



BETRAYAL

in the

**TUDOR
COURT**

Darcey Bonnette

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Betrayal in the Tudor Court

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Keep your friends close, your enemies closer, and your family closest of all... Orphaned at the age of eight, Lady Cecily Burkhart becomes the ward of a rich and prestigious family. Welcomed as one of their own, Cecily is nurtured and loved by Lord Hal and his wife Lady Grace. As the years pass the family's devout daughter, Mirabella, becomes increasingly consumed by her religious vocation. But when Henry VIII's reign of terror begins to spread throughout England, Mirabella's monastic life is ripped from her. As her life is torn apart, the true reason for her religious fervour becomes clear – her forbidden love for the family's priest and tutor, Father Alec. As the family falls apart, Cecily must hold them together. But a dangerous mutual attraction between her and Father Alec begins to grow. Plagued with jealousy, Mirabella unleashes a tumultuous chain of events that threatens to destroy everyone around her, especially Cecily...

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BETRAYAL IN THE TUDOR COURT

DARCEY
BONNETTE

AVON

In memory of two incredible women: my grandmothers, Lily Bogdan and Helen Baer

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Lincolnshire, England Summer, 1527

She hid in her mother's wardrobe. The Sickness would not find her there. Shoulders scrunched, limbs hugged close to her body, eight-year-old Cecily Burkhart huddled against the silks, taffetas, and damasks of the baroness's elegant gowns. She fingered the materials, thinking of her beautiful mother, murdered by the dreaded sweat. She heard the servants' dresses as they rushed in and out of Lady Ashley's chambers. They rustled, stiff with starch, crude gowns of homespun and wool. They did not flow the way her mother's did when she walked across the floor.

But she was not walking across the floor. The footfalls that click-clacked against the rush-strewn chambers now belonged to the physician, the servants, and, finally, the priest as he administered the last rites.

Cecily's mother was dead.

Cecily buried her head against the fur hem of her mother's gown and offered silent sobs. Her mother was the last of them, her father, Lord Edward Burkhart, passing the week before. He had joined Cecily's four brothers, who met the angels when they were but infants. Now she was alone.

Someone called her name. She hugged herself and began to rock back and forth. She did not want to answer. She did not want to think of anything but her mother's gowns. She smiled to herself, remembering Mother gliding across the floor, hand on Cecily's father's arm, in the very gown her tears wetted now. How gentle she was and how merry was Cecily's father in her mother's company.

"Lady Cecily, do come out, lamb!" begged one of the servants, Mistress Fitzgerald. "You must come out of Lady Ashley's wardrobe now; we must know if you are ill!"

"Supposing she passed on and we're not being aware of it?" another of the servants added, her voice wrought with anxiety.

Silence.

"Lady Cecily!"

Cecily drew in a breath. She must not evade them any longer; it was cruel to cause them distress. "I am here," she said in soft tones.

Footfalls bounded toward the wardrobe. "Lady Cecily, child, are you ill? Do you feel hot, child, achy?" Mistress Fitzgerald's voice was taut.

"I am ... well," Cecily assured her. She was not well. Her parents were dead, her family was wiped out, she did not know what was to become of her. But she was alive and there was no other response she could think of.

Mistress Fitzgerald threw open the doors to the wardrobe. Cecily squinted against the painful light and retreated farther back within its reaches. Meaty, chapped hands parted the gowns, revealing Mistress Fitzgerald's broad face and teary brown eyes.

"Lady Cecily," she said in gentle tones. "What have they done with my mother?" Cecily asked, sniffing.

Mistress Fitzgerald expelled a heavy sigh. "Lady Ashley has been promptly put to rest, to help contain the spread of the Sickness." She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "Blast the king for bringing God's wrath upon us and all for lust of that Boleyn Whore, witch and heretic that she is! And blast your parents for supporting him! That's why God took them, you know. They supported the Boleyns and their despicable lot."

Cecily covered her ears against this gloomy interpretation of God's will, averting her head from the round-faced maid.

"I'm sorry, my lady," Mistress Fitzgerald said. "It's just me being mad with grief is all. This sweating sickness came into our country with the Tudors ... and sometimes I'm afraid it won't leave

till the last Tudor is—” At this she cast her eyes to and fro, then crossed herself. It was treason to predict the death of any monarch and Mistress Fitzgerald had enough problems.

Cecily uncovered her ears and stared the maid in the face. “Then I am Baroness Burkhart now,” she said as she realised the fact for the first time. “I am the lady of this house ... of everything. ...”

“Yes,” said Mistress Fitzgerald. “Though this is hardly the time to gloat about it.”

Cecily scowled. “I mean to say, madam, that I am the mistress of this house,” she explained.

Mistress Fitzgerald bowed her head. “Of course, my lady. What can I do for you?”

“Close these wardrobe doors and leave me alone!” Cecily ordered.

Mistress Fitzgerald screwed up her face in confusion, shrugged her shoulders, and closed the doors.

In the darkness of the wardrobe, Cecily inhaled the traces of perfume on her mother’s gowns. She wrapped herself up in them and pretended they were the beloved arms of the woman she would never see again.

Father Alec Cahill saw no valid reason for having to fetch the Earl of Sumerton’s new ward. Now that the threat of the dread sweating sickness was on the decline he couldn’t understand why the Pierces could not get the girl themselves. It was the least they could do for her, a child all alone in the world with no one to care for her. As for the Pierces, while a stag lived in Sumerton Forest they were not to be disturbed. Not when there was hunting and entertainments to be had.

Yet Father Alec liked the Pierces. They were warm and merry, and since being engaged as tutor to their children he could not say he didn’t enjoy being a member of their household. The children were intelligent and eager to learn, the employers were generous and freethinking enough to allow him to teach in the progressive manner he felt would someday benefit the children in what was becoming a fast-changing world.

If there was any fault to be found with the Pierces it was that they were upper gentry and, as with most upper gentry, an inherent selfishness accompanied their station. It would not occur to them to fetch the Baroness Burkhart themselves, not because they were cold and unfeeling but because the thought would never cross their minds. He supposed it didn’t matter. He would endeavour to make the child feel as comfortable as possible until her delivery to the Pierces, where he was confident they would do the same.

Father Alec drifted in and out of a listless sleep as the coach lurched and bounced along the rutted road. When not sleeping, he prayed for the girl’s smooth transition, and it was as he was praying, eyes closed, mouthing the words, that the coach rambled up to Burkhart Manor. He opened his eyes to a sprawling green vista. The manor house was set on a hill surrounded by lush gardens and an imposing stone wall. Vines climbed the walls of the house toward the heavens and Father Alec inhaled the sweet smell of fresh rain and green things.

