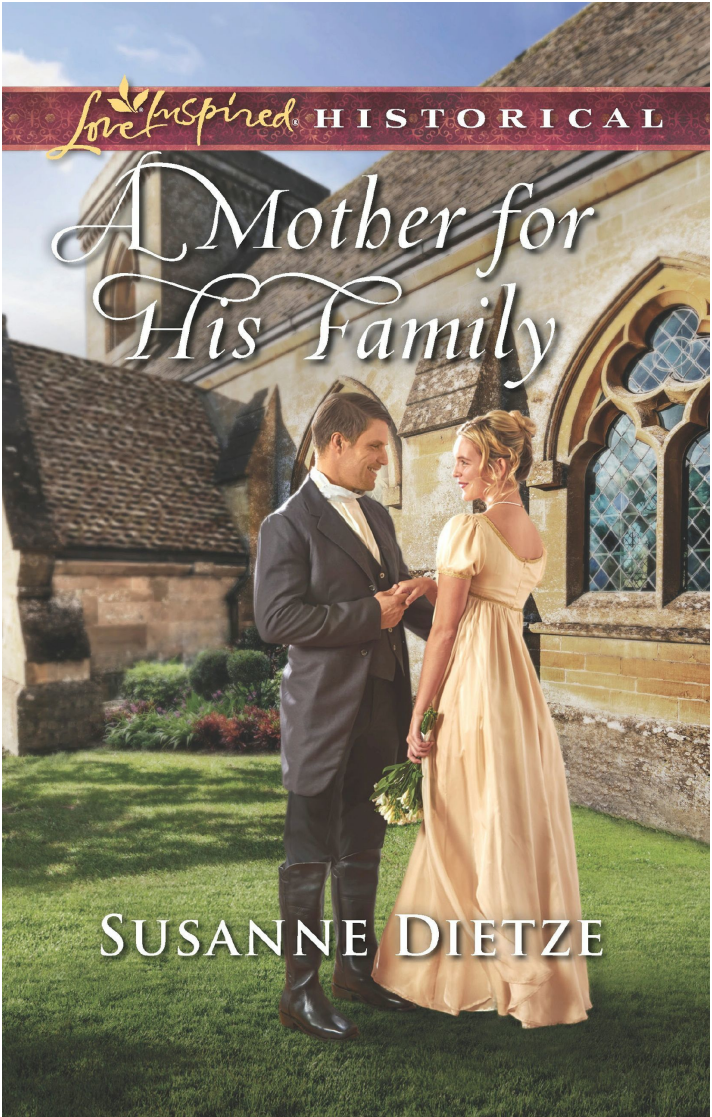
Love Inspired HISTORICAL
A Mother for His Family
SUSANNE DIETZE

Susanne Dietze

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Аннотация

A Convenient ArrangementLady Helena Stanhope's reputation is in tatters…and she's lost any hope for a "respectable" ton marriage. An arranged union is the only solution. But once Helena weds formidable Scottish widower John Gordon, Lord Ardoch, and encounters his four mischievous children, she's determined to help her new, ever-surprising family. Even if she's sure love is too much to ask for.All John needs is someone to mother his admittedly-unruly brood. He never imagined that beautiful Lady Helena would be a woman of irresistible spirit, caring and warmth. Or that facing down their pasts would give them so much in common. Now as danger threatens, John will do whatever it takes to convince Helena their future together—and his love—are for always.

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"Why do you take my part, John?"

"You are my wife. I will always take your part." He leveled Helena with his gaze. "I may not always agree with you, but I will stand beside you. No matter what you do."

Helena blinked. John believed her. He truly believed her.

He pulled her to stand. In a gentle motion, he wrapped his arms around her, even though he had promised never to do that, even though she had sworn she would never let him. He left a proper distance between them, as if they were about to waltz, but this was nothing like a dance. This was an embrace. A true, real clasp of his arms around her back.

Helena closed her eyes. John smelled of starch and wood smoke and soap—so wonderful, she'd bottle the scent if she

could and sprinkle it on everything she owned.

"'Tis all right, Helena," he whispered. "You are safe..."

SUSANNE DIETZE began writing love stories in high school, casting her friends in the starring roles. Today, she's blessed to be the author of over half a dozen historical romances. Married to a pastor, and mom of two, Susanne loves fancy-schmancy tea parties, cozy socks and curling up on the couch with a costume drama and a plate of nachos. You can find her online at www.susannedietze.com.

A Mother for His Family

Susanne Dietze

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Therefore if any man be in Christ,
he is a new creature: old things are passed away;
behold, all things are become new.
—2 Corinthians 5:17

To Debra E. Marvin, with gratitude for your friendship, prayers and encouraging help. If I could thank you by taking you to the UK for scones and tea, I would. Instead, we'll have to settle for Starbucks and a BBC costume drama, which isn't so bad. Right?

With deep appreciation to my family; my editor, Emily

Rodmell; and my agent, Tamela Hancock Murray. Thank you one and all, from the bottom of my heart.

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Chapter One

Perthshire, Scotland, July 1819

With no warning, the rain-soaked ground underfoot gave way, and Lady Helena Stanhope slid backward into the mucky trench. Landing at the bottom of it, she lifted the mud-soaked shred of fabric where her snowy hem used to be and burst into laughter. What else could she do? At least she matched now, inside and out.

Ruined gowns befitted a ruined reputation.

"Are you injured?" Gemma Knox, Helena's cousin by marriage, knelt at the edge of the ha-ha, some six feet up the slope from Helena. A naturalistic feature in the landscaping, the

ha-ha prevented cattle and sheep from grazing too close to the house without impairing the view like a fence would—an obvious barrier to animals, but Helena had stumbled into it easily enough.

Even sheep were smarter than she.

"I'm well," she called, her face upturned to the rain. She didn't rise yet, though. Her right ankle throbbed. So did her pride, little of it though she had left.

Two boys with ginger-blond hair scurried down into the ha-ha with her. Young Petey Lyfeld's freckles faded into his flushing cheeks. "My fault, Lady Helena. I didn't mean to push you."

"You shoved her?" Eddie, two years younger than Petey's eight, gaped.

"No," Helena said with a smile. "I stood too close to the edge to see the world's largest earthworm and I fell, that's all."

Petey's arm had bumped hers, but Helena didn't blame the boy for knocking her off balance. Her unfortunate circumstances were her own fault—not just slipping into the ha-ha, but being banished to Scotland in the first place.

Even being out in the rain was her doing, because she'd been the one to suggest taking a walk to escape the tension in the house. The skies opened once they'd hiked a half mile or more, and now water dripped from the brim of her cork bonnet and the hem of her once-milky-white cloak. A glance at her ensemble assured her she was now brown-speckled as a goat. "Let's climb out before we turn to mud."

"Why is it called a ha-ha?" Eddie gripped Helena's hand and

tugged her upright. “It should be called a no-no.”

A shackle of pain fettered Helena’s ankle the moment her foot bore her weight. “Thank you for your assistance, gentlemen, but I do not seem to be ready for the ascent yet.”

“You are hurt.” Gemma’s lips pressed into a thin line.

“My ankle twisted. A tiny bit. In a minute or two, it will be better and I shall march up the slope like one of Wellington’s men.” But she didn’t mind postponing her return to the house, where Papa no doubt paced and grumbled under his breath, as he had done since their arrival from London yesterday.

He had much to be frustrated about. His health was declining, and his disobedient daughter caused him no small amount of grief.

Her stomach tightened. “Go home and get out of the rain. I’ll be well enough here.” In the trench. In Scotland. Alone and a little afraid.

Gemma’s frown revealed Helena’s trembling hadn’t gone unnoticed. “Don’t be a widgeon. Boys, fetch Uncle Tavin.”

Muddying their nankeen pantaloons and miniature boots, the boys scrambled up the ha-ha in less time than it took Helena to envy their pain-free ankles. “Gemma, no.”

“They’re well on their way. I would pull you out myself, but I’m not so steady on my feet these days.” Her hand rested over her protruding belly. “My husband won’t mind.”

Helena rolled her eyes. Of course Cousin Tavin wouldn’t mind. He’d relish teasing her about it. Ever since she was a girl,

he'd been merciless in his brotherly teasing—

But she wasn't a child anymore. Frederick Coles had changed that, too.

Then again, like an infant, she needed assistance if she was to escape the ha-ha. Just like she needed help to get out of her "devastating dilemma," as Mama called it. Helena's shoulders slumped as she settled to wait.

She glanced up. "You shouldn't be out in the rain in your condition, Gemma."

"I'm in the family way. I'm not rheumatic." Gemma wrapped her scarlet shawl about her.

A steady thudding rumbled through the earth. Hoofbeats. Wincing in pain, Helena hopped forward like a one-legged bird. How had the boys reached Tavin so fast? How had he saddled a horse and—oh.

The rider couldn't be Tavin.

The hoofbeats slowed as Gemma rose. Before she found her footing, a man in a tall beaver hat and deep blue coat was at Gemma's side, supporting her by the elbow.

Helena's pulse battered her rib cage. No, the man was definitely not Tavin.

The man stepped out of Helena's sight. "You gave me a fright, Mrs. Knox, down on the ground. Are you unwell?" He said down like doon, and his yous were clipped and soft.

Helena's throat pinched shut. The man was a gentleman in appearance, manner and speech. And he'd been riding to the

Knox house. That could mean only one thing.

Gemma's face reappeared at the edge of the ha-ha. "I'm in robust health. But I fear we've had a small accident."

"Ah. Which of the boys made mischief this dreich day?" He peered down, allowing Helena her first good look at him. He was a full head taller than Gemma, broad but slender. Dark blond brows scrunched in concern over light-colored eyes that widened when he saw her. He rushed down into the ha-ha, splattering mud all over his boots and buckskin breeches. "Are you injured?"

"No." Her cheeks heated. Surely she blushed so fiercely her wet clothes would steam.

"Yes," Gemma contradicted.

His well-formed lips twitched. "Either way, let's get you out of here, shall we?"

The last man to touch her was Frederick. But this man was not Frederick. She had no choice but to allow his help. "Thank you."

There was nothing lurid in his gaze as he assessed her one-footed stance and extended his arm. "Lean on me."

She placed her hand in the crook of his elbow and dropped her right foot. Pain shot up her bones. "Oh!"

"Forgive me." His arm fell.

"No. It is me."

He rubbed his square jaw with his leather-gloved hand. "I intend to carry you." It sounded like a warning.

"Say yes, please." Gemma brushed rain from the epaulettes of her spencer.

Helena sighed and nodded. The gentleman's arms went underneath her, swooping her from the ground. He'd carried her out of the ha-ha before she realized her face pressed against his spice-and-starch-scented lapels. A rather nice smell.

She jerked her head back. How improper to notice such a thing.

The gentleman peeked at her. "How did you fall down there?" There it was again. Doon. Would Helena speak like that soon, too?

"Clumsiness, I fear."

"No doubt the boys were with you." With steady steps, he marched to a black, white-socked gelding grazing a few yards distant. She might have been a sack of corn seed for all the intimacy of the act. "I'll put you on the horse, if you dinnae mind."

What she minded was encountering him in this sorry state, but ah well. She'd left her pride back in London. "Thank you for your assistance."

