child in this house, Zachariah,' my Aunt said as firmly, wiping her hands. 'Now please go, Katherine.'

'She will not go,' said my Uncle with an authority in his voice that I had never heard before and I could see my Aunt was taken aback by his tone.

'Very well,' she condescended, 'if that is to be, the child can stay in her room.'

'She will not,' said my Uncle indignantly. 'She will eat with us and feed the chickens and come and go as she always has.' How grateful I was for my dear Uncle's words.

'As you say,' conceded my Aunt, realising that her husband would broach no argument. 'But do not expect me to be civil, or indulge in conversation with her.'

'How childish you are, Phoebe,' my Uncle told her, 'and all because the dear child has fallen in love with a man who you don't approve of, even though you do not know him.'

'And I do not wish to know him, for he is a *gypsy*.' My Aunt almost spat the word at him and I was shocked to say the least at the hatred she felt for Kane.

'You will be civil to him and attend church with the three of us to hear the banns read, starting tomorrow,' my Uncle told her, 'and you will be pleasant to this dear child, who has committed no sin, except to fall deeply in love.'

'A thing you would know all about,' my Aunt retorted.

'Yes, indeed, a thing I would know all about,' admitted my Uncle.

‘And are you going to tell this dear child the truth about her birth?’ my Aunt taunted him.

‘Although we had agreed never to say anything, I will now do so, when the time is right,’ my Uncle promised.

‘I would dearly love to know,’ I said suddenly, not realising that the truth would come from an unexpected source, very soon.

‘You will know, Katherine, I promise you, but not today,’ my Uncle told me gently. ‘Now, let us take your belongings to your room and maybe Aggie would help you unpack.’

‘A pleasure, Miss Katherine,’ agreed Aggie, who had watched the scene before her, with wide-eyed interest. So I found myself back in my room again, with Aggie helping me hang my clothes once more.

‘It is good to have you back, Miss,’ Aggie said kindly. ‘Are you to marry Mr Kane in the church then?’ she asked.

‘It would seem so, Aggie, for propriety’s sake,’ I told her, ‘but if I had my way, my wedding in the clearing behind Treverrick would suffice.’

‘That were a lovely day,’ said Aggie dreamily, going over to look from the window. ‘There’s cloud bubbling up, Miss, looks like we could have some rain,’ and indeed, it did rain that night, the gale from the sea causing the raindrops to lash at my window pane, as I lay in bed, thinking the weather matched my mood and the misery I felt at being parted from my beloved once more.

Next morning, the sun shone again but small clouds scudded across the sky and puddles of water lay on the ground. Aunt Phoebe breakfasted with us, but true to her promise, didn’t speak except to say to me,

‘I have found three pairs of sheets for you to repair Katherine, which should keep you out of mischief. I have laid them on your bed,’ at which words, she rose from her chair. ‘I am now going to get ready for church and I expect you to do the same, child. Let us go along with this charade for as long as it takes, for I feel it will come to nothing,’ she said unkindly and as she reached the door, she turned back and said to me.

‘Have you lain beside this Kane?’

‘I promise you I have not Aunt,’ I replied civilly.

‘Then we must thank the Lord for that,’ my Aunt retorted, sweeping from the room.

The four of us walked across the cliff to the church, my Aunt, Uncle, Aggie and myself me with my arm through Uncle Zac’s, and trembling with

anticipation at seeing Kane. The view beyond the church was grey today and frothy brown waves tumbled after each other to the shore and I shivered, hoping that the change in the weather was not a bad omen. We sat in a pew awaiting the start of the service. The Trevartha family, with Constance's sister Patience, sat on the other side of the church in the family pew and Daniel kept looking across to me and smiling, but I had no interest in him or anyone except Kane. Where was he? I kept thinking, turning around every now and then so see if he was there, but he was not and I was admonished by my Aunt.