He was shown into the house, where he was instructed to wait in the great hall for the girl. It was a stunning hall, outfitted with imported Turkish carpets, intricate tapestries, and stained-glass windows bearing the Burkhart coat of arms. He shook his head, awed as always by such opulence. It, along with all of the treasures within, belonged to a single little girl now. Quite heady.

“I’m afraid she won’t come down, Father,” a stout servant informed him with a huffing sigh. “She’s been devastated since her loss, sequestering herself in her mother’s wardrobe. She takes her meals in there and everything—only leaving to use the chamber pot!” With this the round face flushed deep crimson. “If I may be begging your pardon, Father.”

Father Alec smiled and waved a hand in dismissal. “Perhaps you should take me to the girl.”

“I apologise, Father,” the servant continued as she led him up the stairs to the chamber that used to belong to Baroness Ashley Burkhart. “Lady Cecily has always had a bit of a stubborn streak in her and now aggrieved as she is—”

“I am not worried, mistress,” assured the young priest with a slight chuckle.

The servant entered the chambers first. “Lady Cecily, there’s a priest here waiting to see you, a servant of God! You’ll not want to be angering a servant of God!”

“We’re all servants of God, so I expect *he* should not want to anger *me*, either!” a little voice shot back.

Father Alec’s lips twitched, but he refrained from breaking into a smile.

The servant balled her thick hand into a fist and pounded on the heavy oaken doors of the wardrobe. “Now we’ve indulged you long enough! You come out of there!”

At this Father Alec rushed forward, laying his hands upon the doughy shoulders of the servant. “Please, mistress, perhaps you should allow me. If you wouldn’t mind stepping out?”

Scowling, the servant scuffled out of the room, slamming the chamber door so that the little girl within the wardrobe was certain her displeasure was heard.

Father Alec laid a slim-fingered hand on the door. “Lady Cecily, my name is Father Alec Cahill. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind coming out and speaking with me awhile? If you do not like what I have to say you can go back in if it pleases you.”

“No!”

Father Alec leaned his forehead on the door. He found himself wishing with more fervency that the Pierces had come to collect the girl.

“Then perhaps you will allow me to come in there and talk to you,” he suggested in gentle tones. Silence.

“All right, you may come in,” she conceded.

“Thank you, my lady,” said Father Alec as he opened the door and crawled inside the cramped, stuffy wardrobe. He folded his knees up under his cassock and thanked God he didn’t have gout. “This is a rather nice spot, my lady, if I may say so.”

“Thank you,” the child replied, her voice thick with reluctance.

“I’m told you’ve made it a second home,” he said. “Small for gentry folk, but I suppose it has all the amenities.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “My ... my ... lady’s gowns are here so I stay here to be closer to her. To her smell.” Her voice caught in her throat. “It makes her seem alive.”

“My child, you will never heal from this. I know.” Father Alec heaved a sigh, squeezing his eyes against memories of his own. He continued. “But God will give you the strength to go on and each day your burden will be easier to bear. You must honour their memory by living. There is so much of the world to see, so much that you need to do. You are the last of your family and it is up to you to be brave and carry on for them, to grow up, to marry and have children. You cannot do any of that if you hide yourself away in this little wardrobe.”

“But if I come out it all becomes true. One day will go by and then another and another. And all without them,” she said miserably. “In here it isn’t quite real; in here I can pretend they’re just away. They were always away so that is easy,” she added with a snuffle. “I can still smell my mother’s pomander, you know. I wait for her in here. Any minute, I keep thinking, she will throw open the doors and find me hiding, just like she used to when she was alive. She would laugh and put her hand to her heart as though I gave her an awful fright—but all along she knew I was there.”

Father Alec was silent along moment. “It sounds like a beautiful memory, Lady Cecily. I imagine your mother must have been a kind, loving woman. It would break her heart to see you hiding away. She cannot come find you now. So she sent God to. And God and your mother both long to see you come out and take your place in the world.”

The child was silent.

In the hopes she was giving credence to his words, Father Alec went on. “I’m certain the wardrobe with all of your mother’s lovely gowns can be brought to your new chambers at Sumerton,” he told her. “And someday when you are big enough, the gowns can be updated and fitted for you. Your mother would love to know you would use them again, I imagine.”

Cecily paused a long moment, then quietly, in tremulous tones, she asked, “What is Sumerton like?”

“It’s a lovely place, much like your home,” Father Alec told her. “It is surrounded by a lush forest teeming with life and there is a lake the Pierces keep their barge on. There are stables filled with beautiful horses and mews with regal hawks. And Lord Sumerton loves hounds. The king himself has called them among the finest in England.”

“The earl—I am his ward now?” Cecily asked.

Father Alec nodded, then, realising it was too dark for her to see, said, “Yes.”

“Is he kind?”

“He is,” Father Alec told her in truth. He had never known Lord Hal to be unkind. The man always smiled, always had a gentle word for his children, never raised a hand to anyone. “He is kind and quite young, in truth.” He smiled in fondness. “He and Lady Grace, the countess, are both vibrant with youth and vigour. It is . . . well, it is a *fun* place, my lady—very alive. And me, I am tutor to their children, which means I will be educating you as well.”

“Tell me of the children,” Cecily prompted.

Father Alec’s legs were getting sore and stiff within the confines of the wardrobe, but he continued. He would win this child. Rather win her than have to drag her kicking and screaming to Sumerton. He rubbed the backs of his knees as he talked.

“One, young Aubrey—they call him Brey—is just your age, and Mirabella is thirteen. They are loving children and eager to make your acquaintance,” he said. “Why, the whole household has been in a thrall of preparations since news of your wardship. They will be so disappointed if I cannot convince you to join me.” He paused. “Won’t you join me, Lady Cecily?”

She was silent again. “Yes,” she acquiesced at last. She pushed open the doors, squinting as blinding white light flooded the wardrobe.

Father Alec scrambled to his feet, then extended his hand toward the girl.

She accepted it, emerging from the depths of the wardrobe to reveal a stunning beauty with rippling waves of rose-gold hair and startling teal blue eyes set in a tiny face with skin the colour of alabaster. Father Alec’s breath caught in his throat. *An example*, he thought to himself. *I am looking at an example of God’s art, for this child is nothing if not a masterpiece.*

He squeezed the little hand in his. She turned her strange eyes to him, eyes that were a mingling of so many emotions—fear, grief, anxiety, longing. Longing to trust, to be happy. To live.

Together priest and child proceeded out of Burkhart Manor, where waited the coach that would carry them toward Sumerton and Cecily’s new life.