With no noticeable difficulty, he adjusted her in his arms and hoisted her into the saddle. She landed square on the horse's back, although it was an uncomfortable fit, sitting sideways on the standard saddle. It was far more suitable, however, than being carried in his arms all the way back to the house.

Although he had been everything proper. Even now, he looked away when she adjusted her sullied gown and cloak over her legs. It proved no easy task, for the drenched muslin of her gown clung

to her damp undergarments, which stuck to her limbs, revealing the curves of her legs. And her cloak did not reach her ankles.

Mama would swoon at the sight.

Her rescuer removed his blue coat and held it up to her. It was on her tongue to refuse, but his expression brooked no argument. His eyes were soft, though. And such a nice shade of green, like the underside of a new leaf.

She unclasped her cloak and draped it over her legs like a blanket. Then she pulled his wool coat over her shoulders, at once enveloped in welcome warmth and his spicy smell.

"Thank you." Did he realize she meant it for more than his coat?

He nodded, then turned to Gemma. "Are you able to walk back, Mrs. Knox?"

"Oh, yes." She tucked her hand into his elbow. "What an exciting day."

Did Helena imagine it, or did the gentleman glance at her and smile? The evidence vanished as if washed by the raindrops pelting from the leaden sky. With a click of his tongue, he urged the horse to a walk.

"In my haste, I did not wait for a proper introduction." He tilted his head to Gemma. "Perhaps you would be so kind, ma'am?"

Gemma's hand flew to her face. "I beg your pardon. In all the activity, I forgot."

She then spoke his name, but Helena had guessed it the

moment he appeared. How many landed neighbors of a certain age did Tavin and Gemma possess? His name was familiar to her. She had spent the past two weeks clinging to it like the rail of a rotting bridge over a turbulent river. Clutching it because, while she didn't quite trust its safety, it was the one hope she had to get to the other side.

He was John Gordon, the Lord Ardoch. The stranger she had come here to marry.

* * *

In less than an hour John Gordon, Lord Ardoch, had returned home, changed into dry clothes and ridden back to his neighbor Knox's house, and been shown with all haste into the blue-papered drawing room. Not one of his London cohorts in Parliament would dare call him inefficient, and if ever a matter demanded expediency, this was it. The task ahead was critical.

Unfortunately, it was also distasteful. Not the marriage, exactly, but the other part. Coming to terms with Lady Helena Stanhope's father.

"And the deed can be accomplished by when?" The powerful Duke of Kelworth stopped pacing a trail into the thick Aubusson rug and leveled John with a glare. Other men quaked under such a stare during parliamentary discussions at Westminster. But not John, which perhaps accounted for Kelworth's bristling manner toward him.

His future father-in-law. He stifled a grin. His peers in Parliament would drop a collective jaw when they found out John

had married Kelworth's daughter. Romeo and Juliet made a less surprising match.

"I must post the Banns first, Your Grace." John sipped his coffee. Bitter, as he liked it.

"That will take too long." Kelworth shoved thinning blond hair from his broad brow in an impatient gesture. "This is Scotland. Marriages are performed by blacksmiths and butchers. Can't the deed be done today?"

The deed, as if his daughter's marriage to him was naught but a transaction. Most dukes expected a better match for their eldest daughter than John, true. No doubt Kelworth would have preferred a Tory, too.

"It could, but your daughter deserves better, and I've my own bairns to consider. A wedding in the kirk is best for everyone. I'll make special arrangements for all the Banns to be read at once during divine services this Sunday, and we can be married Monday." He set his coffee on the filigreed table. "By this time next week, it will be over."

For better or for worse.

A pinprick of guilt needled John. He was betraying his late wife's wishes by marrying again—she'd never said those precise words, but he'd understood her meaning. Catriona would understand him marrying this way, though, wouldn't she? Because it was not for love?

A brief knock on the door drew their gazes. The butler opened the door, admitting a rush of cool from the hall and a wide-eyed

Lady Helena. “Forgive my intrusion.”

John hopped to his feet. Kelworth stood, too. “No intrusion, daughter. The matter is settled. Ardoch is on his way out.”

“I should like an audience with him before he leaves.” Her words were for her father, but her clear gaze fixed on John.

“Well, then.” Kelworth started to sit down.

“A private one.” Her thumbs fidgeted.

“I should be honored, Lady Helena.” John was eight-and-twenty, no green lad, but the idea of being alone with Lady Helena sent his heart thunking in his chest.

Kelworth’s brows met in a fierce line and his face purpled, like he had choice words to sputter. Instead he succumbed to a fit of coughing.

John stepped forward. “Your Grace?”

Helena rushed toward him, wincing with each step. “Papa—”

“I’m well. Don’t fuss.” A few more coughs, and Kelworth’s coloring returned to its normal hue. He stepped away from Helena’s outstretched hand, avoiding both of their gazes. “Five minutes.”

The moment the door shut behind Kelworth with a soft click, Helena hobbled toward John. He hastened to her side, arm extended. “Mayhap you shouldn’t be walking yet.” His wife would have stayed in bed for a week or more after taking a fall. But Helena was not Catriona, was she?

He shoved the dangerous thought aside and assisted Helena into the fireside chair vacated by her father.

"I'm already much better. 'twas just a twist." She'd changed clothing since her tumble into the ha-ha, and her high-neck gown of white covered her, throat to wrist. She looked the model of modesty.

Something they both knew to be an overstatement.

He pitied her and her mistaken choice to trust the wrong gentleman, and it was clear from her demeanor that she regretted it. But here she was, paying the price, without tears or wailing, and he couldn't help but admire her resolve. He took the seat beside her.

"How may I put you at ease?"

"You already have, more than you know. Agreeing to a, er, convenient marriage to me, sight unseen?"

In a fit of madness four weeks ago, he'd confided to Tavin how much he wished he had a wife—for the children's sake but no more—but he'd expected nothing to come of his admission other than relief at sharing his burden with a friend.

Tavin, however, knew of a female who sought a husband—who was rather desperate for one, as it turned out. When John learned the lady was amenable to a marriage in name only, he couldn't help but believe it an answer to prayer.

"You agreed to the same. We both have our reasons."

"As to that." She swallowed. Pinked like a cherry. Looked everywhere but at him. "Papa wished to rush the wedding in the event I was in a d-delicate state."

Oh. "I assure you, it doesn't matter to me if you are with child

or not."

"I'm not. In a delicate state, that is. If you're to be my husband, you should know."

So she had no need of an immediate marriage, after all. Did that mean she wished to break their arrangement altogether?

Of course she did. Who would wish to bind herself to a stranger and raise his children?

Disappointment soured his stomach. He needed a wife. No one could replace Catriona for the children, but they needed someone. Needed her now, because he had failed so miserably.

But that wasn't Lady Helena's problem; it was his. He forced a smile. "I see. Fear not, Lady Helena. I shall speak to your father and tell him we decided to break our arrangement."

"No, you misunderstand. I'm willing to marry you. But you deserved the truth first. If you do not wish to marry me now that you've met me, however, I understand." She looked into the hearth, presenting him with her profile. Her blue eyes flashed silver in the firelight until the fringe of her dark lashes lowered, allowing him the freedom to truly look on her. She was dainty, from her fingers to her pert nose. Tendrils of blond hair escaped the pins at her crown to curl about her temples.

She was lovely, his bride-to-be. But frightened, too. Her fingers clutched the armrests of her chair.

She need never be frightened of him. "Our convenient arrangement might be unusual, but it suits me well," he said. "We may marry Monday, if it pleases you."

"It does."

This was nothing like his first proposal. His heart had skittered like a snared rabbit's that winter day nine years ago when his father arranged for him to speak to Catriona. They were both nineteen, the same age as Helena was now. A bit young, but his parents desired him to marry at the earliest opportunity. He must produce heirs, as many as possible, because children, as his family knew all too well, were fragile. And heirs were an absolute necessity.

He didn't resist his father's direction to marry Catriona. She was a fair lass with a kind demeanor. He'd called on her at the appointed hour and asked for her hand. She had smiled, he had smiled. He gave her a chaste kiss afterward.

Now, betrothed once again, there were no smiles. No kisses, chaste or otherwise, would ever exist between him and Lady Helena. This was a business transaction, no more.

But they were in agreement. Relief soothed his stomach like a healing tonic, yet a niggling of fear would not be displaced. Would he come to regret this? Would she?

Her eyes were large, as if she expected something. Perhaps he should kiss her hand, if not her lips.

He stood and bowed instead. The scent of clean linen and rosewater emanated from her, fresh and feminine and more appealing to him than it should be. "Thank you, Lady Helena."

"Are we to forever thank one another for our sacrifices?" Her smile was weary. "We shall help one another. But there is one

more thing we should discuss."

A token of his pledge, perhaps? Surely this duke's daughter would expect something expensive. A small price to pay, he supposed, for what he asked of her. He fingered his signet ring. "Anything."

"I wish to meet your children before we make an announcement."

Of course. That should have been obvious. What sort of father was he, to commit to marrying a stranger before he saw how she behaved with his children?

A desperate one, that was the sort of father he was. And he saw no other way to nurture his four charges than to provide them with a well-bred maternal figure to see to their needs. Tavin's recommendation of his cousin Lady Helena's character —disregarding the one grave error that brought her here— gleamed like a polished gemstone. She was a lady of breeding and bearing: educated, refined and gentle with her younger sisters.

"Tomorrow? It would be my pleasure to introduce you." His niece and three children were quick-witted and mannerly.

No doubt she'd love them on sight.

Chapter Two

They are just children.

Helena perched on the settee in her betrothed's drawing room awaiting his offspring, willing her hands to be still. She'd wear through her gloves if her thumbs kept up with this fidgeting.

They are just children. And Lord Ardoch is just a man whom you shall seldom see.

And this was to be her home, the oddly named Comraich. She was more than capable of running it, despite her youth, although the task was a trifle daunting. It was only natural, facing such prospects, for her stomach to stir as if a whirlwind eddied inside her.

But she had not expected to be daunted by him. Lord Ardoch was no longer a distant hope for redemption, but a real man with gold hair curling over his brow, his elbow propped on the arm of his chair, his index finger resting against his lip. Intelligence sparked in his eyes, and his broad shoulders bore an air of confidence. Her husband-to-be was self-assured, noble and handsome.

Handsome? Oh, dear. Her thumbs resumed fidgeting on her lap.

"Your home is a far more comfortable pile of stones than I expected, considering its age," Papa was saying. "How do you feel about living in such an ancient manse, Helena?"

Her gaze flew to Lord Ardoch's. His brows lifted, awaiting her response. Heat flushed her cheeks.

"Comraich is lovely." And it was, with its blue freestone walls and mullioned windows. "This is a pleasant chamber, too."

The drawing room benefited from southwestern exposure. Light spilled through the windows to brighten the cheerful green and cream decorating the walls and furnishings. A gilt pianoforte

occupied the corner by the window, and Helena itched to touch the keys. Once Lord Ardoch left for London and she was alone, she'd play every day.

One side of Lord Ardoch's lips curved upward. "I'm gratified you think so. My late wife decorated it to her tastes, but you may do as you wish with it."

Alter his wife's rooms? Her hand lifted an inch from her lap. "I would not wish to overstep."

Lord Ardoch's gaze fixed on her hand. "It's not an overstep. You're to be the lady here. Change whatever you like."

What she liked was to change nothing. To be a grateful little mouse. She lowered her hand.