'Sit still Katherine. Think of what you have been taught.' The organ started to play the notes to Rock of Ages when I heard the latch on the church door rattle and I turned around to see Kane and his Mother step into the aisle and take a seat. Several other people looked too and then we started to sing the hymn, but I stumbled over the words, as all I could think of was Kane. He looked so handsome today in a white shirt and black jacket, his unruly black wavy hair smoothed back to look tidy, but I preferred it tussled, was my thought and I could hardly believe that Tessa had joined him. Her hair also was tied back and she wore a beautiful crocheted cream shawl, which accentuated the blackness of her hair. I hardly took notice of the sermon being read except to be full of joy as the Parson read out our names, Kane O'Brien and Katherine Johnson. The service over, I was restless to get out of the church and speak to Kane, but my Aunt held me back with a firm pressure on my arm. How I wished to struggle free but thought of Uncle Zac's words and I kept hold of my temper. Once outside in the sunshine, there was no sight of either Kane or his Mother and my heart sank.

'Be patient, child,' whispered my Uncle and I heeded his words, but once back at the gate of Northcliffe I could hold my anxiousness to see Kane back no longer. 'I am going for a walk,' I told the three of them and before anyone could argue, I set off for Monks Cove.

'You have your Sunday best on,' my Aunt called after me with anger in her voice and I looked down at my royal blue coloured gown and jacket made of fine silk, my royal blue bonnet with a band of black around the brim bobbing on my head and I nearly went back to change but decided against it knowing that I could be in a lot of trouble when I finally returned to Northcliffe, but my desire to be with Kane burned inside me and I carried on walking. The tide was in at Monks Cove, the waves crashing on the

rocks of the cliff. I removed my bonnet, untying the ribbon and then loosening my hair from its pins and I suddenly felt as free as a bird again. Reaching the clearing I could see Tessa sitting on the steps of the vardo and then I could see another vardo brightly painted and new looking and I picked up my skirts and ran. Kane appeared from behind the newer wagon, catching me in his arms as I flew towards him.

'A surprise for you little one,' he said, kissing my hair.

'Is it ours?' I asked breathlessly.

'It is indeed. My Father has brought it from Dorset as we arranged, whether I were here or not with the Trevartha's permission.' He released me from his embrace and I ran to the front of the vardo and could see it was of the barrel type, with high wheels and a stable door as on Tessa's. The colours of red and yellow were magnificent and with tears in my eyes, I could see that 'K' and 'K' had been entwined together on one side of the stable door.

'It is beautiful,' I enthused, 'and it is really ours?'

'It is Kate,' he said proudly. 'This is where we will live, love and laugh for the rest of our lives.'

'Can I go inside?' I asked excitedly.

'But of course, little one, it is yours as well as mine,' Kane told me, so we climbed the steps together and I surveyed the beautiful interior. Even the barrelled ceiling had been painted in reds and yellows to match the exterior. It was delightful. There were the two beds one above the other across the back and someone had already made the top one up with the white sheets and the crocheted edging peeping out from under the blanket. There was a stove and a china cabinet, a chest of drawers and a locker seat, all beautifully upholstered.

'Oh Kane,' I said, putting my arms around him, 'it is lovely and I can hardly wait to travel in it and sleep in it with you,' I enthused, blushing when I realised what I'd said.

'We will be happy, I promise you,' Kane said softly.

'And I promise you,' I said with joy in my heart.

'But we must…' began Kane, putting me from him, 'adhere to your Uncle's wishes.

'I know,' I agreed, 'but my Aunt still thinks that it will end and very soon.'

‘Never!’ were Kane’s words. ‘Never, Kate, for now that I’ve found you I will never let you go.’

We stepped out into the clearing and I acknowledged Jed who said gruffly, as was his way.

‘Are you pleased with your vardo, Kate?’

‘I am, Jed,’ I told him, as he went on his way searching for wood for the fire.

‘Why did you leave the church so quickly?’ I asked of Kane.

‘Because I didn’t want to incur your Aunt’s wrath and I wanted to get back to inspect our wagon, for it was a surprise for you, but I didn’t expect you to come here so soon.’

‘I couldn’t keep away,’ I told him.

‘My precious wife,’ he said, holding me close once more.

‘Can we walk in the meadow?’ I asked him, having a sudden desire to see the poppies.

‘But your lovely gown,’ he said looking down at the skirts of my silk dress.

‘It is no matter,’ I told him.

‘Very well,’ Kane agreed. ‘I can see that you are in a wilful mood’ and he laughed.