Cecily was well accustomed to opulence, but never had she seen such beauty as that possessed by Castle Sumerton. Father Alec had explained the history of the castle to her as they rode. Built in the fourteenth century and a favourite summer estate of Lancastrians and Yorkists alike, the palatial fortress was awarded to the Pierces, along with the title of earl, when their family assisted Henry VII in his victory over Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth. Since then not only had a little town of the same name emerged nearby to support its needs, but it had been visited by ambassadors and kings and prelates, scholars, princes, and pundits. An advocate of education, Lord Sumerton entertained Europe’s most celebrated minds, men such as Thomas More and Desiderius Erasmus. The Pierces adored giving grand entertainments and feasts, Father Alec told her, and there was seldom a week that passed without guests.

It sounded very grand to Cecily. Yet even as her heart raced with anticipation she feared the transition. She feared liking her new home, liking her keepers. What if she grew too fond of them and forgot her own family? Even now, so soon after her parents’ deaths, their faces were obscured in her mind’s eye, forms that resembled the people she had cherished but were not quite right. Like paintings, their features were soft, a little lacking in definition. Guilt surged through her as she thought of it and she found herself focusing on the miniatures she had brought with her, staring for long hours

at the little faces. But what were miniatures but paintings? They were not her parents; in fact, these miniatures were very poor reproductions indeed.

But as she approached Castle Sumerton thoughts of her parents were replaced by fearful curiosity. The large keep with its climbing turrets captured her breath. She could not imagine playing hide-and-seek here. She took in the vast expanse of lush green forest that surrounded the fortress; it made it seem sort of isolated as opposed to the open, sprawling green fields that had made up the Burkhart lands. Somehow this comforted rather than intimidated her.

Taking Father Alec's hand, she allowed him to lead her into the great hall, which was being set for a feast. Servants bustled everywhere. The hall was being swept and sweetened, trestles set up, plates laid, and orders shouted. Cecily looked toward the cathedral ceiling, one side of which was outfitted with three large windows allowing the light to stream in and dance across the floor. She stood in one of the rays, watching the flecks of dust float and sparkle in the sunlight. She smiled.

"Ah! She has arrived!" a jovial voice cried, rousing Cecily from her reflections. She turned to face a well-built man in his early thirties sporting a close-cut beard, wavy brown hair that curled about his neck, and twinkling blue eyes. His countenance was kind. Cecily was immediately disarmed.

She curtsied. "Lord Sumerton."

Lord Sumerton dipped into a bow. "My dearest little lady," he said. "We mourn the loss of your parents; Baron Burkhart and I were educated together with the Wyatts of Kent." His eyes softened with fondness over a memory, perhaps of the carefree days of youth. He returned his gentle blue gaze to Cecily. "Please know that we will take good care of you and hope you will be very happy with us here at Sumerton." He took her hands in his, offering a bright smile. "I should like to present my family." He indicated a slim, fair woman beside him whose blond hair was pulled back beneath her gable hood. Her sleepy brown eyes were bleary and unfocused. "This is Lady Grace, my wife."

Another curtsy.

"And these are my children. Aubrey and Mirabella." Lord Sumerton gestured toward the children. Lord Aubrey offered a quick bow. He was fair haired and wiry, his smile slow and sweet. His cheeks flushed when he looked at Cecily. She smiled and curtsied in return.

Lady Mirabella was slender and tall, her black hair cascading down her back in soft waves. The green eyes peering out of her olive-skinned face were keen as they scrutinised Cecily. She shivered as she offered a curtsy.

"You will share the nursery with them, Lady Cecily, until you are older," Lord Sumerton told her. "Matilda is our nurse." He nodded to a short, buxom young woman with bouncing red ringlets who tossed her a reassuring smile. "And of course you know our tutor and chaplain, Father Cahill."

Cecily offered a fond smile to the priest whom she had placed all her trust in since this peculiar journey began. It comforted her to know he was a fixture in the household; perhaps it would make her adjustment easier to bear.

"Children, take her to the nursery and get acquainted," ordered Lady Grace in soft tones. "We will send for you at supper."

"Yes, my lady," they chorused. Cecily threw one pleading glance at Father Alec, as though begging him to stop them, to stop her life from moving forward, to suspend the moment of bittersweet uncertainty and anticipation a bit longer before Reality began.

Father Alec only smiled.

Cecily averted her head, allowing herself to be shown out of the hall and up a flight of narrow stairs to the nursery. It was a room far lovelier than her nursery. The tapestries depicted cherubs surrounding the Blessed Virgin, all enveloped in a light so welcoming Cecily longed to be embraced by it. The beds were dressed in sumptuous white lace with cornflower blue velvet curtains to match those that were drawn across the bay window. The floors were covered in soft bearskin rugs to warm their feet and a cheery fire crackled in the hearth.

"What do you like to do?" asked Aubrey as the three took to sitting upon his bed.

Cecily pondered. She liked to be with her mother and father, but they were no more. Aubrey and Mirabella would not want to hear about all that as it were. “I like to dance,” she said at last. “And read. I like to sing and play the lute, too—my . . . my lady played all the time.” She would not cry. They would think her a baby if she cried. She must still her quivering lip.

“Do you like snakes?” asked Aubrey. “I have one,” he said, his tone growing conspiratorial as he reached under the bed to withdraw a little wooden box. Upon opening, it revealed a slim grass snake.

“Brey!” Mirabella cried. “Get that slimy thing out of here!”

“Do you want to pet him?” Brey persisted, thrusting the snake toward Cecily.

Cecily smiled, touched. “I am not afraid of snakes,” she said as she reached out, stroking the creature’s skin. He was not slimy at all.

“Eve wasn’t afraid of them either and look what happened to her,” Mirabella snapped.

Cecily bowed her head, ashamed. She had never likened herself to the woman who steered the entire world into sin.

“She wants to be a nun,” Brey informed Cecily sotto voce.

At this Mirabella lit up. “The abbey is within walking distance,” she told her. “I love to go there and help them with their chores; it is usually forbidden to outsiders, but they allow me to visit. Perhaps you would like to accompany me sometime?”

“Very much,” Cecily told her. She had never seen an abbey before.

Her willingness to acquiesce seemed to please Mirabella, and Cecily’s taut limbs relaxed as relief coursed through her.

At once memories of Burkhart Manor swirled before her mind’s eye. Riding her pony through the fields with her groom, hiding outside the solar to hear her mother sing . . . Cecily squeezed her eyes shut. This was her home now. There would be new memories.

She must concentrate on making them.

It was an energetic young household, abundant with vibrancy. The Pierces surrounded themselves with people their age; few who entered were over forty and all who visited could count on being made merry. Because it was Cecily’s natural inclination to be happy their enthusiasm afflicted her like contagion. She fancied God could not have sent better guardians, and as the weeks separating her from her parents’ deaths turned into months her former life at Burkhart Manor became more dream than reality. Her parents were the undefined faces in miniatures, and while there were nights she awoke crying for her mother, she found that it was increasingly difficult to recall her mother’s voice, her touch, her face.