"Change is your way, isn't it?" Papa skewered Lord Ardoch with a glare. "I suppose you'll have some new bacon-brained notion for the House of Lords come January?"

Helena's thumbs fidgeted anew, but Lord Ardoch grinned, appearing almost gleeful. Her husband-to-be could stand up to Papa. Few could.

"Not new at all, Your Grace. I'm determined to introduce a plan to improve education."

Papa waved his hand near his nose, as if the notion reeked. "Do not think I'll support your notions because you are my son-in-law."

Lord Ardoch's smile turned impish, taking years off his countenance. Was this what his sons looked like? If so, they no doubt got away with heaps of mischief.

"I would not have dared dreamt it so, Your Grace. But neither will I neglect my determination to see the children of Britain educated."

"All children?" Helena blurted. Did he mean the poor? Or just poor boys?

Papa stiffened beside her. "He'd insist the government school every urchin."

At a soft shuffle at the door, her fiancé's gaze riveted behind Helena. "Speaking of children, mine are here at last."

A flutter twisted in Helena's stomach as she and Papa stood. Would they like her? She would be their mother. Not in the real way, but she would try to make a worthy substitute. She'd always wanted to be a mother, after all.

Four children—two boys and two girls—assembled like infantrymen into a line, although the smallest girl needed the assistance of the young maid with mouse-brown hair and a beak nose.

Lord Ardoch made introductions, and the children performed precise bows and curtsies. "'Tis an honor, Your Grace," they each said to Papa. Mama would approve of their deferential bearing at being condescended to by a duke.

But Helena didn't wish them to feel condescended to by her. She turned to the eldest, a girl, and not Lord Ardoch's child. Margaret Allaway was his deceased wife's orphaned niece. A pretty girl, Margaret had the lean, angular look of an adolescent experiencing a rapid shoot of growth. The top of her reddish-

brown head reached Helena's nose.

"How do you do, Margaret? I understand you are thirteen? My youngest sister, Andy—Andromeda—is your age."

"How do you do, Lady Helena?" Margaret did not return Helena's smile.

Next came the boys, twins, seven years old and—how would she ever tell them apart? They were identical, from their bright eyes to their pointy ears to the light brown hair curling over their collars. The first, Alexander, mashed his lips together as if to stifle a laugh. His brother, Callum, stared at her shoulder as if his life depended upon holding his gaze there.

Mayhap she should address them both at once. "I hear you are busy lads."

"Yes, Lady Helena." One side of Alexander's lips twisted up more than the other. It gave him a mischievous look. Callum grinned in exact imitation of his brother. Was there nothing contrary in their appearances?

A shaft of anxiety twisted in her abdomen.

She turned to the littlest girl, a round-cheeked blonde with clouded eyes.

"Louisa." Lord Ardoch's voice broke in before Helena could greet the child. There was a touch of something careful in his tone. "Lady Helena, Louisa is—"

"Five years old, I expect," Helena interjected. What had he been about to say? That Louisa was blind, in case she'd forgotten? When Lord Ardoch had written to propose, he'd told her his

youngest could see nothing but light. Did he fear his daughter's blindness would bother her? Or did it embarrass him?

The back of his fingers stroked Louisa's rosy cheek. "Her birthday was last week."

No, he wasn't embarrassed. Just protective.

"Papa gave me a cradle for Tabitha, and the boys aren't allowed to touch it," Louisa announced.

Perhaps that was for the best, considering how Alexander and Callum stifled snickers. "Is Tabitha your doll?"

"She is indeed," Lord Ardoch said.

"From Mama 'afore she went to heaven." Louisa's statement was matter-of-fact.

At the front of the line, Margaret stiffened. Oh, dear. Perhaps Margaret missed her aunt, or feared being shuffled off because she was an orphaned relation. Well, Helena would give Margaret plenty of support during the adjustment. And surely, in no time at all, they would be a happy family.

Papa cleared his throat. "Very good, Lord Ardoch."

With a paternal nod, her betrothed sent silent approval to his brood. They executed one last bow or curtsy and filed from the room with the birdlike maid. He watched their backs as they went, smiling, like a loving father.

Helena smiled, too. Had he known her request to meet the children was a test? To see if he was a man of his word?

It wasn't the children she'd needed to observe. Rather, it was whether or not Lord Ardoch loved them. Because if he loved his

children, his motivation for marrying her was true.

He wanted her for his children's sake. He did not want her for himself. And that was what she wanted above all. To not be wanted by a man, not after what Frederick did to her. If she was never going to be hurt again, she must spend her life alone.

* * *

Alone. John was so accustomed to silent corridors and solitary meals and empty arms, it felt almost strange to be at Comraich, with its noise and activity. How sad that it felt strange, too, to hold Louisa in his arms.

Her breath was warm and milky on his cheek as he carried her down the main staircase to the ground floor Monday morning. "You've grown, little one."

"I am five now. Of course I have grown."

"And in eight years, you shall be as grown up as Margaret."

Her brow furrowed. "Will I turn as sour?"

"Your cousin is not sour." Moody, perhaps, but that was the age. At the bottom of the stairs, he gestured to the bird-boned nursemaid, Agnes, to take Louisa. "We leave for the wedding at a quarter to eleven. Ensure the children are ready, please." There was still plenty of time for the boys to work out their fidgets, as they seemed to be doing. Overhead, their stomps reverberated across the oak plank floors.

"Yes, m'lord." Agnes's head bobbed.

He bid Louisa farewell and made his way outside. Dismal clouds thickened overhead, stirred by the chill wind nipping

John's cheeks and nose. His wedding day would be damp, to be sure.

But not without all the usual trappings of tradition. He traipsed over the grass until he spied MacArthur, the wizened-faced gardener with a white forelock escaping a tweedy cap. The man had served here since his father's time, and had seen John bring one bride home. Now the gardener would see John bring another here, this afternoon.

MacArthur spied him and bowed. "M'lord."

"Good morning, MacArthur. Forgive my disturbing you, but where is the patch you mentioned?"

"On the nort' side of the great oak, m'lord. I'll fetch some for ye, if ye like."

"No, thank you. I shall see to the matter myself." Every bride deserved a posy, and it seemed fitting that a husband should gather the wedding blooms for her himself.

Comraich had traditions, although he'd neglected them for some time. When Catriona was alive, he'd been too preoccupied in London to be home a great deal, and she didn't seem to mind overmuch. "You have your occupations, and I have mine," she'd say every time they parted, the wave of her hand more like a shoo than a farewell. Surely she meant to ease his guilt over his long absences in London.

At least, until Louisa's birth.

John winced as pain stabbed inside his cheek—he'd chomped it again. He shook his head and looked ahead for a glimpse of

white close to the ground, but he couldn't shake the image of Catriona from his mind.

He should have spent more time at Comraich with her, but he had a duty to the Crown, and even though he'd not been eligible to sit in Parliament until the session started this coming January, he spent more time in London, it seemed, than he did at home.

So how could he know where the wedding blooms grew anymore?

He tromped through the wet grass, allowing the familiar smells of damp earth and cattle to fill his lungs. For all his absences, he loved this place. And by the end of the day, he'd have a wife who would care for it while he executed his duty.

His eye caught on something small and white. The wedding blooms. Although the stems were slim enough to snap with his fingers, he withdrew a slim knife from his pocket.

The cuts were precise and neat. Just like his life would be from now on.

* * *

Helena had never indulged in daydreams of her wedding day, but if she had, she would have hoped for sunshine, not the cloudy skies overhead. She would have also expected to marry a man she'd seen more than twice.

She was grateful all the same. Lord Ardoch was rescuing her. Marrying him would solve every problem she'd created.

She smoothed her hands over her snowy wedding gown, adjusting the gauze overskirt trimmed in green ribbon before she

examined herself in the looking glass. She looked ready, to be sure, in the dress and with a short veil trailing behind her white bonnet, but her skin was pale, her eyes flat, her lips set in a line. She didn't look grateful.

She looked like ice.

A knock on the door startled her, rattling her teeth. Was she brittle as frost, too?

Barnes, her new dark-haired lady's maid, hopped to open the door. Gemma swept past her, her grin as sunny as her daffodil gown. "How lovely you are, Helena. Here, the finishing touch."

The bridal posy was unlike anything Helena had ever seen. Bundled and tied with a simple white ribbon, a sprig of white blooms lay atop a cutting of ivy, spreading a delicate but delectable spicy-sweet fragrance. "How thoughtful. Thank you."

"Do not thank me. 'Tis heather from Lord Ardoch."

A faint swooning sound came from the usually stoic Barnes.

Her maid was right: this gesture of Lord Ardoch's was thoughtful. The heather was a pleasant token, and far preferable to a more lavish gift. Papa had presented Mama with the Kelworth diamonds on their wedding day, but a convenient wife like Helena didn't deserve anything like that.

She sniffed the blooms. "I thought heather was purple."

"Most of the time. But white heather is special and not easy to find."

"Is it a bridal tradition?" She fingered the slick leaves of ivy trailing the heather. Rimmed in creamy white, the green foliage

echoed the trim of her gown.

"I don't know, but I'm sure the ivy is not. I recall it is his family plant." Gemma patted Helena's arm. "'Tis a Scottish tradition, a way of him welcoming you to his family."

A gesture, which, if theirs was a true marriage, would make her heart swell. As it stood, this symbol was kind, but one more facade to mask the hollow shell that would be their marriage.

"I shall carry it with my prayer book." Helena tied the cuttings to the slim volume using the ribbon he had provided. Or, rather, his staff had provided. He wouldn't have bothered with such a chore himself.

Only a devoted man in the throes of love would pick blooms for his bride.

In her youth, she hadn't dreamed of her wedding day, true, but not so long ago, she thought she would marry Frederick. Sometimes when she thought of it, her grief compressed her chest like too-tight stays, and no matter how her fingers plucked and pulled at the laces, she couldn't loosen them.

Everyone thought she was here today because of her love for Frederick, because she'd made a grave mistake giving herself to him before they wed. Tavin, Gemma and her almost-husband seemed to pity her over it. Would they feel otherwise if they knew the truth, that Frederick forced himself on her? The facts hadn't mattered overmuch to Papa, although he was angrier with Frederick than he was with Helena. He just didn't know how to show it.

He also blamed her for her disobedience in falling in love with Frederick. Well, this was the day she would obey Papa, demonstrating her sorrow to God and her family by marrying a stranger. She squeezed the flowery prayer book and looked up into Gemma's expectant face.

"We mustn't keep everyone waiting. Shall we?"

Chapter Three

Helena pattered up the rain-puddled path to the village church on her father's arm, favoring her stiff ankle. The kirk's weathered stones blended into the landscape's gray-green palette of rolling hills, rain-heavy clouds, mossy gravestones and muddy grass. It was probably damp and drafty inside, but the moment Helena crossed the threshold, she didn't mind the cold swirling her ankles. The kirk felt like something, all right—warm and comfortable in a way that had nothing to do with the temperature.

It felt hopeful, something Helena hadn't experienced in a long while.

Was this from God? Did it mean this church was full of His love? Could some of it extend to her?

Someone must have noticed them arrive, because the murmured conversations of the guests quieted. A nervous thrill twined with the quickening she'd experienced in her body, but she was ready, especially now that she'd felt such comfort. She took a deep breath, filling her nostrils with the smells of every church she'd ever entered: stale air, musty pages, candle smoke and beeswax.

