

Chapter 1

Daniel Graham had the annoying habit of considering himself rather more important—and wiser—than his fellow men. That, at least, was his mother's opinion, and at present Alex Graham was so angry with her minister son she was tempted to take him over her knee—an image she found so amusing her anger cooled somewhat. For an instant, that is, before she recalled just what a toad he was. To betray Carlos to the authorities, and then have the gall to come visiting and say he was but doing his Christian duty! Pshaw!

From the parlour, came the sound of Matthew's and Daniel's voices. She'd been shooed outdoors by Matthew, although for what reason was something of a mystery, because if she'd been mad, Matthew had been close to incoherent with rage. Which was why Alex had deemed it wise to settle herself on the bench just below the parlour window to ensure things didn't get entirely out of hand.

"My son, with the integrity of a snake!" Matthew yelled.

"He's a papist priest, Da."

"He's a friend!" Matthew's voice rose to a roar. "And we do not betray our friends—ever."

"Not *my* friend," Daniel said. There was a long ominous silence. Alex had no need to be in the room to envisage how Matthew's face would have settled into an icy mask.

"Go," Matthew said. "Just go."

"But Da—"

"Leave. Now, before I say something that can never be unsaid."

"But we just got here," Daniel protested.

"And you're not welcome to stay." With that parting statement, Matthew apparently decided the conversation was over, at least to judge from the slamming door.

"Bloody hell," Alex muttered, leaning back against the wall.

“There you are.” Matthew appeared in the doorway and came over to join her on the bench. “I knew you’d be keeping close.”

He was still struggling with his anger, his eyes emerald gashes, no more, the eyes of a hawk about to strike. Ageless eyes, as full of fire and passion now as they’d been when she first met him after her involuntary fall through time. Beautiful eyes, she thought, lifting her hand to trace his brows, cup his cheek.

Matthew leaned into her touch. “How could he? And even worse, how can he stand before me and tell me he was right to do so?”

“Youthful fervour?” Alex suggested. “What will happen to Carlos?”

“Deported at the very least. Robert Chisholm is facing charges of assault, on account of smiting one of the militia over the head with a shovel.” He looked grim. “They may very well hang Carlos, and all because of our minister son.” He groped for her hand. “Was I like that? Would I have condemned a good man on no other grounds but his faith?”

“Never,” she said with conviction. Even when she’d met him, all those years ago, Matthew’s firm adherence to his Presbyterian beliefs had been balanced by an innate sense of justice.

“So what did I do wrong?”

“We, honey. He’s my son too.” She sighed, tightening her hold on his hand. “We let him go too early. We left his formative years to men like Cotton Mather, men who see the world as either black or white.” Alex leaned her head on his shoulder. The son they’d sent away to distant Massachusetts to be educated as a minister had returned a man convinced of his own moral superiority. “Maybe he doesn’t understand what the consequences may be.”

Matthew snorted in response. “Fool!”

At that precise moment, Daniel stepped outside. The long black coat he’d discarded upon arriving was now back in place, but he’d shoved the collar into one of his pockets, a discreet froth of white lace spilling out.

“Da,” he began, but Matthew held up his hand.

“Go. Until you’ve sorted the mess you’ve caused, you’re not welcome here. And you best pray neither wee Carlos nor Robert end up dead because of you.”

“Dead?” Daniel’s voice shook. “Because of me? Is it my fault Robert struck that poor man over the head?”

“No. But is it your fault he felt compelled to do so? Aye.”

“Da,” Daniel groaned, “you’re making too much of this. At most, they’ll fine Robert and deport Carlos, and—”

“This is Carlos’ home,” Alex cut in. “He is also your sister’s priest. What will she think about all this?”

Daniel’s regular features tightened into a dark scowl. As a Presbyterian minister, he had major problems accepting the fact that Sarah had converted to Catholicism some years back, was raising her children as Catholics as well. Come to think of it, Matthew had problems with this as well, now and then expressing the hope that maybe his grandchildren would find it in them to return to the true kirk.

“I did as I had to do,” Daniel said, straightening up to his full, rather impressive, height. The only one of their sons who overtopped his father by an inch or so, Daniel Graham was a good-looking man, bright blue eyes contrasting with his dark hair.

“I guess that’s what Pilate said as well,” Alex retorted.