It startled her; it riddled her with guilt. But then there was a feast to prepare for and lessons to be had, embroidery to do, ponies to ride, and Cecily was consumed with the task of daily living. And, perhaps since Cecily had known such a great deal about death, the mission of living was all the more precious to her.

She loved her lessons with Father Alec. The patient priest tutored the children on all manner of subjects, from Latin to history, from astronomy to arithmetic, and Cecily was a quick wit. She enjoyed the company of the other children. Brey stirred a lot in his seat and his blue eyes were often more engaged by the window rather than his books, but Cecily imagined he wouldn’t need much book learning anyway, since he was the heir and would not be a gift to the Church.

Mirabella had little use for book learning as well, though her intelligence was never in doubt. No, her heart lay with the spiritual. She plagued Father Alec with questions about the Church, about the Holy Orders, her eyes sparkling with longing, her smile as wistful as a lover separated from her heart’s desire.

“Mother says she just likes all the decorations,” Brey would insist to Father Alec when Mirabella demonstrated her desire to take vows herself one day. “The golden rosaries and pretty statues.”

“You hush up!” Mirabella cried.

Father Alec laughed. “If Lady Mirabella is called to join the Church, I am certain it would be for reasons more pure,” he told the boy, resting fond eyes on Mirabella.

Mirabella rose from the bench in the library where their lessons were held and strolled toward the window, resting her long-fingered hand on the glass. “I would join because it is so peaceful there,” she said. “There is nothing to do but talk to God. ...”

“*All* the time?” Brey asked, his tone incredulous. “I would run out of things to say,” he confessed.

“Don’t you want to get married and have babies?” Cecily asked her.

Mirabella shrugged. “Anyone can do that; only special people are called to do God’s work. Besides, He needs everyone he can get for the fight against the New Learning.”

At this Father Alec arched an inquisitive brow. “What do you mean, dear child?” he asked her slowly.

Mirabella fixed him with an earnest gaze. “Well, to keep the Church strong. The book of Mark tells us a house divided cannot stand, isn’t that right? God needs soldiers to combat evil people like Martin Luther and William Tyndale. That’s what the abbess says.”

Father Alec lowered his eyes, his face paling. “Yet we must remember that everyone, no matter how ... misguided you believe their faith to be, deserves to be treated with compassion. Remember, Lady Mirabella, God is our only judge. You—know that, don’t you, my child?”

Mirabella offered a fervent nod.

Father Alec drew in a breath, running a hand through the chestnut waves that grazed his shoulders. “Well, I think that is enough for today. It is beautiful outside—perhaps you should all take some exercise.”

As the children filed out of the room Cecily lingered. She was not like Mirabella; she did not want to talk to God all the time and could not imagine life cloistered away from the world. Yet religion concerned her. She remembered Mistress Fitzgerald’s claim that Henry VIII had invoked the wrath of God for loving the heretical Anne Boleyn. She recalled bits of conversations at Burkhart Manor, her parents discussing something called the New Learning. They spoke of it in hushed voices, sustained with excitement. They did not speak of it with malice, as though it were a plague to fight. They spoke of it with hope lighting their eyes.

But to Mirabella the New Learning encompassed all that was evil. It was an enemy with which to do battle and God was mustering His soldiers.

“Father,” Cecily asked after the other children had left, “is the New Learning evil?”

“There are those of authority who think so,” Father Alec replied in gentle tones as he knelt before her. He studied the child’s face, a face wrought with sincerity and kindness. A face that he enjoyed greeting, a face that could be tear streaked from tragedy but instead chose to meet each day with sparkling eyes and a bright smile.

“But what is it?” Cecily persisted.

Father Alec searched for a simplified explanation. “It means different things to different people, but the central theme is the belief that the Church should be reformed. That the wealth in the monasteries and churches should be dispersed among the people, that sin should not be expiated by paying indulgences—that is, paying the clergy for forgiveness—that church officials in power should not give offices to family members even if they are undeserving ... There are many things, complicated things—”

“But they all make sense!” Cecily cried with a smile. “Why would people think that is evil when they just want to make things fair?”

“That, too, is complicated, little one,” he told her, touched by her innocent summation of the situation. “Many people do not like their authority questioned, even if the suggestions seem reasonable. People fear change and those benefiting from the way things are now will no doubt fight to keep them that way.” He sighed. “It is dangerous even discussing the New Learning, Lady Cecily,

and you would do well not to speak of it to anyone but me. People, like Martin Luther, have been excommunicated for their beliefs and began what some would call renegade sects of their own. They are the lucky ones; others have even been put to death.”

He watched the teal eyes grow round; the alabaster face paled to match the falling snow. “What do you believe, Father?”

Father Alec paused. He reached out to tuck a stray rose-gold lock behind her ear. “I will tell you. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and earth. ...”

Cecily smiled.

“Come now, my little theologian, let us to the outdoors!” he cried, sweeping her up in his arms. “I believe there is a pony waiting for its mistress.”

Cecily snuggled against his chest, all thoughts of the Church forgotten as she anticipated riding on the snow-covered trails of Sumerton Forest with Father Alec and the children.

Father Alec had not forgotten, however. For the rest of the day his thoughts were dominated by Cecily’s questions. He prayed that none would accuse him of leading her in a direction most would consider to border on heretical. On the heels of these thoughts was the knowledge of his own beliefs, beliefs harboured within the deepest recesses of his heart.

He thought of Tyndale’s English Bible, hidden in a chest in his chambers along with other forbidden texts.

He trembled.

He must be careful.



It was Christmastide when Mirabella took Cecily to see her cherished convent, Sumerton Abbey. Together, dressed in thick otter fur-lined cloaks, they trudged through the snow-covered trails through Sumerton Forest to the Benedictine convent that bordered the eastern edge of the Pierces' vast estate. Beneath a canopy of sparkling tree branches they walked and chattered, their voices tinkling like the icicles that chimed in the crisp breeze. Mirabella patted at the heavy pouch of ducats on occasion. The large donation her father sent with each visit was safe, snug in the pocket of her gown.

Preparations for Christmas were being made when they arrived. Pine boughs were being strung about the chapter house and all throughout women's voices were raised in song, their harmonies swirling, filling up the breadth and height of the little chapel, which was lined with stained-glass windows and outfitted with statues of female saints.

Mirabella took Cecily by the hand, leading her throughout the cloister, introducing her to the sisters, who offered warm, cheerful welcomes. All the sisters loved Mirabella and it was with them she felt most at home. Unlike her own mother, who was caught up in running Castle Sumerton along with planning the endless entertainments for her illustrious friends, these gentle women always had time for her. They listened to her. They soothed her.