She squeezed Papa's arm as they paused at the threshold to the aisle. She hoped he'd look down at her. Smile and squeeze her fingers. Tell her she made a beautiful bride.

Instead he looked ahead. "Come along, then."

The aisle was as lacking in length as the pews were in guests. A tiny female in dull clothing—the children's nursemaid—lurked in at the rear. Toward the front, a few others dressed in finer attire stared at her with unashamed curiosity. The familiar faces of Gemma and Tavin smiled at her from the left side of the aisle while their wards, Petey and Eddie, wriggled and tugged at their miniature neck cloths.

Lord Ardoch's children stood in the front pew on the right. The boys wore matching brown coats and impish expressions. Margaret, wearing sprigged muslin, a straw bonnet and a scowl, lifted little Louisa in her arms.

And beside the bespectacled, round-faced young clergyman at the end of the aisle, donned in a formal black coat, Lord Ardoch waited, hands at his sides, face impassive.

The sensation of peace she'd experienced at the threshold drained away.

Helena compressed her lips. I do not know if I can address You like this, God, but You must know how sorry I am. Marrying will make everything right, won't it? Will You forgive me, once I do this? Will You even love me?

When they reached the end of the aisle, Papa released her arm. She clutched her prayer book so hard her knuckles ached.

Glancing down at her flowery book, Lord Ardoch's eyes warmed to a deeper green and a soft smile lifted his lips. He must be pleased she'd attached his gift of blooms.

He was handsome, the sort of gentleman she might have noticed before she met Frederick Coles. But as Lord Ardoch was a lord of Parliament, the lowest rank in the Peerage of Scotland, her parents would have dismissed him as a potential husband.

In the end, however, rank hadn't mattered to her that much. Certainly not with Frederick.

Stop thinking of him. She forced her lips to lift into a slight smile. Now freeze.

She trembled. Perhaps in freezing her smile, she'd iced the rest of her, too.

The clergyman spoke of covenant, looking over his spectacles at them as if to impress on them the gravity of such a thing. But she wouldn't be here if she didn't understand. Her pledge was no small thing. It was forever.

A few more words, punctuated by one of the children's snuffles and someone's long sigh. Then Lord Ardoch faced her and took her right hand. Steady, she ordered her twitchy fingers.

"I, John Angus, do take thee, Helena Caroline, to be my married wife, and do, in the presence of God, and before this congregation, promise and covenant to be a loving and faithful husband unto thee, until God shall separate us by death."

As he spoke the vows, did he think of his Catriona, the wife he chose? He was marrying Helena out of convenience, after all.

Then his gaze met hers, its message sure. He would provide for her and shelter her. He would be a good husband in that way. Perhaps not loving, but good.

It was more than she deserved. A jerky swallow pained her throat as she took his right hand. Not too firmly. Nor too affectionate, or too scared, or however else he might interpret her clasp. She fixed her gaze on the precise knot of his neck cloth.

"I, Helena Caroline, do take thee, John Angus, to be my married husband, and do, in the presence of God, and before this congregation—"

She glanced at Papa. His mouth was downturned, like a child's drawing of a rounded mountain.

"Before this congregation, promise and covenant?" The clergyman bore an indulgent smile. She must not have been his first overset bride.

"—before this congregation promise and covenant to be a loving and faithful wife unto thee, until God shall separate us by death."

There. She'd done it. Maybe God would absolve her now.

Her fingers squeezed Lord Ardoch's.

His brows rose.

Oh, dear. She meant nothing more in her gesture than relief. Assurance of their partnership. But perhaps he hadn't understood. Prickles of heat barbed her neck and cheeks. Her hands pulled back, but he held on, his grip far firmer than hers had been.

She couldn't lift her gaze from the buttons of his silver waistcoat while the clergyman spoke about the fruits of marriage. There would be none of that. The warmth of her blush washed away, from the crown of her head down, leaving her cold again.

After more prayers, Lord Ardoch slid a cold, polished ring with a deep red stone on the fourth finger of her left hand.

And then the one other thing. Their first—and last—kiss.

With one hand, he cupped her shoulder, and with the other, he lifted her chin. It was a light touch, enough to hold her steady. But more than enough to send her insides quaking.

He bent his head. His well-formed lips brushed the corner of her mouth, fleeting and gentle. Then he lowered his hands and released her.

She had received warmer kisses on her hands from courtiers back in London. Still, the tingle of his touch lingered. She resisted the urge to touch her mouth.

One final blessing by the clergyman, and it was done. She was married. Her problems were solved, neat and tidy. Her parents would be relieved. God approved, too. From this day forward, everything would be smooth as the cream icing on her wedding cake.

A shriek, shrill and jarring as a parakeet squawk, echoed off the stones. Startled, Helena dropped her prayer book.

Lord Ardoch spun toward his youngest child. "Louisa—"

Louisa's red-slippered feet kicked Margaret, who dropped her cousin with a gasp of exaggerated outrage. Louisa fell to her

hands and knees, screeching.

"Is she ill?" Helena rushed forward.

"No." Lord Ardoch scooped Louisa into his arms. "What is it, poppet?"

"Get it out!" Louisa's screams reverberated through the sanctuary.

Papa's grumble wasn't loud, but it lifted the hairs at Helena's nape. She didn't need to look up to know every eye fell upon them. All she could do was watch Louisa writhe and howl in her husband's arms. Yet he said she was not ill. Then what sort of problem could explain her behavior? Children knew better than to show such poor deportment. In church. At their father's wedding—

Alexander and Callum—whichever was which—doubled over, hands pressed against their diminutive satin waistcoats, silent laughter escaping their ruddy little faces. Why, they weren't just amused by Louisa's tantrum. No doubt the rascals caused it.

She touched the boys' shoulders. Not hard, but enough for them to spin toward her, their eyes wide.

"What did you do?" She enunciated each syllable.

They glanced at one another. Her eyes narrowed.

"Nothing—"

"'Twas his idea—"

"Dear me," the clergyman lamented, retrieving Helena's prayer book.

Louisa thrashed. Lord Ardoch cupped her golden curls, and

below his hand, under Louisa's dress, something moved.

Helena's stomach rippled. "Inside her gown."

Her husband's brows lifted. She may not know him well, but it was not difficult to discern his utter befuddlement. With a huff, Helena thrust her hand down the backside of Louisa's lacy bodice and grasped something hot and furry.

She yanked. A thin, hairless tail dangled between her fingers.

A yip, like an angry Pekinese's, escaped her throat and her grip went slack. A gray blur fell from her hand and shot under the pew. The clergyman clutched Helena's flowery prayer book and the boys fell to their knees. Not out of penitence, but to hunt the rodent.

Lord Ardoch held out Louisa to Helena, but Margaret hurried forward and took the sobbing girl, leaving Helena feeling foolish with her arms extended and empty, and half her new family either weeping or crawling about the floor.

Tempted though she was to swoon, she'd never managed to escape in such a convenient fashion, so she fixed another frozen smile on her face.

Lord Ardoch pulled one of the twins to stand. "Enough."

"But he was a good mouse." The boy's lip stuck out.

The lad cared about the mouse more than his sister? No blood or rips marred Louisa's white gown and the child's cries had hushed, but Helena would have to summon a physician to be certain. "Your sister could have been bitten."

"That one never bites." The second twin folded his arms. "He

goes about under our waistcoats all the time and all he ever does is tickle."

Gemma and Tavin's ward, Petey, broke from the pew. "I want him in my waistcoat."

"Not now." Gemma pulled him back.

"The only creature that beastie will be acquainted with now is the kirk cat, but that is the least of your concerns." Lord Ardoch's brows knit. "Apologize to your mither for causing such a scene at her wedding."

Her wedding, and oh, dear, what had he called her? Helena's stomach swirled as the twin's eyes widened. Then narrowed.

"She's not my mither!"

Well. Louisa was not the only one with strong lungs in the family.

"I won't call her mither, either," the other boy said. At least he wasn't screaming.

"You will not disrespect your m—your st—Lady Ardoch." Emotion bleached a rim of white around her husband's tight mouth. "Apologize now."

The boy's lips twisted, as if he'd been presented with an unappetizing dish. "Sorry, ma'am."

Helena forced yet another smile. "This is a new situation for us all. Perhaps together we might think up a name for you to call me. You cannot call me Lady Ardoch forever." And perhaps they could discuss it later, in private, rather than in front of their assembled wedding guests.

Margaret took the twin's shoulder. "Leave Lady Ardoch alone, Alex. 'Tis her wedding day, after all."

"Margaret." Lord Ardoch's snap brought color to the girl's cheeks. "Your tone leaves much to be desired. Your aunt deserves a better welcome than this."

Margaret hid her face in Louisa's bonnet, but her mumble of "She's not my aunt" was nonetheless audible.

"I apologize." Her new husband looked sincere and poised. Every bit the politician he was, working to pass bills in Parliament.

"None of us has had much time to get used to the idea." Her frozen smile didn't waver. She'd not show how embarrassed the children made her feel.

What had she felt when she'd entered the kirk? Warmth, love? She felt neither anymore, neither in her heart nor radiating from her new family.

Perhaps God had felt the need to punish her further by reminding her that the marriage was as much a sham as the wedding turned out to be. But Helena had been taught that a duke's daughter should exude confidence and poise, so she held her head high as she walked beside him through the kirk door.

Where she was met by shouts and hands. Dozens of them, as children reached out to her.

* * *

John withdrew the purse he'd shoved into his pocket for this moment and pulled out a shiny coin. "Will a shilling do, lady

wife?"

She didn't take the coin. Instead, her face froze in a detached expression that looked too much like her haughty father's for John's taste. Meanwhile, the village children enclosed them, open-handed and noisy with congratulatory hoots. Why didn't she take the coin? Was she as arrogant as her father, dismissing others below her in rank?

John's jaw set. She was the new Lady Ardoch, and she must comply with tradition before displeasure—and then distrust—grew in the villagers' hearts.

He reached for his bride's hand and pressed the shilling into her palm. He'd been in politics long enough to know how to keep his voice level and diplomatic, but be able to convey a sense of urgency, and he strove to use that tone now. "The first one you saw."

"The first?" Her gaze lifted to his, breaking her emotionless facade.

"Is it not customary for a bride to give a coin to the first child she sees after leaving the kirk on her wedding day?"

"I do not know." Her fingers closed over the coin.

A trickle of shame slid down the back of his neck. He'd judged her as arrogant, like her father, jumping to the conclusion she didn't wish to engage with the villagers, when in truth she'd been ignorant of local customs. He opened his mouth to speak, but she turned away and leaned over a ginger-haired girl in a brown frock. The cooper's daughter. "I saw your smile first. Thank you

for your welcome."

"Thank ye, m'lady." The girl bobbed a curtsy.

John emptied the purse of its contents and tossed the handful of dull gray sixpence over the children's heads. While they shrieked and lunged for the coins, he offered her a small smile. Behind them, the children and wedding guests followed them out of the kirk. He waved at the crowd before assisting Helena into the landau they would share to Comraich.

John settled against the squabs beside her as the carriage lurched forward. "You must know how sorry I am about the scene the boys caused. And Margaret, and, well, all of it."

"As I said, it will be a transition for us all." Her expression was polite, which made it impossible to know what she thought.