Daniel’s face fell. “Is that what you think of me? Truly?” He looked from one to the other, and suddenly he was no longer a twenty-six-year-old, self-assured young man, he was that lanky adolescent boy who’d set off to Boston with the intention of living up to his father’s dreams. It was Matthew who’d so fervently wanted one of his sons to become a minister, and it had fallen to Daniel to do so.

Matthew made as if to say something, but Alex gestured for him to be quiet. She stood up and approached Daniel, who regarded her warily, the thick dark lashes he shared with his father lowered protectively over his eyes.

“You’ve done wrong and you don’t need me to tell you that, do you?”

A fiery flush crept up Daniel’s cheeks. “I—”

“Don’t.” Alex placed a finger over his lips. “Now is not the time to bandy words. Do as your father says—leave before we’ve all said things we shouldn’t.” She nodded in the direction of Temperance, at present sitting under the huge white oak, surrounded by her sisters-in-law and an assortment of Graham children. “Take your wife and children with you and ride over to the Leslies. We’ll send Jonah and Malcolm with you.”

“If I go, Julian and Ruth will go with me.” Daniel’s chin rose, a challenge in his voice.

“Julian?” Alex raised her brows. “I don’t think so. He’s as upset as we are.” She took his hand and squeezed it. “Go.”

There was a darkness in Daniel’s eyes that made Alex’s heart contract.

“Forever?” he asked.

“God, you’re an idiot at times,” she replied. “Of course not forever. You’re our son, and even if both of us would gladly belt you until your arse glows, we still love you. It’s just that we distinctly dislike you at present.”

Daniel gave a short bark of laughter. “And am I to feel comforted by that?”

“That’s all you’re getting at the moment.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “And your father is right: you’d best pray both Carlos and Robert come through this unscathed.”

Ian Graham watched his brother storm across the yard, making for the stables. Daniel was the brother he knew the least, having seen him only intermittently since he’d left for Massachusetts as a lad of thirteen. Even after Daniel had moved back to Maryland, they had not met much, Daniel busy with his flock in Providence, while Ian was far too busy managing the ever-expanding Graham lands to have time for more than two or three visits to Providence each year.

Halfway across the yard, Temperance caught up with her husband. As always, Temperance was impeccably attired, a silent reprimand to the women of the Graham household who wore their hair uncovered in their homes. Only Agnes, the maid, and Mrs Parson went about with coifs and caps on their heads—

and Temperance of course, not one single stray lock of hair visible, what with her white cap and wide-brimmed hat.

Ian neither liked nor disliked his sister-in-law, but in this particular matter he suspected Temperance had spurred Daniel on, indignant at being related, if only by marriage, to a family who had welcomed a Catholic priest.

“Dan?” Temperance half-ran to keep up with her husband. “What happened?”

Ian took a step or two backwards, disappearing into the shadowy interior of the stables while keeping his gaze on his brother.

Daniel threw his wife a quick look. “We are no longer welcome here.”

“What?” Temperance came to an abrupt stop. “But we just got here.” She sucked in her lower lip, fair brows pulled together. “It’s about the priest, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is.” Daniel scowled. “To them, the priest is a friend, not a menace. They do not see anything wrong in having him here, in having him lure my nephews and nieces from their faith.” He inhaled. “Last time we were here, he told them the bloody story of El Cid. Ha! A Catholic hero, reconquering his lands from the infidel. What sort of story is that for children of the Presbyterian faith?”

A good enough story, in Ian’s opinion. Not that El Cid was quite as devout as wee Carlos had made him out to be. Mama had rather brutally informed the captive audience that El Cid had changed allegiances as often as it suited him, far more interested in feathering his own nest than in dying for the Holy Church.

“I fear Mr Campbell may be right,” Temperance said. “It is your mother’s outlandish ways that—”

“No.” Daniel held up his hand. “Richard Campbell is a worm. Never, ever, take his word before that of my mother.”

“I didn’t mean it that way! But it is a fact, is it not, that it is your mother who promotes this ridiculous notion of tolerance.”

“Aye.” Daniel barged into the stable, tagged by Temperance, and came to an abrupt stop at the sight of Ian.

“Brother,” Ian said, nodding politely in the direction of Temperance.

“He’s throwing us out,” Daniel said. “My own father, and he’s insisting we leave—on account of a priest. A priest!”

“A friend,” Ian corrected. “A good friend, even.”

“A papist,” Temperance interjected. “We don’t hold with those any longer—not here, not in this colony.”

“No?” Ian arched an eyebrow. “So what would you have us do with them—all the good, law-abiding papists who have made their homes here over the last few decades? Should we drive them into the sea? Burn them?”