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Kane put his arm around my shoulder as we walked once more through the woods and then into the meadow. I stopped still and looked around me at the poppies whose petals were decorated with tiny raindrops, as the sun had not yet reached them to dry them. It was indeed wet underfoot and the hem of my dress was getting wet, but I ignored it for I was with Kane in our field.

‘Dance with me,’ I said suddenly.

‘But there are no butterflies,’ he observed.

‘There will be,’ I assured him. Taking me in his arms with his strong hand gently at my waist, we danced round and round and lo and behold, as we danced and I prayed for a butterfly, one appeared as if from nowhere to light our way. The Red Admiral flew around us for several seconds and then vanished.

‘You are a sorceress,’ said Kane as we both stopped dancing.

‘Kane, I cannot go back to Northcliffe,’ I told him, ‘I am happy there no longer.’

‘But you must, dear heart, for both our sakes.’

‘No, I cannot. It is my Aunt. She makes me feel uncomfortable and said there is something my dear Uncle needs to tell me.’

‘Please try and put up with it for a little longer, for me,’ Kane pleaded.

‘I cannot,’ I said, the tears starting to fall and as we walked back to the clearing, my tears turned to sobs, for I was happy here and this was where I wished to be.

‘Whatever is the matter?’ said Tessa coming over to me and placing an arm around me pulling me close to her, but I couldn’t speak.

‘She doesn’t wish to go back to the cottage,’ explained Kane.

‘Why not, Kate, tell me,’ urged Tessa kindly.

‘Because,’ I sobbed, ‘my Aunt dislikes me and I feel uncomfortable in her presence and I can endure it no longer.’

‘Also,’ added Kane, ‘her Aunt says there is something her Uncle needs to tell her.’

‘Indeed there is,’ agreed Tessa. ‘I’ve had enough of secrets and lies. Just one moment while I step into the wagon,’ and she appeared back in no time, with her beautiful shawl around her shoulders and something wrapped in her hands. ‘Come,’ she said. ‘Come, Katherine and you Kane. We are to go to Northcliffe and sort this out once and for all.’

Chapter 10

As I walked with Kane and Tessa across the cliff, Kane's Mother's words kept coming into my head '*secrets and lies*'. What secrets and what lies and if any, what would Tessa know about them? I was curious as to what was in the package she carried under her arm. Kane stopped for a moment, but Tessa had determination in her steps, causing Kane to call after her.

'Mother. Please stop,' he urged her and she did. 'Are you sure you are doing the right thing?' Kane asked, anxiety in his voice. 'It doesn't matter for me, but what of Kate?' As he spoke the words, I was even more perplexed.

'It has to be done, Kane, for both your sakes and your happiness. I have stayed silent for long enough,' Tessa told him and then she walked on once more, Kane striding after her, his arm around my waist.

'What is going on?' I asked, more bemused than ever at the whole situation and then my Aunt's words sprang to mind, '*what would she think if you tell her the truth?*'. What truth and how was Tessa involved in this truth? I was shortly to find out.

'It is the white cottage ahead, isn't it?' Tessa called out to me.

'It is,' I answered, very much afraid as to what was to happen if Aunt Phoebe saw the three of us walk up her path. It was Tessa who unlatched the gate. The sun was now high in the sky and I was very hot. My cheeks flushed as we walked up the path. Tessa raised her hand towards the brass knocker, Kane reaching for Tessa's hand to delay her.

'Are you sure, Mother?' he pleaded.

'I am, I assure you,' and as Kane released her arm, Tessa lifted the knocker, banging it three times on the door. It seemed no sooner had she knocked, when Aggie appeared, looking aghast when she saw the three of us standing on the doorstep.

'Is your Mistress home?' asked Tessa quite calmly.

'She is,' replied Aggie, her voice quivering, 'but she has a visitor.'

'Please tell her that Tessa O'Brien wishes to speak with her,' said Tessa gently, but it was too late for Aggie to relay the message, for Aunt Phoebe had stepped into the hallway.

'What is the commotion Aggie?' she demanded then peering around the door, she could see the three of us standing there. 'Katherine, come in,' said

my Aunt calmly.

‘I wish to speak with you,’ said Tessa in a firm tone.