It occurred to him that his first private words for her as husband and wife were an apology. Half the villagers following after their carriage assumed they were taking advantage of their privacy by murmuring words of affection, maybe even kissing.

Not that he wanted to do such a thing. Never. That one brief kiss he'd pressed on her lips was the only one they'd ever share, and while it had been quick, it had felt important, as if it sealed the vows he made to her—

John blinked. What had they been discussing, before his gaze caught on her lips?

Ah, the children. "My bairns know better. It's no consolation, but they've been without a proper governess for some time. A candidate arrives tomorrow, and I'll instruct the housekeeper to

hire her."

His bride's brows raised a fraction. "No need. I shall see to the matter."

"You don't mind?"

"'Tis my role now, is it not, my lord?"

"John," he corrected. "You are my wife. Please call me John."

Her lips parted in surprise, breaking her polite mask. Many couples didn't use Christian names, but he didn't think he could stand it if his wife—convenient or not—called him by his title all his days.

"John. And I am Helena, but you know that already." Her head dipped, but then her brows furrowed and she turned to look out the window. "Are they following us?"

The villagers' cheers and the strains of flute and fiddle accompanied the carriage around the bend toward home. "Aye, for the wedding feast."

"The entire village will be there?" Her fingers stilled, but her gaze met his in an apologetic look. "Forgive me. I'd not expected much celebration. My mother said—"

Her lip caught in her teeth, as if she bit back her next words.

"What did she say?" Plenty, no doubt, if she was of the same mind as her husband. Kelworth certainly thought John uncouth. "Did she think I'd be inhospitable?"

A vibrant flush stained her cheeks, burning away the cool mask she'd affected. "She said naught about you, just my...circumstances. That there was nothing to be celebrated."

John's amusement fled as understanding dawned. His wife expected no festivities because her wedding was no happy union, but a rushed embarrassment, the fruit of her ruin and his desperation.

He'd not known quite what to expect of Lady Helena, beyond Tavin's assurances of her gentility, but he'd learned a few things of her since their first meeting in the ha-ha. She was willing to pay the price for her mistakes, and she was brave to have made the decision to marry him. Most of the time, she wore a mask that made her appear haughty, but beneath it, she was lost, unfamiliar with her new surroundings. And no doubt she felt quite alone.

The carriage rounded onto Comraich's drive. John had but a moment left of privacy while the liveried footman hurried to open the door latch and lower the steps. "Your mother is wrong. There is much to celebrate this happy day."

And it was true. He'd prayed for a wife to help him, and the Lord had sent Helena. Perhaps the tone of their marriage could be set now, with their first steps on his—their—land. "Comraich means welcome, and it is now your home every bit as it is mine."

"That's a beautiful name." Her smile was small but enough to assure him his words comforted her. John preceded her out of the carriage and assisted her down.

Her head was regal as she met the staff lined in neat rows at the door. She greeted each one, from the lowest of the chambermaids up to the butler, Kerr, the housekeeper, Mrs. McGill, and his valet, Ritchie. Then the other carriages arrived, followed by

villagers, and everyone moved to Comraich's grassy yard, where the aromas of roasting mutton and beef tangled in the air with laughter and strains of music.

After welcoming the guests and nibbling on the roast meat and punch, John and his bride separated. He didn't even glance at his wife until his portly agent, Burgess, stopped midsentence and lifted his brows. "Fetching scene, m'lord."

John turned. His new wife, her white gown billowing in the breeze, linked arms with his niece Margaret as they strolled away from the festivities. Helena's head bent toward Margaret's, and she spoke softly. He couldn't see Margaret's face, but he imagined a smile there.

He expelled a long breath of relief. Thank You, Lord. It seemed he'd made a wise decision, after all. Despite the scene at the kirk, Margaret seemed to be regretting her attitude and was now warming to his new wife. Before long, the boys would, too.

He'd had nothing to worry about, after all. Everything would go well from here on out.

* * *

At least Margaret didn't try to break free from Helena's loose hold as Helena led her toward the house. "When did you find time to do it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Margaret forced a phony-sounding laugh.

Helena's eyes stung from the oversweet tuberose perfume the girl had liberally applied at some point since arriving back from

the kirk, but the fragrant fumes weren't all the girl had put on. "I know the effects of Rigge's Liquid Bloom and a rouge crepe paper pressed against a cheek when I see them."

"I didn't do anything."

"You are not the first person I've met to use color and deny it. Even the Prince Regent." Helena glanced about, thankful they stood in the shadow of the house. "I've no wish to embarrass you, but you are far too young for cosmetics."

Although she had a fair idea why Margaret had put them on: that dark-haired schoolboy who'd tugged Margaret's bonnet ribbon. "Who is that young man?"

"Archibald Dunwood, the solicitor's son." Margaret's tone was superior.

Archibald—like every third male she'd met today. "I see. Well, he will still be at the party after we've washed your face."

Margaret's head snapped back, as if she'd been slapped. "I'm not washing my face. I'm not wearing cosmetics."

Really, was she having this argument with a child? At her wedding party? What should she do? Mama would order the nursemaid to see to her punishment and ignore her for several days, dared she behave like this.

But Helena was not Mama. She looked Margaret in the eye, or at least tried to, for the child stared at the house with a mulish expression. "You may not lie to me, Margaret. I know my being here will be a difficult adjustment for us all, but things will go better if we are honest with one another."

That got Margaret to return her gaze, but oh how it crackled, like a log catching fire, sparking and hot. “May I go inside the house to wash my face, Lady Ardoch?”

Helena ignored the sarcastic tone. “By all means. And then we may start again.”

But Margaret was already stomping toward the house.

It was a relief when Papa approached, a familiar face among the strangers. Behind him, some sort of dance began, with the fiddle and fife growing louder. Papa would not dance, of course, but the tiniest bit of her wished he would dance with her on her wedding. For one person to be happy. Other than Louisa, that is, who’d been sweet enough once the mouse was out of her dress.

“Papa, isn’t this a lovely party?”

“Just so,” he said in a tone that implied the opposite as he stared at a toddler attaching himself to her new husband’s legs. “Alas, I must take my leave.”

“It has been a long day.” Helena’s feet ached. Or rather, one ached. The other—the one she’d twisted last week—throbbed. And Papa must be exhausted, too. He hadn’t been well. “What time shall we expect you to call tomorrow?”

As his head shook, a thin lock of faded blond hair fell over his forehead. “Tomorrow I return to London.”

Oh. Her eyes stung, but she’d not allow tears. “When will I see you again?”

If ever? As if on cue, Papa coughed. She reached out but didn’t allow herself to touch him. He wouldn’t want it.

This spell was blessedly short, however. Within a few moments he took a steadying breath. “I do not know. I’m certain your mother desires a letter from you, once you are settled.”

“I shall write to her on the morrow.” It would be pleasant if he waited to deliver it himself, but clearly, he had no desire to stay any longer than he’d had to. He hadn’t been well, true—

“How could Mrs. Knox permit you to wear that?”

“Wear what?” Was her hem ripped? Did she drip punch on her bodice?

“That gown. ’Tis a good thing no one we know from London can see you—can you imagine what my brother would say?”

“Uncle Cecil?” Papa’s younger brother and heir presumptive was a stickler and looked down his nose on others even more than Mama did, and he’d no doubt disapprove of Helena’s marriage once he learned of it. But why would he care about her dress?

“If your mother had been here, she would have seen you dressed properly.”

“Mama suggested I wear this gown today.”

“Then she was rendered daft by grief, for your gown is a disgrace.”

The bodice was modest, not at all alluring, as Papa had accused her of dressing after Frederick—after that terrible day. “Is it too showy?”

Papa’s lips twisted. “It is too white.”

“White is fashionable.” The words tumbled out. All unmarried ladies—and many married ones—wore white.

"'Tis also symbolic."

Of course it was. Was the church altar not dressed in white at Easter and Christmas and all the other happy feast days? "White is the color of joy."

"And purity, a quality you lack, so there is little joy today, either. You could have made a dazzling match. Stayed close to us in London. Now you've lost everything." His eyes moistened, which made her eyes sting and her hands tremble to reach out to him, but before she could move, he shook his head. "No, daughter, there is no cause to wear white this day."

With that, he left her alone. A few guests approached, expectant smiles on their faces, forestalling her from fleeing into the house and doing something shameful, like giving in to tears. She forced herself to freeze: smile, posture, proud tilt of her chin.

I am ice. I am ice. And if I am not careful, I will crack.

Chapter Four

Helena ambled onto the grass behind Comraich, the site of yesterday's wedding celebration. All evidence of her nuptial feast had disappeared from the scene, like a dream dissolving at first light. One might well wonder whether it had happened at all.

But the ring on her finger and the children trailing behind her were real. This was her life now.

She cupped the wooden ball in her hands, judging its weight. No heavier than a large apple, it should be perfect for the children. Even Louisa should have no trouble rolling it across the grass for a game of nine pins.

Something whizzed past her ear. Helena spun to where the boys scampered over the grass, swinging rackets. They'd hit the shuttlecock toward her. "Too close, lads."

Alexander—she knew it was him because his coat was darker brown than Callum's today—grinned as he bounced the strings of his racket off his fist. "Accident! Sorry, ma'am."

Callum spun away, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

If it was indeed an accident, the boys thought it a lark of one. Helena's jaw clenched. She wasn't certain how to be a mother, but she'd always wanted to be one. To love a child and be loved in return. Surely God had given women some sort of instinct to care for them, too. Things should get easier once she spent time with them, shouldn't they?

At least she would be hiring the new governess today to help ease things along. She should have asked why the children currently lacked one, but there hadn't been time, with all the wedding guests clamoring for their attention yesterday.

She'd hardly slept in her new chamber—Catriona's chamber, with its heavy, dark draperies that begged to be replaced with lighter fabrics, although she'd not intended to change anything. But it was her room now, separated by a sitting room from John's.

He kept his promise and left her alone, but she hadn't slept anyway. Her ankle pulsated all night, as did her head, with thoughts of Papa and Margaret and white gowns and Frederick until her maid, Barnes, brought her a tray of tea and toast at eight o'clock this morning. She'd forced down a bite and dressed,

determined to start being a mother.

Surely Papa would have approved of her primrose yellow gown and matching pelisse. She'd not wear white ever again. Still, her parents frowned at her in her imagination, and her forehead ached.

The smack of the shuttlecock against a tree trunk dragged Helena to the present, where Louisa, held in the nursemaid Agnes's arms, sucked her thumb and gripped a well-loved doll. Beside them, Margaret stared at the clear heavens, a bored expression on her fair, cosmetic-free face.

"Right," Helena said, clutching the ball as if it held her sanity within it. "Who wishes first crack?" She lifted the ball in a gesture of offering.

The children stared at her. Dear God, help.

She took a deep breath before trying again. "Please set up the pins, Margaret. That patch there looks flat enough." The girl slumped off to obey. "Louisa, would you like to go first?"

"Yes!" Louisa's thumb flew from her mouth with a wet pop and she squirmed in Agnes's arms. An exasperated look fluttered over Agnes's thin face as she set the child down and took her by the wrist.

"Are ye sure o' this, milady? She cannae play." Agnes shoved a loose tendril of lank brown hair under her white cap.

"Has she never learned? 'Tis not a difficult game."

"O' course nae, milady. Because she cannae see." Agnes exchanged a glance with Margaret.