The two girls approached the altar to light candles and pray before they would join in the decorating. Mirabella cast an adoring face toward a portrait of the Blessed Virgin, drawing from her serene countenance a sense of inner calm she could find nowhere else.

"Here one lives for God and for charity," she explained to Cecily. "At home everyone is frantic and hurried—'Quick, we must prepare! So-and-so is coming! Quick, we must set table! Quick! We must impress Lord Who's-Its! Dress in your smartest gown—you must look your best!'" She turned, gesturing toward the nuns in their humble habits. "But here everyone casts away vanity. Here there is no one to impress. Here all one has to do is pray, sing, help others, and think. To be at peace, perfect peace." She drew in a deep breath, expelling it slowly. "I can *breathe* here. I never think about breathing at home. But here I can cherish it—I can appreciate it. And it fills me up completely."

"Do you expect that is what being in love is like?" Cecily asked her, finding Mirabella's sentiments terribly romantic.

"Yes," a young olive-skinned sister answered before Mirabella had the opportunity. "It is being in love. In love with the Lord. That is why we wear wedding rings and circlets." She held up her slim-fingered left hand to display the humble gold band.

"Sister Julia!" Mirabella cried, her face alight with joy as the nun, who seemed far too beautiful for convent life to Cecily, opened her arms. Mirabella ran into them, snuggling against her breast as Sister Julia stroked the thick, raven locks tumbling down her back. "You have brought a friend," she observed, smiling at Cecily.

"This is our ward, Baroness Cecily Burkhart," Mirabella introduced. "Cecily, Sister Julia."

Both curtsied. Cecily stared at the woman in awe. She looked peculiar in her habit, as though dressed for a masque. A courtly gown would suit her far more. A vision of her twirling about a ballroom in a fleet, graceful dance seemed far more appropriate than the idea of her on her knees before a prie-dieu all day.

Yet Mirabella and the nun were enraptured by their surroundings, as though they could not imagine being anywhere else. Both faces were made radiant; both were indeed in love with God.

There was something else about their faces, something unsettling. But Cecily could not identify it and as quickly as it was noted it was forgotten.

The girls returned home just as the dusky hues of twilight began to subdue the snow from bright white to a subtle violet. As they scampered into the great hall they encountered Lady Grace, who

rested one slim white hand on her hip while the other clenched a cup of wine. She fixed Mirabella with a dark stare.

“Where were you?” she demanded. “You were to be home hours ago.”

“The abbey, my lady,” Mirabella answered, bowing her head.

“You know you shouldn’t be going without escort, and especially with little Cecily,” she said. “Anything could happen to you in that forest—there could be bandits waiting to do all manner of things to you,” she chided.

“Yes, my lady,” was Mirabella’s automatic response.

Lady Grace shook her head, sipping her wine. “You are a fanatic,” she spat, her words slurring. “And while men cherish piety in their wives, such extreme devotion will repulse a future husband. No doubt your father will have to bribe your prospects with a higher dowry as it is, that your high-mindedness might be made more tolerable.”

“I will not take a husband,” Mirabella told her mother. “As well you know. If a man will find me as offensive as you have always claimed then you should be relieved that I fancy embracing the Church. My dowry would be put to far better use with them than by fattening some lord’s coffers.”

Cecily began to tremble. She did not fear Lady Grace; most often she was quite gentle with her. Yet there was something in Lady Grace that was distressing. Something dark and to be avoided.

Lady Grace gritted her teeth, her cheeks flushing. “A dowry will be paid, but I will be goddamned if a penny of it goes to that abbey or any other!”

“Ladies!” cried Lord Sumerton, who insisted everyone call him Hal, as he made long strides into the hall. He wrapped an arm about Lady Grace’s shoulders, squeezing her tight. “Now, now, my love, we do not wish to frighten little Cecily, do we?” he asked under his breath. Then to Mirabella, “Did you deliver the donation, sweetheart?” His eyes lit with tenderness as he regarded her, but the gentle smile on his handsome face did not reflect in them. At once Cecily believed she had never seen such sad eyes.

Mirabella nodded. “They were most pleased, my lord,” she told him.

“You mean to say that the girls were alone in the forest with *money*?” Lady Grace cried. “God’s wounds, my lord, do you ever think?”

Lord Hal drew in a wavering breath. “I apologise, my lady. I shall make certain the girls are accompanied on all future excursions.” He cast his gaze upon Cecily, brightening. “And how do you find the abbey, sweeting? Fancy it as much as Mirabella does?”

“It is a beautiful place,” she answered. “But I do not think I shall ever become a nun,” she added.

“It is not for everyone,” Lord Hal agreed with a chuckle. “But it is a divine calling and not to be disrespected.” This comment was directed toward Lady Grace, who narrowed her eyes and sipped her wine.

Lord Hal wrapped one arm about Mirabella’s shoulder, then stooped down, lifting Cecily with the other. Cecily relished his generous displays of affection. He was a kind man, never failing to demonstrate his love for his children. His attentions softened the pang of longing for her own father, who often had been distant and preoccupied.

“Come now, sweetings, let’s remove to the solar and warm you both up. We shall send for some honeyed milk and bread and cheese,” he told them. “Twelfth Night is coming soon and I need to know what my best girls will be expecting!”

As they quit the great hall Cecily peered over his shoulder where Lady Grace stood, head bowed over her cup of wine.

“We have to set to making a match for Mirabella,” Grace told her husband in their bedchamber late that night. “She’ll be fourteen soon. It cannot be avoided any longer.”

“Of course it can,” Hal returned as he removed his clothing and knelt before his prie-dieu. Grace’s gaze travelled up and down the well-muscled torso, taking in the sight of skin made raw by the hair shirt he wore underneath his fine doublets. She shuddered.

“A betrothal, Hal,” she amended in gentle tones. Tears pooled in her eyes. She rolled onto her side, back to him. “Just a betrothal.” She would focus on that. Far better than the scars decorating what would have been an otherwise perfect specimen. “Brey’s future is secured,” she went on. “The little baroness will make a fine wife; add all her lands and ten thousand ducats a year into the bargain and you have one of the best catches in England. Which leaves us with Mirabella. An alliance must be made. We do not have to send her away for a long while. She could remain till she is seventeen, eighteen if she likes.”

Hal crossed himself, then joined her in bed. “A worthy thought,” he said. “Meantime, you will indulge me with peace under my roof.” He rolled her toward him by the shoulder, appealing to her with his eyes. “Please.”

Grace pursed her lips, scowling. She reached up, tentatively fingering one of the angry red sores. “When will you stop?”