‘Well I don’t wish to speak with you,’ retorted my Aunt as she caught hold of my arm.

‘Leave her,’ said Kane, stepping between us.

‘How dare you come to my doorstep and tell me what to do,’ said my Aunt indignantly, stepping back from the doorway.

‘Are you going to ask us in, or shall we air our dirty linen on your doorstep?’ asked Tessa, calmly.

‘I have a visitor,’ said my Aunt, quietly.

‘No matter,’ persisted Tessa. ‘This won’t take long if you will just let me in.’

‘Call my Husband,’ my Aunt instructed Aggie and as she scuttled off to do as she was bid, my Aunt stood in the doorway, arms folded across the purple gown she had worn to church that morning. I had just watched the whole scene with fear in my heart, but a fear of what? That Aunt Phoebe would slam the door in our faces? or a fear that I was about to learn something that until now had never been revealed to me? I think the latter thought was to blame.

‘Let us go,’ I urged Kane, just as my Uncle appeared behind Aunt Phoebe, with Constance Trevartha beside him.

‘Whatever is amiss?’ asked my dear uncle.

‘I wish to talk with you and your wife,’ Tessa told him, ‘but not on your doorstep.’ As she spoke, Constance’s face paled.

‘I will leave you now,’ she told my Aunt.

‘No,’ Tessa said, raising her voice. ‘I wish you to hear what I have to say also.’ At these words, my Aunt put her hands to her face in despair.

‘Ask them in Phoebe,’ coaxed my Uncle, at which words my Aunt disappeared into the drawing room, Constance Trevartha following her.

‘Please come in, the three of you,’ invited my Uncle and without further ado, and carrying the mysterious parcel, Tessa stepped over the threshold of Northcliffe, followed by Kane and myself. As we stepped into the drawing room, Uncle Zac urged Tessa to sit down, which she did, Kane and I sitting alongside her on the settle, with my Aunt and Constance sat on the opposite one.

‘Now you have lured your way into our home,’ began my Aunt, ‘maybe you will be so kind as to explain why you are here and then you may go.’

At these words, Tessa unwrapped the parcel she was carrying and placed the contents on the table and I gasped with amazement.

'It is my keepsake box, but I thought…'

'No, Katherine, it is my keepsake box,' Tessa interrupted. 'Please go and fetch yours and we will wait for you.' I did as I was asked and on reaching my room, I could see that my beautiful box was indeed on the dressing table where I had left it. Hurrying back down the stairs and into the drawing room once more, I placed my keepsake box beside Tessa's.

'They are identical,' I said quietly as Uncle Zac leaned forward in the armchair to look more closely as I did, noting the boxes were exactly the same, from the exquisite pink roses and rosebuds on the lid to the tiny pink hearts intertwined with the gilding.

'Katherine has gypsy blood in her veins, hasn't she?' said Tessa addressing my Aunt. For a moment, there was a deathly silence before my Aunt spoke.

'How on earth can you come to this conclusion, from the ownership of a keepsake box?' she said, her eyes never leaving the contents of the table.

'I will show you,' Tessa replied, reaching across for her exquisite box. Lifting the lid she removed the contents then felt along the back of the base and I heard a click and as if my magic, Tessa lifted out the interior of the box and reaching inside, she drew out a small crocheted baby jacket decorated with pink ribbon.

'Now, if I am correct, the same thing will happen to Kate's box,' she explained and I was mesmerised as she put the contents of my box on the table before her, then reaching for the secret lever, she then lifted out the contents with a flourish and sure enough, she held a small crocheted baby's jacket in her hand. It was identical to the first one and edged with pink ribbon, the same ribbon which was lying on the top of my keepsake box.

'So who was my Mother?' I asked Tessa.

'She was my Sister, Katarina,' revealed Kane's Mother. The room was silent and Uncle Zac got up and walked over to the window.

'Tell her!' my Aunt almost screamed, breaking the silence, as all that had been told me whirled around in my brain. So I was of gypsy blood, I thought, amazed at this revelation. This would explain why I was so drawn to the gypsy way of life.

'Tell her,' my Aunt repeated and Uncle Zac came over to me, kneeling on the floor before me.

‘This isn’t easy to say and there is no easy way to say it, but I am your Father, Katherine,’ he said quietly as a small tear ran down his cheek.