How dare she address you in such a manner. Mama's sharp tone resounded in Helena's head. You must assert your place, or you shall never be respected. Sending the chit off without a reference would send a strong message to the staff—

Enough of Mama. The children had experienced too much change of late. They did not need to suffer the loss of a nursemaid now, too, but that didn't mean Helena should cower to the staff. After all, she was the lady here now. "I do not see why Louisa cannot try. Come, Louisa."

A grin split Louisa's rosy face, revealing perfect, tiny teeth. Helena took her moist hand and led her to a spot six feet from where Margaret set the pins in three rows of three. Once finished, Margaret stepped back, concern furrowing her brow. "I'm not certain this will work, ma'am."

Margaret's love for her cousin was clear. Their love for one another is a good place to start. Helena hoped her smile for Margaret was tender and comforting, especially after having to chide her yesterday. "If she does not enjoy it, we shall cease."

Margaret chewed her lip. "Aye, ma'am."

Helena had better think of something for the children to call her other than ma'am and my lady and the occasional Lady Ardoch. The terms were appropriate, but they didn't seem at all warm. But Mother wasn't acceptable, either. Not after yesterday's scene.

She bent behind Louisa and reached for the doll. It was sticky to her touch. "Let's set Dolly down."

"Tabitha."

"Tabitha, yes. She will sit here on the grass." Helena propped the grimy, wood-headed doll on her cloth haunches. "Now, hold out your hands, as if you're to receive water from a pitcher."

Louisa thrust out her hands and giggled.

Helena set the ball in them, cradling Louisa's hands from below until the child adjusted to the ball's weight. Louisa's thumbs and index fingers rubbed over the ball, and she bent her head down to it. Was she able to see its outline, out here in the bright sunshine?

"The pins are on the grass a short distance from us. Roll the ball, like this." Guiding Louisa's arms, Helena swung them down to the child's knees and back again. "Now let it go."

The ball thudded, landing a foot away.

"You did it," Helena praised. Louisa hopped in place, knocking Helena's chin with the top of her head. Pain sluiced through her jaw and brought tears to her eyes.

"Did it go?" Louisa asked.

"No." Margaret's glare caused a different sort of pain to Helena than the bump to her jaw. "She does not even know where to aim."

The twins paused in their game, staring at Helena as if she had forced Louisa to walk through thistles barefoot.

Her physical pain receding, Helena retrieved the ball. "An excellent first attempt. This time let the ball roll from your fingers."

Louisa released it and it trundled far enough to tap a pin. Louisa's head turned to the side, reminding Helena of a robin scouting for worms. "It hit!"

Warmth coursed through Helena's chest. "Indeed, it did."

"Well done." Margaret's frown twitched upward.

The twins dropped their rackets. "Good show, Louisa."

"Now," Helena said, "it's Margaret's turn with the ball."

Margaret scowled, took up the ball and knocked down eight of the pins. Louisa jumped up and down. "My turn again."

Margaret reset the pins. Louisa's roll missed, but Margaret brought the ball back before jogging to stand beside the pins. "Roll it toward my voice, Louisa."

Again, Louisa cocked her head. As Margaret called to her, she rolled the ball, this time knocking over two pins.

Alexander and Callum abandoned their game to join in, and soon the foursome were cheering and teasing. Helena stepped back to stand beside the nursemaid.

"She seldom knocks the pins doon, ma'am." Agnes shook her head.

Mama would send the impertinent Agnes packing before noon, for certain.

Perhaps kindness, shown with firm confidence, would make more difference than dismissing a servant on her first day as the lady of the house. "Louisa enjoys herself. And watch her. When the ball strikes a pin, she aims for the same place the next time. She may never be a champion at nine pins, but then again, neither

am I. Yet I still find enjoyment in the exercise."

A huff escaped Agnes's pinched lips, but Helena didn't care. The scene was too pleasant to be ruined by Agnes's insolence. A blue sky banished yesterday's clouds, and the sun's glow lit up the rocky tor to the east and warmed her back. The children's cheeks pinked from exertion, and they all clapped for Louisa when she struck a pin.

Something prickled Helena's neck, drawing her gaze. A wheat-colored terrier pranced over the yard, followed by her new husband. He strode across the grass toward them, dressed for riding.

What a dashing figure. Not that she should be thinking such things.

The dog ran to the children, its stub tail wiggling with enthusiasm. "Iona!" The game was forgotten as the children patted the dog.

So they had a pet. She should have guessed.

Louisa hopped in place, a whine escaping her throat, until Agnes hauled her into her arms and carried her to John's side, stopping first to retrieve the dolly, Tabitha.

She'd have to remind Louisa that ladies requested attention with words, not whimpers.

John smiled and placed a hand on each child's head as he greeted them.

"I threw the ball," Louisa announced.

"Did you, now?"

He must have seen it, of course. How kind of him to let Louisa tell of it.

The children spoke over each other, relating the events of their game, and Helena hung back, her hands folded at her waist. These children loved their father. God, if You forgive me, could some of that childlike, family affection extend to me someday, as well?

Life was quite long indeed to go through it unloved.

Margaret rose on her tiptoes. "Will you watch us?"

John chucked her under the apple-green bonnet bow, tied at her chin. "Alas, I cannot. It seems we've lost more cattle to theft."

"Who would steal our cows?" Callum's brow scrunched.

"Hungry folk, I fear. I'm also told one of the bulls is causing a stir. He's been separated from his fellows, but I must see what the fuss is about." His gaze found Helena's. "A word, if you please?"

The children pulled faces, except for Alex. "Glad I don't have to ride along this time," he mumbled as he passed Helena.

"You're the heir." Callum shoved his twin's shoulder. "You have to do everything horrible. Don't you wish you were me?"

Helena chewed her lip.

John didn't offer his arm as they walked toward the garden wall, but she didn't need his support over the even grass. He looked down at her with a smile, which was handsome, but it was also restrained. Businesslike.

Just like their arrangement.

"The candidate for governess arrives in a few hours." With the

toe of his black Wellington boot, he prodded a clump of sodden leaves, as if testing whether they concealed a rock.

"I shall be ready for her." Helena may be young, but she was no schoolroom miss.

"Hire her and be done with it. They need consistency, something they've lacked since their mother died three years ago. The sooner someone takes charge of the bairns, the better." His smile faded. "You've only met the children, but remember Louisa's blindness endangers her. Playing outside like this is not at all wise."

Helena's lips parted with an embarrassing pop. "Agnes and I have kept close watch."

"You cannot watch everything. Believe me. My child lost her sight and my wife her life because some things cannot be predicted. But with proper care, hazards can be avoided."

Helena learned that lesson all too well with Frederick Coles. But this? "Play on grass is not so perilous."

"What if a ball strikes her because she cannot see it hurtling toward her? Or she trips and hits her head on a stone?"

The bite of reproof gnawed at her stomach. "I would never put Louisa in harm's way."

"Not intentionally." A muscle clenched in his strong jaw. "You mean well, but you do not know how things are done here. Catriona instituted rules to protect the children, and I ask you to follow them."

Ask? More like order, when she had done nothing to endanger

any of the children. Her hands fisted, but something held her back from arguing further, like a hand of warning on her shoulder. She sucked in a deep, calming breath. John was their father and guardian, and without him, she'd have nothing.

"Very well. Is there a list of these...rules?" Beyond not playing outside?

He smiled that pleasant smile again. Attractive, but the look did not reach his eyes. "Not rules, so much as a system. Agnes knows how things are done here, she can help you. Everything will smooth out soon. I look forward to dining with you this evening, so you may tell me about our new governess."

She nodded her farewell. "Until tonight, then."

He waved to his children and strode the way he had come, leaving the dog behind. Helena watched him go, a mix of frustration and resignation swirling in her chest. How could she be a mother if she had no authority, or if her attempts to better know the children were thwarted by his dead wife's rules—as relayed by a sullen nursery maid?

Besides, John could not possibly expect her to twiddle her thumbs and change nothing but the decor in the drawing room.

Then she sighed and made her way back over the grass.

"Come, children." Her voice sounded flat to her ears. "Time to return to the house."

* * *

After seeing to the tenants and the bull, John was met at Comraich's door by Kerr, the butler. "Welcome home, my lord."

"Thank you." John could hardly remember a time at Comraich without Kerr. The upstanding butler's dark hair was now dulled to a leaden hue, but his step was vigorous and his dark eyes shone with wit. "Has the post arrived?"

"It awaits you on the library desk, sir."

"Excellent. I shall adjourn there now. Coffee would be most welcome."

The butler bowed, and John took the main staircase, mulling over the problematic bull he'd just observed. The animal was a valuable sire, a fine specimen with a long red coat, black-tipped horns and thick fringe over the eyes, but the signs of aggression he'd exhibited toward man and beast alike brought up disconcerting questions. As his stewards were well equipped to handle such issues, he did not normally oversee these types of matters, but since the bull was worth a good deal, he'd been consulted about the possibility of putting the creature down.

He'd chosen instead to keep the bull separated for observation. He hoped he wouldn't regret it, but he'd made what he felt was the best choice.

Like marrying Helena.

Despite some difficulties at the start, this marriage would work how they both needed it to. Today, Helena would hire the governess and restore balance to the house. He could return to London trusting the children would thrive in safety and harmony, and his household would be in order.

That, and poor Helena could recover from her dishonor, too.

He entered the library, and his shoulders relaxed. The two-story room was all wood shelves, scarlet wallpaper and leather, his safe haven. He sat at the desk and picked up the post.

Three letters. Lord Carvey, his particular friend in the House of Lords, shared news, while Earl Grey sought his opinion, requiring an immediate reply. When Kerr brought the coffee, John nodded his thanks and picked up the final letter. It rested on the silver tray, addressed in an unfamiliar hand. On the reverse, a dollop of red wax, pressed with a falcon stamp, sealed the paper. With the tug of his letter knife, John broke the seal, unfolded the foolscap and took a large sip of coffee.

The hot beverage burned his throat when he finally managed to swallow it.

So this was what it was like to receive a blackmail letter. John's pulse pounded in his ears and fury ran hot under his skin.

The author—no, the blackmailer—knew about Helena entrusting herself to a young man in London without the benefit of marriage, and her marriage to John to disguise her ruin. And, of course, this rogue would hold silent in exchange for money. The large sum was to be deposited with a London metalsmith, Travers & Sons by name, at an address on the fringes of London's better neighborhoods. John had heard goldsmiths could be used for monetary transactions between individuals, but he'd never done such a thing.

Then again, he never imagined he'd be blackmailed.

Helena must never know about this. If the true reason for her

hasty marriage to John was made public, her name and honor would be tarnished. So would her family's, but John was far less concerned with the Duke and Duchess of Kelworth's reputations than about Helena's heart and mind. She'd been through enough.

He'd vowed to protect her yesterday in the kirk, and he was a man of his word. He'd pay the blackmailer, then—tomorrow he'd write to his man of business in London to deposit the demanded amount. He'd also insist his man investigate who picked up the payment, too, although anonymous blackmailers tended to protect their identities rather well.

But he wouldn't tell Helena about this. It would only upset her, and he wouldn't want her to experience a tenth of what he felt now. Instead of subsiding, his anger increased as the realization that someone was willing to hurt Helena sunk deeper into his brain. A fresh surge of anger coursed through his arms and clenched his fists.