Hal looked past her at the bedside table where rested a decanter of wine. “When will you?”

Grace flopped onto her back, staring up at the blue velvet canopy.

We will remain thus trapped, she reflected. Each in our own twisted vices.

The thought did not prevent her from leaning over and seising the decanter, however.

She drank straight from it.

She did not need a cup when no one was watching.

Twelfth Night was ushered in with a feast that many celebrated nobles attended. The children were all allowed to sit at table, though Mirabella excused herself early so that she might devote the night of Epiphany to prayer.

Cecily absorbed the event with delight, however. She had never been to such a gala. Though her parents had socialised with their peers, Cecily was restricted to the nursery. Now she was allowed to be in the thick of things, to drink in the colours and flavours of the evening. It surpassed the bustling excitement of market day in the nearby town of Sumerton and far exceeded a fair—Cecily never cared for the disorganised chaos of fairs. This was splendid—a perfectly choreographed feast. The table was laden with mincemeat pies, mutton, haunches of venison, a fat stuffed goose, brawn, eels, cheeses, bread, puddings, and tarts. The guests attendant were attired in their finest silks, velvets, furs, brocades, and jewels. It was a display of sensory pleasure and Cecily savoured every moment.

She and Brey, as the only children present, were the centre of everything. She was dressed in a silver damask gown with a kirtle of white lace. Brey was dressed to match in a fine silver damask doublet with white hose. Both children’s slippers bore silver buckles encrusted with pearls and they were displayed for the adult guests to pet and admire. Together Brey and Cecily showed the spectators the latest steps they had learned while Lord and Lady Sumerton sat at the high table, their smiles wide with pride.

After a fleet dance that left Cecily and Brey collapsing in each other’s arms breathless and giggling, Lord Hal rose. “What a delight to watch these children at their revels! And what a delight it shall be to watch them grow in the sacred union we have chosen for them.” He paused, casting fond eyes at the children who stood stock still before the assemblage. “Tonight we would like to announce the betrothal of my son, Lord Aubrey Pierce, to Baroness Cecily Burkhart.” He raised his cup. “To the future!”

“The future!” echoed the guests.

None was more surprised than Cecily herself.

She stared at her intended with wide eyes, cocking her head, trying to imagine his features sculpted and angled with five, ten years of age added to his seven years. She could not.

Brey offered a shy smile. “I guess this means we can hunt snakes together for the rest of our lives!” he cried then, as though finding a great deal of refuge in the thought.

Cecily’s shoulders relaxed as she imagined traipsing through the vast forest of Sumerton alongside of cheerful, gentle Brey. “And we can pick berries, too,” she added.

“And go hunting and hawking,” he said. “That will be fun.” He cast a sidelong glance at his parents. Lord Hal was leaning in to offer Grace a peck on the cheek. “What else do you think we have to do?” Brey asked.

Cecily grimaced. “Certainly not that,” she said. “At least not till we’ve grown proper.”

“Yes,” he agreed, sighing in relief. “Meantime, we shall look for snakes.”

“Yes,” said Cecily. “I should like that.”

At once the children were swarmed by well-wishers eager to congratulate them. They were hugged and pinched and kissed. Brey grimaced and wiped the kisses away. Both were soothed from the onslaught by sweetmeats.

“What a commodity!” Cecily overheard one of the lords exclaiming to Lord Hal. “God’s body, man, I expect this child is one of the wealthiest heiresses in the kingdom. A fine suit—I rather wish I had snatched her up for one of my sons!”

“Thank you, Lord Norfolk,” answered Lord Hal. “We are most pleased with the arrangement.”

Cecily’s heart pounded. A commodity. An arrangement. When did a person become a commodity? She had never thought of herself that way. A commodity was a bolt of fabric, a fine jewel perhaps, but her? At once the heat of the room and stench of the different pomanders stifled Cecily. She suppressed the urge to gag as she removed herself from the assemblage. She needed a moment to think about her new estate.

She cooled herself in the hall. She longed to remove her sleeves and run about bare armed but dared not. She did not want to be unladylike. She rolled them up instead. No one was watching, after all. She sank to the floor and leaned against the cool stone wall, closing her eyes, blinking back tears. She could not stave off the dark thoughts.

She was betrothed. She wondered what her parents thought of the match. She supposed it was inevitable that she should, as the Pierces’ ward, marry their heir. It was custom. It was one of the main reasons why people took on wards.

It was good business. She was a good commodity.

“Lady Cecily.”

Cecily started at the husky male voice, looking up to find Father Alec standing before her.

“Are you well, little one?” he asked.

Cecily nodded, brushing the tears aside with the back of her hand. “Do you expect the Pierces like me?” she asked.

“I expect the Pierces love you,” answered Father Alec. He paused a moment, then sat beside her. “Why do you ask?”

“I expect they like me a great deal more for the money and the lands,” she said, scowling at her slippers. “And the title, of course.”

The priest drew in a breath. “Well, Lady Cecily, I will not lie to you. I am certain your assets made you quite attractive as they thought of securing Brey’s future. But even had your parents lived it is likely you would have been made a ward to someone and allied to their son in marriage.” He sighed. “Someday you will have children, Lady Cecily, and you will want to secure for them the best future possible as well. There are obvious benefits of your wealth that please the Pierces no doubt, but look what else they’re gaining! They will have a beautiful, bright, and sensitive daughter-in-law.” He reached out, seizing her chin between thumb and forefinger. “For all you may be bringing to them, you, Lady Cecily, your soul, your self, are irreplaceably priceless and they know that.”

Cecily brightened at the thought.

“This, Lady Cecily, is an opportunity,” Father Alec continued. “You are very young and it may be hard to see now, but you have the chance to shape Brey’s whole life, to mould him”—he offered a brief chuckle—“to train him, if you will, into your ideal husband. You have more influence than you know. What’s more, Lady Cecily, is that you are not going to marry a stranger. You are going to

grow up as *friends*. Few realise how special and rare that is to find in a marriage.” He smiled. “Do you like the Pierces, Lady Cecily?”

Cecily offered a fervent nod. They were the only people she could call family now and they were easy to like. Easy to love.

“Do you like Brey?” he asked.

She nodded again. Indeed, Brey was as sweet a boy as one could find.

“Then I think you have a better start than most,” he told her, taking her hand in his. He rose. “Come now! You’ll be missed!”

Cecily rose and followed him back to the celebration.

She would dismiss her uncharitable thoughts and be what Father Alec said: irreplaceably priceless.

Lent sobered Sumerton, and though there was still a modest amount of entertaining, it was nothing compared to the rest of the year’s revels. Mirabella enjoyed Lent; in its deprivation of physical pleasures she found solace. Quietude. She spent hours in prayer and meditation, enveloping herself in the rare peace her home afforded during this fleeting time of year.