‘My Father!’ I exclaimed, as if in a dream and stumbling over my words.

‘But how could this be?’ I asked, holding Uncle Zac’s hand tightly. But of course, I thought, he isn’t my Uncle, he is my Father. Uncle Zac got to his feet and faced us all.

‘When I was betrothed to your Aunt, the gypsies camped where they are now and every day I would walk to the clearing to catch a glimpse of Katarina,’ my Father began. ‘We fell deeply in love with each other and one day we did what you and Kane did, marrying in the clearing and jumping the broom. My family would have none of it and short of running away with her, I let Katarina go and married your Aunt, but a few months later, Katarina appeared on our doorstep, heavy with child. She begged of your Aunt to let her have her baby in the cottage and you were born in this house Katherine, but sadly, your Mother died from a great loss of blood. My wife, your Aunt Phoebe, agreed to bring you up here, making me promise that I would never tell you the circumstances of your birth, but now it has come out in the open, through no fault of my own.’ Here, my newfound Father stopped.

‘So this is why you gave consent for Kane and I to marry,’ I said, the truth dawning on me, ‘and why you were so shocked that day in the dining room.’

‘You are right, Katherine. When I knew that you too had jumped the broom, I just wanted you to be happy and share your life with the person you loved. I am not ashamed to say I loved your Mother, but I have a loyalty to my wife.’

‘Loyalty,’ scoffed my Aunt.

‘There isn’t a day I haven’t thought of Katarina,’ admitted my Father. ‘Please say you understand,’ he pleaded, at which words, I got up and put my arms around him.

‘I forgive you,’ I whispered and turning to my Aunt, said, ‘and I thank you for bringing me up as you did, Aunt.’

‘This doesn’t mean that I give you my blessing,’ said Aunt Phoebe.

‘Maybe you will when I tell you something else,’ said Tessa, who had sat quietly throughout my Father’s admission.

‘There is nothing you can possibly tell me which would make me change my mind,’ my Aunt replied resolutely.

‘What if I were to tell you that Kane is a son of Treverrick.’ Tessa revealed, looking at Constance Trevartha as she spoke.

‘A son of Treverrick!’ my Aunt exclaimed, looking at Constance.

‘Neither I nor Jed are this young man’s parents and he knows it,’ said Tessa.

‘Then who does Kane belong to?’ Aunt Phoebe said incredulously and there was a moment’s pause until Constance spoke.

‘It is Patience,’ she revealed.

‘I just cannot believe this,’ said my bemused Aunt.

‘It is true,’ began Constance. ‘My sister gave birth to a little boy, outside of wedlock and we asked Jed and Tessa if they would raise him as their own, so as to avoid scandal. Patience was sent to France, from where she hasn’t long returned.’

‘So you knew this, Kane?’ I said, looking to him for an answer.

‘Tessa told me when I was ten years old, but I was happy having been brought up in the gypsy way of life and I would never want to change that,’ he admitted.

‘So what say you now?’ Tessa asked of my Aunt, who sat with an ashen face.

‘Maybe I could fold under the circumstances,’ she replied meekly.

‘So you would judge a man on the circumstance of his birth and not the person himself?’ queried Tessa.

‘It would appear so,’ my Aunt said meekly, ‘and I could not bear Katherine to do what her Father did twenty years ago and ruin her life.’

‘I will look after Kate and cherish her for the rest of our lives, but I will not give up my way of life,’ Kane said emphatically.

‘I do understand now, your dilemma, Aunt,’ I told her.

‘I take it, you two young people are to marry,’ said Constance Trevartha.

‘We have jumped the broom,’ revealed Kane, ‘but are now in the process of marrying in church, if it is to be allowed.’

‘I guessed as much when the banns were called this morning and I must admit to being happy for Patience’s son, for he couldn’t be marrying a lovelier young woman,’ she said kindly.

‘Thank you, Mrs Trevartha,’ I responded with a grateful heart.

‘What problem have you marrying in the church?’ my Aunt’s friend asked.

‘I am not of your religion, which could be a stumbling block,’ Kane told her.