His hands were steady when he locked the letter in the ornamental box by the inkwell. But they were cold when he laid his head in them to pray.

Chapter Five

Helena plopped her forehead into her hands and muttered. "Geography. Mathematics. Art." One would think a governess would know a fair bit about such subjects.

Or music. Or manners, something Miss Campbell lacked outright. Oh, she'd not been rude, but once she'd confessed her lack of schooling, she'd wiped her nose on her sleeve and

nattered about the benefits of flogging as discipline. Helena's initial misgivings unfurled into certainty.

Miss Campbell was not the governess for the children of Comraich.

Helena rose from the table in the morning room where she had conducted the interview. There was still plenty of time before her scheduled tour with the housekeeper, Mrs. McGill, so she ascended the stairs to the yellow-papered nursery. In the bright central sitting room, the children gathered around a table eating their noonday meal. Agnes and the children, except Louisa, started to stand at her entrance, but Helena indicated that they stay seated. "Pray do not allow me to interrupt your meal."

Sneaking glances at her, they resumed their bites of meat, stewed fruit and a mashed vegetable—well, Callum ate only meat, and Louisa only the vegetable. She leaned forward, her mouth wide like a baby bird's, while Agnes spooned the pureed vegetable into her mouth. Saucy drips of butter trickled down the child's chin.

Helena caught herself chewing her lip, one of Mama's most despised practices—but the sight of Louisa slurping from a spoon was startling. Five-year-olds fed themselves, did they not?

She held back the question. If she asked, Agnes would set her jaw and insist, once again, that Louisa "cannae see." Meanwhile, shabby Tabitha lay on the table. The dog sat on its haunches near Callum's feet, begging for a morsel. Mama had never permitted toys on the table. Nor did she allow animals in the nursery. Or

the house, come to think of it.

Was Mama unique in her rules? Or were things as Catriona, the previous Lady Ardoch, left them? That was the most important question, for Catriona was still the ruler of Comraich. Helena would have to ask her husband.

For now, she made a show of looking into the bedchambers off the right and left of the sitting room, called them charming, and then eyed the fare on the children's plates. "Callum, did you eat any vegetables?"

"I never do." Callum grimaced. "Just meat."

"I don't like meat," Louisa announced.

"Try a few bites of what you don't like then, each of you."

Callum scowled.

Helena peered down at the dog. It seemed clean and well mannered, at least. "Does the dog always, er, attend you when dining?"

Alex shook his head. "Iona is with Papa much of the time. He calls her his lady."

Did he? Helena gave in to the dog's begging look and scratched her behind the ears. Ah, silky. Iona's stub tail wagged. "Iona is the name of an island, isn't it?"

"Aye." Alex started to lick a finger, but stopped at her shake of the head. "There were monks on Iona in the auld days and Papa liked their stories. But I don't remember any of them."

"Uncle John says the isle is deceptive. 'Tis small but has greatness about it, like our pup." Margaret set down her fork with

a ping of finality. “At least, that’s what uncle said when he named her. She may be little, but she can be a fierce thing.”

Helena patted Iona’s sleek belly, which the dog had presented for rubbing. “Well, she keeps her fierceness well hidden in the nursery.” If not at all times. The dog was reduced to a puddle of drooling leisure under Helena’s strokes.

“Did you come to tell us about our new governess?” Callum leaned back, clearly in need of a serviette to his chin. Helena indicated the linen square and nodded. He made a hasty swipe.

“The candidate did not suit. I didn’t hire her.” At the children’s gaping, a flurry of remorse scuttled through Helena’s stomach. “Fear not. I will find another. How long has it been since you last had a governess?”

“Two months.” Margaret took a sip from her cup. “It was ever so sudden. Miss McManus left with Mr. Robertson.”

Helena blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Mr. Robertson. Our music master,” Alex explained. “Agnes said they run off together.”

“Ran off,” Helena corrected. It was far more polite than what she wanted to say, which was to repeat Alex’s remark in an inelegant balk.

Such a scandal. And it had not been hidden from the children. She brushed dog hair from her hands and stood. She had seen more than a few things that could use improving around here, Catriona’s rules or not. She forced her gaze to avoid Agnes’s, lest the look sizzle.

"Enjoy your pudding." She crossed to the door.

Her husband had been correct. The sooner she hired a governess, the better. Helena married to atone for her sin, but clearly banishment and marriage to a stranger were not enough to appease God. Yet He had provided a blatant opportunity for her to continue to make amends. The children were in desperate need of stability and wholesome example. Surely God would provide.

With a renewed sense of confidence, she informed one of the footmen—she really must learn their names by the end of the week—to summon Mrs. McGill for their tour. The housekeeper's arrival was prompt, but her mouth pinched shut like a meat pasty.

Perhaps Helena had mistaken their appointed time. She smiled at the plump woman of middle years, who carried with her the fresh smell of rosemary. "Do I take you away from an urgent matter?"

"Not at all, milady."

A fudge if ever Helena had heard one. The housekeeper's sullen expression did not come close to matching her words.

Helena began to open her mouth to ask if another time was more convenient, or question if something had happened to upset the housekeeper.

This staff does not respect you yet. Make them. Mama's words resounded through her mind.

"Then let us begin." Heavens, Mama's voice wasn't just in her head. It was in her mouth, too. But her tone created the desired

effect. Mrs. McGill had the grace to blink, although her mouth remained set in a pout.

"Aye, milady. Where should you like to start?"

Helena folded her hands over her waist. She knew how to run a household. Time to prove it. "Anywhere you wish, so long as I view it all."

Mrs. McGill stepped back, sending the keys on the silver chatelaine pinned to her waist to jingling. Helena passed her through the threshold.

If Mrs. McGill thought to bore her by showing her every last nook and cranny, she was in error. Helena found the stillroom to be clean and organized, perfumed with lavender and rosemary drying from hooks, and she expressed her approval of the supply of tinctures, vinegars and balms prepared by the stillroom maid. She exclaimed over the spotless house, and nodded in appreciation at the well-stocked larders and cupboards. Candles, cheese and meats awaited future use, and a closet fragrant with the sweet scent of dried apples coaxed a pang of hunger from Helena's stomach that was only heightened when they visited the savory-scented kitchen.

She'd eaten so little in the past few weeks, it was a relief to feel hungry again.

At tour's end, she ordered tea delivered to the morning room, along with a small plate to assuage her appetite until dinner.

"Anything else, milady?"

Now it was Helena's turn to frown. No amount of praise could

charm a smile from the housekeeper. So do not praise, Mama's voice said.

Helena fixed her smile in place. Froze. Prepared to dismiss Mrs. McGill as Mama would.

But I'm not Mama. Nor am I Catriona. Helena could only be herself, and she wanted the housekeeper's affinity. Their duties kept them in one another's spheres, so it was best if they got along.

Helena let her smile crack. "Nothing further, but I'm grateful for your efforts. Thank you for executing your responsibilities so well."

Mrs. McGill's frown altered into a confused curl.

After the housekeeper curtsied and left, Helena's mouth relaxed. She'd done it, soothed the housekeeper's frown. A rush of triumph shot through her veins.

It had been a rough first day, perhaps, but not all bad. Louisa tossed a ball, the housekeeper defrosted a degree and her husband would be pleased that she'd dismissed the unskilled applicant for the children's governess. All in all, she'd accomplished a great deal on her first day as the Lady Ardoch.

She welcomed the tea's arrival and poured herself a full cup. If one day's success was any indication of the years to come, she'd count herself blissfully married, indeed.

* * *

His wife had done what?

John set his fork onto the rim of the Wedgwood plate with a

soft chink. Astounding he hadn't dropped the utensil altogether. "Pardon me, but I didn't quite hear that last bit."

Helena nibbled her food, unable to answer until she swallowed.

Across the gleaming mahogany expanse of the dining table, she made the perfect picture of a lady, all berry-colored silk and proper deportment. Her jeweled combs and pale hair glowed in the candlelight, a glittering contrast to the matte of the marine-blue wall behind her. She looked every bit the daughter of a duke. A lovely daughter of a duke.

John retrieved his fork. He'd known she would be fair of face, of course. Her parents were fine in looks, and apples tended to not fall far from the trees on which they sprouted. But perhaps it might have been preferable if Helena had been, well, plain. It seemed rather disrespectful to Catriona to have married such a beautiful woman.

John's grip on the fork tightened. So his new wife was attractive. There was no shame in finding her so. As long as he did not act on an attraction, he would be a man of his word.

Perhaps these...feelings...had more to do with dining in the company of a lady again. He had not done so in a long time. Longer even than the three years Catriona had been gone. Although his conversation with Helena, who detailed her first day as his wife like his man of business listed cattle prices, was nothing like dining with Catriona.

She swallowed, patted her lips with a linen serviette and

smiled. “I said the ragout of celery is divine. So is the salmon. What a delicate leek sauce.”

Any taste of leeks lingering on John’s tongue had disintegrated to sawdust. “Before that. About the governess?”

“Unsuitable was the word I used.” She forked another bite of salmon.

“How so?” At Helena’s furrowed brow, he lifted a hand. “Perhaps you were not aware how desperate the children’s need is. Our last governess left without warning.”

“I was acquainted with that information.” Her mouth turned down in a fair imitation of her father’s disapproving grimace. “From the children.”

How did the bairns know about Miss McManus and Mr. Robertson? John’s stomach twisted. It seemed the servants had not shown restraint, gossiping in front of his children. Here was yet another reason why he needed a lady in the house to oversee things.

“I share your displeasure over the matter. However, I had expected to remedy the problem of a governess today, as we discussed this morning. Could we have not made this one work?”

“No.” She started to chew her lip, then pressed her lips together instead. “What the children require is a governess of character and education. This woman today did not even use a handkerchief. I do not think she owns one.”

Was that all? “We provide our servants with handkerchiefs.”

“We’d need to provide her more than that before she could

teach Margaret anything. She lacked knowledge of globes, French or history." Helena's eyes sparked. "But she knew plenty about flogging. I know it happens at boys' schools, but I never expected to hear of it as a disciplinary option from a governess."

Neither did John. "Are you certain she said that? Mayhap you misheard—"

"I did not mishear her."

"But she could be instructed of how things are done at Comraich—"

"You married me for this purpose, and I ask you trust my judgment when I insist the woman is as I said—unsuitable."

John's first response died on his lips. As did his second. Helena was right. Flogging wouldn't be tolerated, and it sounded as if Miss Campbell wasn't qualified. He'd wanted the matter resolved today, but no governess was better than the wrong one. And he must trust Helena to hire another, just as he handled the estate and his political issues. This was, as she said, why he married her.

He sat back in his chair. "So what will you do?"

"I shall make inquiries on the morrow." Her lips twitched into a shy grin, a far different smile from those placid, frozen-into-stillness smiles she wore so much of the time. Her expression was not in the least flirtatious. Nevertheless, her little smile drew him in, and he craved another from her, the way the children hungered after desserts of cream ices and puddings. As if he could ask for more, please.

What a ridiculous thing to think, considering their arrangement. He shoved the foolish thought aside. “And in the meantime? Until someone who uses a handkerchief can be found?”

She didn’t look up at him, even though he’d used a teasing tone. “I thought I might teach the children.”

“You?” The word blurted out before he gave it thought.