When not absorbed in her devotions, Mirabella passed the grey winter days in embroidering, riding, and lessons. One favourite pastime for all of the children became listening to Father Alec’s tales of his travels through Europe.

“After Cambridge I wanted to see a bit of the world,” he told them one afternoon. “So I travelled abroad. I was given a letter of introduction to study under the great Erasmus; it was he who recommended me to your parents.” He nodded toward Mirabella and Brey.

“What else did you do?” asked Brey, his tone fringed with impatience.

Father Alec offered a conspiratorial smile. “I camped with Gypsies, I preached to bandits and vagabonds—I was held at knifepoint on more than a few occasions.” He chuckled. “I met greatness in humility and humility in greatness.”

“Wasn’t your family terribly worried?” Cecily asked him.

Father Alec’s face softened. His hazel eyes grew distant. “My family was gone by then, victims of the sweat.” He offered a sad smile.

Mirabella reached out, laying a hand over his. “It was God’s will,” she said, her green eyes grave with conviction.

Father Alec withdrew his hand. “Yes ... thank you, Lady Mirabella.”

Mirabella offered her sweetest smile, her heart clenching.

“Then we are orphaned together,” commented Cecily, raising saddened eyes to the priest, eyes made wistful with the pain of loss.

Father Alec’s eyes revealed fondness as he cast them upon the child. “That we are.”

“Yet I suppose no Christian is really orphaned. God is always our father,” Cecily added then, her face brightening with hope. “And He sends us people to look after us and help us, even though our parents were called to Him. Like the Pierces and you for me. That way we need never feel all alone.”

Father Alec’s eyes softened with unshed tears. “No ... we are never all alone.”

Mirabella’s gaze darkened. She had spent hours discussing matters of faith with Father Alec and with unending patience he had indulged her, all while praising her intellect. Yet Cecily’s oversimplified generalisation, along with the mutual loss of their parents to the dreaded sweat, connected her to the priest in a way Mirabella’s devoutness and keen mind never could.

She should not resent her for it. It was unchristian, uncharitable. She was above such things. Yet her gut wrenched and ached with unwelcome jealousy. Cecily was endearing; she was sweet without pretence. Her light permeated the darkest reaches of any room and any heart. Mirabella could not emit these qualities, not because she was not in possession of them but because she preferred her solitude. Her light was secret, sacred, preserved for God and a handful of others, one of them being Father Alec. To see his eyes light with admiration for another seized her with a sense of envy new to her.

She blinked several times. She must not think this way. Cecily was to be a sister to her and to resent a sister was tantamount to resenting Brey or her mother and father.

Besides, Cecily was just a little girl and everyone was sweet to little girls. Mirabella had no reason to fret.

Grace needed another distraction. *Curse Lent and its damnable deprivation!* It was all observed with falsehood, as was most everything Catholic. It was a religion of pretence and ritual, meant to satisfy the illiterate multitudes grasping for visuals. Those with any intellect at all did not appreciate with awe the carefully calculated “miracles” the priests concocted to keep their parishioners in thrall. Grace was never impressed. As it was, whenever she attended mass she could not stop calculating the cost of the exquisite chalices, statues, and other artwork gracing the chapel. And the extravagance of the bishops and priests she had encountered had filled her with unholy envy of its own account.

Grace had heard of Tyndale and Luther, and though she agreed with their various suggestions for reform, she was not a woman impassioned by conviction. Her beliefs were not fervent enough to pursue the New Learning any more than cling to the so-called True Faith. She valued her life, after all. Grace could admit with a dark chuckle that one of the only reasons she resented the wealth of the Church was because she wished to appropriate it.

Thus the matter of the New Learning was only reflected upon during Lent as she wondered what these reformers would do with the season. She couldn't imagine it being made any worse; however, given the reformers' views on simplicity it likely would not be any better.

So it was that Grace needed another diversion; the melancholy was lurking again in the shadows of her mind and brooding over religious and philosophical doctrine would not assuage it. Matters of religion became too heady for Grace and were best left to Father Alec to puzzle out with moony-eyed Mirabella. Meantime, Grace would plan an entertainment for May Day to usher in the spring.

The girls would need gowns. Grace lay back in her bed, steepling her fingers beneath her chin in thought as she envisaged little Cecily and Brey in another matching ensemble. The two were a perfect pair! What a boon the little baroness was! Not only did she bring in a worthy dowry, but she was the presence of beauty and poise. And Brey loved her; they were together all the time, playing as children do. Grace could not refrain from emitting a naughty giggle as she imagined the games they would turn to when adolescence struck. No doubt theirs was fated to be a love match; Grace could see it.

With this to lighten her heart, Grace summoned Mirabella and Cecily. She would invite them to participate in the planning process. Both girls needed to learn; after all, they would be running their own grand households someday and it would give them something to do during the interminable weeks of Lent.

The girls entered her bedchamber, rosy cheeked and breathless from their revels outdoors. Grace offered a bright smile.

“Is it a nice day?” she asked them.

“Lovely!” Mirabella cried. “You should come out, my lady, and take in the air. ’Twould be good for you.”

Grace reached for her cup of wine and took a long draught, then set it beside her, dabbing her lips with her handkerchief. “Yes, perhaps ...” she said offhandedly as she patted the bed. The girls sat, Mirabella at her feet and Cecily at her side. “Now. I've summoned you both to help me plan a grand occasion.”

“Another one?” Mirabella groaned.

“Yes, Mirabella, another one,” Grace said, weary of the girl's aversion to all things pleasant. “A sort of Beltane celebration to bring in the spring.”

“Beltane! But that's a pagan festival!” Mirabella cried, scandalised.

“Oh, bother, Mirabella, I didn't say we would be dancing naked round the bonfire, did I?” Grace returned, thoroughly irritated. “It's just that I thought this would give us an opportunity to ...”

well, to be together,” she added with a wistful smile. “I thought to order some fabrics and we could design the wardrobe—”

“During Lent?” Mirabella interposed, wrinkling her nose in disapproval.

“Oh, my lady, we can plan our own dresses?” Cecily cried, her little face flushing with delight. “Can mine be blue?”

“Blue would be splendid, Cecily—it will bring out your lovely eyes,” Grace conceded, endeared to the good-natured child. “Blue silk trimmed with lace, perhaps?” She reached out to stroke the child’s cheek.

“I think it’s wonderful!” Cecily turned toward Mirabella. “We shall have a good time, Mirabella, with your lady mother. You’ll see! You would look stunning in red—red organza or velvet!” She returned her gaze to Grace. “Don’t you think so?”