“Of course not,” Daniel said. “You’re being excessively dramatic. No one is suggesting anything be done to them—we will simply have to work all that harder to convert them to the true faith.”

Beside him, Temperance nodded.

“They would argue they belong to the true faith,” Ian said.

“They are wrong,” Daniel sounded dismissive.

“Or maybe you are,” Ian retorted. “And what’s this about Campbell? Is he here, in Maryland?”

Daniel squirmed, sending a dark look in the direction of Temperance. “He is.”

“Ah.” Ian frowned. That despicable preacher would be up to no good, no doubt spreading even more calumnies about Mama. “I thought we were happily rid of him what with all that nonsense going on in Salem.”

“Nonsense?” Temperance’s nostrils flared. “A battle against evil, and you call it nonsense?”

“This is 1692, not the dark ages,” Ian retorted. “Only uneducated fools believe in witches.”

“Not everyone agrees with you,” Daniel said.

“So you believe those poor people in Salem are truly in league with the devil? You find it reasonable to hang them based on such flimsy evidence?”

Daniel squirmed, glancing at his wife, standing very much to the side with her arms crossed. “No.”

“Well, thank the Lord for that,” came a dry voice from behind them. Julian Allerton was in shirt and breeches, the

sleeves rolled up to reveal surprisingly strong forearms for a man mostly concerned with managing the spiritual well-being of his growing flock in Providence. Not only was he Daniel's father-in-law—and brother-in-law, what with their Ruth being Julian's second wife—he was also the chief minister of the congregation now that old Minister Walker had departed this world, and as such he was Daniel's superior in all matters.

Julian fixed his attention on his daughter. "Witches do not exist, daughter. Surely I have raised you better than to believe such vile nonsense?" For an instant, his light eyes met Ian's, a shared look that had Ian ducking his head. Julian Allerton had his suspicions about Mama, but Ian was not about to enlighten him.

Temperance flushed. "Father, I—"

"And as to this matter with Carlos, it is most unfortunate," Julian continued, now searing Daniel with his gaze. "By what authority did you take it upon yourself to inform those ruffians that go by the name of militia of his whereabouts?"

Daniel's clean-shaven cheeks went a dark red. "I did as I must to safeguard innocent souls from his proselytizing."

Julian took off his hat and patted at his thinning ginger hair. "And now that you know Richard Campbell is back—a man much given to baying for the blood of papists—how do you think Carlos will fare?"

Daniel shrugged. "They'll deport him at most. How many times must I repeat this?"

"Campbell will want to hang him," Julian said. "And Chisholm. Even worse, he will not content himself with punishing the papist priest, not when he can accuse your family—and specifically Alex—of harbouring a papist."

Daniel swallowed. "You are mistaken."

Ian shook his head. "Nay, he isn't. Campbell knows full well how much Mama cares for Carlos, and he'll do anything to cause her pain—or even better, force us to act."

"Force you to act?"

"Well, we cannot leave our wee priest to rot, can we?" Ian explained.

“But...” Daniel ran a finger along the neckline of his shirt. “You cannot take on the Protestant Associators and their militia! They may very well kill you.”

“You should have thought of that before you gave up one of our own,” Ian told him.

“He’s a papist priest,” Daniel repeated.

“Unfortunately. But he is also a good man,” Julian replied, causing Temperance to gasp.

“And even worse, he is family,” Ian added. True—and decidedly odd—what with Mama being a direct descendant of Carlos’ cousin. Ian scratched his chest in a futile attempt to alleviate the itch he always experienced when considering the complications of his beloved mama’s life, born well over three hundred years after Da.

“Family?” Daniel cleared his throat. “Don’t be ridiculous. We have no papist relatives.”

“Aye we do. Carlos is Mama’s cousin.”

It could have been amusing, how Daniel staggered back. But Ian was far too angry with him to do more than sneer.

“I didn’t know,” Daniel said, extending his hands towards him. “I—”

“No excuse,” Ian told him. “It should have sufficed knowing how much Mama and Sarah love him.”

An hour or so later, Daniel and Temperance were gone, taking with them a loudly protesting Magnus and their little daughter, Emily. Neither Mama nor Da had come to bid them farewell, the rest of the Graham household ranged behind Ian.