‘I think I can help you there,’ said Constance. ‘Before we handed Kane over to Tessa and Jed, he was baptised in the church one morning. It must be on the church records.’ At these words, I looked at Kane with sparkling eyes, for at last luck was with us.

‘That is good fortune,’ said Kane looking at me. ‘It would seem at last, we can be together.’

‘And will you give these two young people who are so in love, your blessing now?’ asked my Father of his Wife, at which words, she looked down at her lap for a moment and then looking up said, ‘I have no reason not to,’ and at these words, I breathed a big sigh of relief.

Aggie brought us a tray of tea and cake as requested by my Aunt and while I sipped at my tea, I mulled over the recent revelations. It must have been hard for my Aunt to carry such a secret for twenty years and I could now understand why she was so against my union with Kane, also I could hardly believe that Kane was Patience’s son but I was so glad Tessa had insisted on coming to Northcliffe today, for I had found a Father and was now free to marry Kane and be with him for the rest of my days.

I lifted up the baby coat and said to Tessa, ‘So who gave you and your sister the keepsake boxes?’ I asked.

‘Our Mother, not long before she died,’ Tessa told me. ‘I knew as soon as I saw the one belonging to you, that it was my sister’s.’

‘So you are really my Aunt,’ I declared.

‘It is all very complicated, but yes I am,’ she told me.

‘And was my Mother beautiful?’ I asked.

‘She was very beautiful, you are a lot like her, Katherine,’ Tessa told me ‘and I am so pleased that you and Kane have fallen in love with each other. You were meant for one another.’

‘That is so true,’ Kane said smiling at me.

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I agreed at my Aunt’s request to stay at Northcliffe until my marriage to Kane. Each day I walked to the clearing, sometimes with Aggie and she helped me prepare the vardo for Kane and I to live in. Tessa taught me to crochet and before many days were past, I was crocheting my own sheets which Aunt Phoebe had kindly given to us. She had at last, come around to the idea of Kane and I marrying, although she was put out when I insisted I

wear my cream skirt and orange blouse on my wedding day, for I wanted to look as I had on the day Kane and I had jumped the broom, I also knew that the ceremony in the clearing, which seemed long ago, was the one I would acknowledge all my life, but I would marry in church for Aunt Phoebe's sake.

'I wish to carry a bouquet of poppies,' I told Kane the day before we were due to marry at the church. It was a glorious sunny day and we had been sorting out mine, and Kane's possessions and putting them away in the vardo. Pride of place was the beautiful keepsake box, which had belonged to my Mother and as I laid it on the chest I ran my hand over the pink roses feeling very close to her. My Father had told me Katarina had given it to Aunt Phoebe before she died and made her promise it would be handed over to me when I was of an age to appreciate it, and I certainly appreciated it now.

When we had finished in the wagon and I had surveyed everything for what must have been the hundredth time, we shared a cup of tea with Tessa and then walked through the wood together, hand in hand. It was so peaceful that I could hear the stream trickling across the stones. A blackbird sang as if for us alone and we stopped to listen, both enraptured by the sound, then we stepped into the poppy meadow once more. There weren't quite as many blooms as there had been on the first day we had walked this way, but enough for me to fashion a bouquet to carry as I walked down the aisle tomorrow. I caught Kane looking back at Treverrick, the walls of which looked softer and more inviting somehow today.

'A penny for your thoughts,' I told him.

'I was just thinking that I can hardly believe I was born at the big house and am indeed a Treverrick.'

'Are you wishing that you lived there?' I asked him.

'Indeed not,' he told me. 'I like the free and easy life I have, travelling the country and working in the orchards and waking each morning to the sound of the birds in the trees. What about you?' he asked, taking me in his arms and with one hand, freeing the pins from my hair, which then tumbled down my back in a cascade of black waves.

'All I wish for, is to be with you and wake each morning in your arms,' I told him, reaching up a hand and stroking his cheek.

'That is all I need to hear,' he replied and we danced together amongst the poppies in the meadow, holding each other close, our hearts beating as one

and my green skirt swirling around me. Magically, three Red Admiral butterflies started to flutter around us and as on that first day, weaved in and out between us as we danced and I was content with the man I loved, who loved me in return, enrapt in each other and the beautiful butterfly dance.

THE END

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