Grace nodded; truly Mirabella was an exquisite child, far more beautiful than she knew. A red dress would accentuate all of her assets and if she ever decided it pleased God to smile . . .

“I think this display is despicable!” Mirabella huffed, rising from the bed. “My lady, it is Lent, the time of repentance and restraint. To plan such an occasion now, especially one that rings of Beltane, is an affront to God.”

“Oh, my self-righteous girl . . .” Grace shook her head. “Who needs Father Alec with you around to keep us in check?”

Mirabella turned on her heel and quit the room, leaving Cecily to sit stunned, lip quivering, beside Grace, who wrapped her arm about her shoulders and drew her to her breast.

“There, now, no worries, Cecily,” she soothed. “If I told Mirabella the sky was blue she would say it was brown just to disagree. We shall never see eye to eye, I’m afraid.” She stroked the child’s silky hair, taking comfort in it. “You would still like to help?”

“Yes, my lady,” Cecily said, offering a timid half smile.

Grace relaxed against her pillows. She retrieved her cup from the bedside table. “Empty,” she murmured, scowling. “Cecily, be a lamb, won’t you, and fetch your mistress another cup of wine?”

“Yes, my lady,” Cecily answered as she crawled out of bed to do Grace’s bidding.

Grace watched the child’s competent little hands fill her cup with the soothing, crimson liquid. How good it was to have such an acquiescent child about!

“I should like it very much if you spent more time with me,” Grace told her on impulse as Cecily handed her the cup. “It pleases me to be in your company.”

Cecily smiled, offering another engaging flush of the cheeks. “Thank you, my lady.”

Grace drank her wine. As it surged through her, warming her trembling limbs and calming her racing heart, she smiled. She would get through another Lent.

She had a ball to prepare for.

Hal Pierce spent Lent playing dice with a few other less observant members of the local gentry. He didn’t mind the deprivation, the penance. He considered his life one endless Lent as it were, so the season had little effect on him. And a little dice was harmless enough. He never lost too much; he was careful with his assets. He would not deprive Brey of his rightful inheritance. It was fun, that was all, just a bit of fun. And he needed fun.

Hal was not a drinking man, he was not a whoring man, and that was more than could be said for most men. Thus he took some measure of pride in himself for being able to go through life with such uncanny restraint. A bit of dice and a hand of cards were his rewards.

He had married Grace at the age of eighteen. His heart contracted at the thought. She was the beautiful daughter of a wool baron from York and had brought with her a generous dowry. They got on as well as could be expected, though like most marriages, it did not begin as a love match. Since their wedding day they had been tested with rigorous consistency. His parents were ailing, both passing within the first two years of his marriage, leaving the running of the household and management of the vast lands that surrounded it to the young couple. Yet they endured and with endurance came

love. They embraced their mutual passion for fun and good company. They shared a love of hunting, hawking, and dancing. Grace became the perfect social ornament. If he focused on those elements he could forget the rest, the lonely nights when their home was not teeming with guests, nights spent in separate bedchambers, nights of solitude and reflection on events that could never be changed.

That was when Grace slept with a decanter at her bedside. And that was when Hal played dice.

Because Hal was the only child of the previous Earl of Sumerton it was his hope to fill the house with children of his own. That there were only two and a succession of miscarriages could not be helped. It was the will of God, he supposed, and he cherished his blessings. Brey was a wonderful child, sweet and bonny. And Mirabella ... well, he was certain Mirabella would come into her own when softened by marriage and children. It was his hope that she would abandon her fantasy of becoming a nun. Though he would never deter her, it was not the life he had dreamed of for her.

Dreams ... Nothing had gone as expected. In that his life was a constant illustration.

He sat now, thinking of this life as he shook the dice in clammy hands, surrounded by other men who wondered after their own lives, all of them convening to stave off their own terrible loneliness for one night. They would listen to the rattle of the dice, the melody of their chuckling, the bawdy jokes.

And they would pretend to be happy.

Thus Hal would get through.

Father Alec was witnessing a change in the Pierce household. Though it had been lively with a superficial sort of energy, he could not say his patrons were happy people. Yet when Lady Cecily came ... He was under no illusions. The little baroness worked no miracles. The Pierces were still imbued with their own respective vices. Yet she infused in them a tranquility that he had not seen before. Her innocence, her trusting nature, her resilient cheer endeared her to all she encountered. Brey had a playmate, a companion, an outlet for his restlessness. Mirabella had an affable girl-child to treat as a sister and pupil, someone with whom she could tout her knowledge, someone she could nurture and lead toward her perception of Right. Lady Grace adored the girl and spent entire afternoons absorbing her serenity; she was a buffer to the antagonism experienced with her own daughter. And Lord Hal was fond of her as well; she was his hope for the future. It was from her womb that would descend all future Pierces.

She was of no exceptional talent; she was the type who mastered all she attempted with competence. If she possessed any gift worthy of note it was in her ability to manage people. Though she was playful, she displayed no signs of being a coquette; she would not manipulate her way through life as would a woman of the court. No, it was her sweetness that won hearts. Her sweetness, her sincerity, her acquiescence, her comforting presence.

Cecily was that rarest of things. A soul of complete integrity.

Father Alec drank her in as well. She was as a daughter to him. Perhaps it was because the other children had living parents that inclined Father Alec to believe they needed him less. Perhaps it was that Cecily shared his acute awareness of loss. Or perhaps it was that she was so uncomplicated. So genuine. Whatever it was, Father Alec found that with her he could be as close to a true father as he would ever get.

Of course it was not productive to think like that.

Father Alec did not regret the choice he had made. What other alternative was there at the time? The priesthood made sense. He was the second son of a Welsh country squire. As such, his fate lay with the Church. He did not resent this. He needed an education and the only ones of his class with access to an education of any true merit were priests. Chastity seemed a small enough sacrifice for the enrichment of his mind and soul.

He found other ways to relate to his fellow man and being a tutor was one of them. It gave him the opportunity to experience a little of what he had chosen to forgo. He lived with the Pierces; through them he witnessed the pitfalls and triumphs of a family. He could not deny that he was still

on the outside, a bystander living vicariously through others. The emptiness of it all enshrouded him and more often than not he felt like a fraud, a man dressed as a priest for a masque.

Then Cecily came and with her a new sense of fulfillment, a new sense of connection.

He cursed himself. He should not feel that need. He should be resigned to his lot, the lot that he chose. Yet what harm was there in pretending? Was he not called Father for a reason? He chose to be as loving as a father to God's people, to guide them, to nurture them. Surely God could not fault him for that.

So he pretended. Cecily called him Father and he revelled in the temporary fantasy that he was a family man, that he had a daughter.

That she called him Father not because he was a priest.

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