“Whyever not?” Her shoulders squared. “I’m proficient at pianoforte and not too terrible with sums.”

But she was the high-born Lady Helena. Catriona had never sat down with the bairns, not to read or spin a top or play a tune on the pianoforte. He’d not expected this duke’s daughter to lower herself to execute the duties of a governess. His surprise faded, replaced by a warm glow of pleasure under his waistcoat.

“I think that would be delightful.” His words conjured another of her genuine smiles, the one he liked too much for his own good. He speared a bite of fish.

“How did the candidate for governess come to be recommended to you?” Helena’s head tipped to the side. “She said it was not through a service.”

The fish stuck in John’s throat, even as the plates were cleared. How pathetic he must seem to his new wife, arranging for an interview with an inept governess. But he had thought—oh, never mind. “She is the great-niece of the housekeeper, Mrs. McGill.”

Helena’s lips twisted. “Now it makes sense.”

“What?” He rose when she did.

"Nothing of note."

He didn't believe her. She held something back from him.

Then again, he held something back from her, too. The blackmail letter, locked in the ornamental box upstairs. His secrecy was for her own good, however, not at all like a matter of household staffing. Before he could ask anything further about it, though, her brows lifted. "What is your habit after dinner?"

"I bid the children good-night. Yesterday was different, with the wedding and lateness of the celebration. Would you care to join me in the nursery?"

She nodded. Her hand was light on his forearm as he escorted her up the stairs to the nursery. Her closeness filled his senses, from the rustling fabric of her gown to the delicate scent of her perfume. Everything about her emanated femininity.

Then she looked up at him, casting that shy smile. It transformed her entirely. Not that she was not beautiful when she bore that fixed smile, but when her true smile curved her lips, she was no longer like a magnificent artwork, a cold sculpture. She was enchanting.

He did not know how long he had been smiling back, or when he'd patted her tiny hand, resting on his forearm. But her fingers felt so warm and natural there, he left his hand atop hers.

"Papa, at last."

He startled. Dropped Helena's arm. With too much haste, perhaps, but the children—Margaret and Callum, at least—frowned at his hand on Helena's.

Perhaps they were unready to view a sign of affection between him and their stepmother. Perhaps he'd confused Helena by touching her. He'd certainly confused himself. Affection of any sort was not part of their arrangement.

"Ready for bed, I see." He hurried from her side into the main room, where the four children waited in their nightcaps and dressing gowns. Bending away from Margaret's glare, he hauled Louisa into his arms. She smelled of milk and soap.

"Papa." She sighed. "I'm sleepy."

"Not me." Alex's dressing gown billowed about his legs as he ran circles around John. "I'm a ship in the sea. Ach, a storm." He flung himself into John's side.

"Time to come ashore." John wrapped an arm about his heir's waist and hauled him off the ground. Alex squealed.

"Me next." Callum jumped on John's back, yanking his neck cloth and almost knocking him off balance. Margaret dashed behind John, and at once Callum's weight lessened. Bless her for boosting her cousin's rump, so he wasn't pulling John backward. But Callum's small hands still held John's neck cloth like a leash.

"My throat, Callum." John's request was gurgled. At once, the pressure moved from his neck to his shoulders. "Enough, monkeys. To bed with you."

"Never," Alex cried. "You can't leave, Papa. No more London."

"You must stay with us." Callum squeezed.

"I'm here for a while yet." But he couldn't ignore the pinch to

his conscience.

The boys slid to the ground, and he was left with naught but Louisa in his arms. He kissed her plump cheek, under the ruffle of her nightcap.

"Rest well." Then he bent to Margaret for a kiss, then Alex.

Callum scowled. "No kisses for me."

"Fine, then. Off you go to say your prayers."

The children scattered to their separate rooms.

"Good night, then." The small voice behind him drew his gaze.

Helena lingered inside the threshold, staring at him. He'd forgotten all about her. How thoughtless. Guilt pricked his abdomen and warmed his earlobes.

"Forgive me. Did you wish to kiss the children? I shall call them back." His tone was apologetic, but even to his ears the offer sounded weak.

"No." Her thumbs fidgeted at her waist and she stepped backward, as if in a terrible hurry to escape him.

Little wonder, the way he'd ignored her. "Helena—"

"Good night, my lord."

"John," he corrected her, but she had disappeared into the darkness of the hall.

One step forward, two steps back. Lord, help us find ease in this arrangement, before we both come to regret it.

Chapter Six

Do not run. You are the lady of this house. You are a duke's daughter. Helena forced her gait to an appropriate speed as she

traversed the hall to her suite of rooms, but her legs quivered with the urge to sprint to her bedchamber. To hide.

And maybe not come out again until the children were grown.

What had she expected? That the children and staff would accept her from the moment John brought her here from the kirk? That she would be included? That she would be forgiven enough to be part of a family again?

She shut her chamber door behind her and sank against it. Barnes wasn't here, mercifully. She'd ring for her once she'd recovered herself. Shoving off from the door, she crossed to the window and rested her aching head against the cold pane.

You could have joined in the frolics in the nursery, instead of standing there like an outsider.

But she was an outsider. Besides, what could she have done? Climb atop Callum? Ridiculous. She was a lady. The lady of the house. When her parents bid her and her sisters a brief, polite good-night, there was no tangling of limbs, no shrieking like urchins.

Besides, no one wanted her. They'd all ignored her.

And it wasn't just the children. The housekeeper, Mrs. McGill, was unfriendly because Helena hadn't hired her niece, that unsuitable Miss Campbell.

A dim light from a handheld lantern bobbed below her window. Helena stepped back. It wouldn't do for one of the servants to see her staring out the window with a baleful expression. Or hanging from her husband and stepchildren

laughing, for that matter. Even if it meant she'd feel this alone for the rest of her days.

You deserve it, Helena. You deserve a lonely, empty life. Mama might never have said the words aloud, but her distant silence before Helena married had said enough. Helena was unlovable. She'd thought if she obeyed her parents and married, Papa would approve, Mama might forgive, and Helena would feel cleaner inside somehow, but marrying hadn't changed anything, after all. Why should she have expected who she now was on the outside to change whom she was inside?

I thought You forgive, Lord. Was I wrong? What was that feeling of love at the church yesterday? Was it fancy, or is there more for me there if I return? Could You love me?

Then again, why would God love her? Papa, ill as he was, would probably never see her again, but after the wedding, he couldn't get away from her fast enough.

Helena rubbed her cold arms. Tomorrow she must begin searching for a new governess, and she also had letters to write to her friend Frances Fennelwick and her sisters and Mama, but not her grandmother, who would be furious at Helena once she heard some made-up story from Papa that Helena had become enamored of Tavin's neighbor and there was no stopping her headstrong ways. She would write of her new home, the weather and the village. She'd say nothing of her feelings.

She should sleep, but her emotions continued to churn inside her, making her limbs quiver. She paced to shake them out, but

it only seemed to make the matter worse. Should she ring for Barnes and tea? She wasn't thirsty. Mayhap if she had something to read, she'd relax. The library would have something tedious to dull her senses, no doubt. And it was far preferable to fretting over her thoughts. She took up the lone candle sputtering at her bedside and returned to the hall.

It was dark and empty—how long had it been since she'd escaped the nursery? Longer than she thought. Her candle cast grotesque shadows as she tiptoed down the hall and around the corner. Her sisters, Maria and Andromeda, would have clung to Helena had they been here, certain Comraich's dark, damp stones held ghosts. Silly widgeons—

Another pang of loneliness tightened Helena's stomach. Would her sisters ever be allowed to visit her here?

Of course not. There would be excuses based on the distance, but the truth was, her parents wouldn't want the girls influenced by their wayward elder sister.

Did the Bible say anything about being lonesome? Wasn't there a woman in its pages who had been uprooted from her home by marriage? Whither thou goest, I will go, too, or something like that? Had the woman's husband loved her? Or had she been as alone as Helena would always be?

Her desire for a musty tome disappeared. Mayhap John had a Bible in his library.

A cry rent the hall's stillness. One of the children.

She hurried to the nursery, where a single lamp cast a

comforting, gold glow over the walls. The boys' door was ajar, and Helena rushed inside.

One of the boys sat up in bed, his hands over his mouth. Iona whimpered at his feet, while Agnes patted his shoulder as one might thump the head of a large dog. "Go back to sleep, Master, 'afore you wake the others."

Alex.

Helena had never ministered to a frantic child before. Perhaps she should leave.

Instead she rushed to Alex's bed. "Poor dear." She rested her hand on his miniscule knee. A quick glance assured her Callum slept on in his bed, which was no doubt for the best.

Agnes's fists flew to her hips. "Now look what ye've done, Master, but gone and disturbed 'er ladyship."

"Nonsense, Agnes." Helena perched on Alex's bed, her thumb tracing lazy circles over his kneecap. Did her touch bother him? She only did what she would have wanted done to her, but it was difficult to tell, the way he stared at her, gasping through his fingers.

"Now then. Does something ache? Or was it a bad dream?"

Alex hiccupped and nodded. Helena wiped his eyes with the lace-edged handkerchief she kept tucked up her sleeve.

"What happened in your dream?"

"I was in the water. There was a kee-ask who pulled me doon and I could nae breathe." He lifted his knees and buried his head between them.

"A what?"

"Kee-ask." Curled as he was, his words were muffled. "I knew I shouldna gone to her, but she looked like Mither. When I got closer I saw she was gray with the tail of a salmon and no' like Mither anymore. She'd come to take me under the water."

The creature sounded something like a mermaid. A kee-ask must be a creature of folklore, then. Poor boy, seeing his mother's face turn into something horrible.

Helena smoothed Alex's nightshirt over his shoulders. "I have nightmares sometimes, too."

He peeked up at her. "What about?"

Frederick Cole's handsome face flashed through her mind. Blue eyes, startling in their contrast to his near-black curls.

"Monsters. Same as you. But I know they cannot hurt me."

"Because they are no' real."

In her case they were, but she smiled anyway.

"I don' want to dream of my monster again." Alex's breath was shuddering and deep, a good sign he had cried himself out.

The sensation she'd experienced in the kirk—of peace and love and yearning—swelled in her bosom, and she cupped Alex's damp cheek with her hand. "I'd pay all the gold and silver I possess to never dream of my monster again, either, and to save you from yours."

Fabric rustled, and she turned to check Callum, but the boy slept on in his bed. Instead, her husband stood against the doorjamb, watching her.

Now it was her turn to cover her mouth with her hand.

* * *

John pulled the nursery door shut as softly as he could, glad for Helena's candle to illuminate the hall. "I think Alex should rest well enough now." The poor laddie had been drowsy when they left, with the comfort of Iona curling on the coverlet at his feet.

"I hope so." She held her candle steady, but tension rolled from her. After their awkward parting earlier tonight, it was little wonder.

Mayhap her unease also had to do with the monster she told Alex she dreamed of, but he couldn't ask her about that. Not now, perhaps not ever. Still, he wouldn't ignore the opportunity to get back on even footing with her. "Would you care to join me for a brief moment? I was working in the library, and the fire is still warm in the grate."

The strain eased from her mouth. "I was on my way to the library when I heard Alex."

He released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. After leading her to the library, he indicated his favorite pair of wing chairs beside the fire, where his nightly cup of tea sat, cold and unfinished beside today's letter from his friend Lord Carvey.

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