“Shunned and shamed, eh?” Daniel had said as he swung himself astride, eyes darting from Ian to Mark, to Sarah and Ruth, as if hoping one of his siblings would relent. No one replied. With an exasperated sound Daniel kicked his horse to a trot and led the way up the lane.

“Poor Daniel,” Ruth said.

“Save your compassion for Carlos.” Mark stretched. “Well, all of that will have to wait. We have fields to harvest.” He clapped Michael Connor on his shoulder. “Let’s see if your scything has improved, brother-in-law.”

In response, Sarah's husband grinned. "A challenge? I'll show you!"

The yard emptied of people until only Ian was left.

"What a mess," Mama said, appearing from behind the dairy shed.

"Aye. But we'll sort it, Mama. As we speak, Simon is already on his way to see what can be done." He smiled slightly at the thought of his rotund uncle riding to the rescue. Simon might be an impressive lawyer, but left a lot to be wished for as a white knight.

"Of course we'll sort it. We have to." She gnawed at her lip. "For Carlos' sake, but also for Daniel's."

Ian nodded. Should Carlos die, Daniel would never be welcomed back—not as long as Da lived.

Chapter 2

“What are you doing?” Matthew stepped into the little clearing, eyes travelling up and down her strange attire.

“Exercising,” Alex said, returning to her shoulder workout. “Now that I am sixty, I have to increase my efforts to stay fit.”

“Ah.” He sat down on a nearby log. “You look healthy enough to me.”

“For now,” she replied through her teeth, counting off her repetitions in her head. “First thing to go is shoulder mobility—you know, being able to stretch your arms over your head.”

In reply, Matthew did just that. The worn linen of his shirt allowed glimpses of his torso beneath, and Alex knew for a fact her man was mostly lean and muscled, his shoulders and arms reflecting a lifestyle that allowed little leisure.

He remained where he was as she finished her routine, but began to laugh when she began her yoga moves.

“What is that?”

“Downward facing dog.” Well, she hoped it was. Truth be told, her memories of her yoga classes were very vague, but she recalled something similar to this position, and from the way her buttocks and the backs of her thighs strained, it was obviously good for something. “I have to make sure I keep my trim figure,” she continued once she was upright again. “Don’t want you to tell me my arse is too round.”

Matthew smiled, biting his lip.

“What?”

“Your arse *is* round. Nice and soft—it always has been, lass.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“Oh, aye. I like my women round and bonny.”

“Your women?” Come to think of it, Kate Jones was also quite curvy, and however ridiculous it was, Alex still had moments when the thought of Widow Jones made something very green and slimy shift through her belly.

“It’s only been one woman for...” He squinted. “Thirty-four years.”

She just looked at him. Kate had happened after they’d been married—no matter how exonerating the circumstances.

“Thirty-one,” he amended in a low voice. “But you know it was out of need and despair, not love.”

She nodded, no more. Her Matthew, abducted and used as a slave, had been certain he would die in servitude, far away from home and family. But it still rankled—even more so given Matthew’s irritating habit of looking Kate up and down with appreciation whenever they met. Sometimes, she suspected the dratted man did it on purpose, enjoying her obvious jealousy.

He took her hand. “Enough of that. I have something to show you.”

“You do?” She bit back a little smile. It was difficult to hide a house, no matter how small. From a distance, she’d seen him work on what had at first looked like a cabin but which recently had become something far more graceful. Every day, she’d been tempted to sneak forward and take a peek, every day she’d stopped herself, not wanting to spoil his surprise.

“A gift,” he said, swinging their hands between them as he led her through the trees, making for the river. He tightened his hold. “A birthday gift, lass.” He drew to a stop and kissed her. “And I must say you look not a day older than yesterday.”

“Idiot.” She slapped his shoulder, making him laugh before handing her a little package wrapped in linen. She knew what it was, yet another carved figurine to add to her collection. She unfolded the cloth and smiled down at the depiction of herself holding a child on her lap. As always, the carving was exquisite, their imp of a grandson almost lifelike as he squirmed in her hold. “Thank you,” she said.

“There’s more,” he told her.

They reached the river and he turned left. Months of working on his project had resulted in a neat little path, the ground cool beneath Alex’s bare feet. They ducked under the boughs of an oak, and there, in a clearing, stood her gift, the cedar wood so new it still retained its coppery colour. It was a beautiful house, the door in the centre flanked by two

windows. The glass panes glittered in the sun, little squares of greenish glass that he must have smuggled up from Providence.

“So, is it a bungalow?” He pronounced the word carefully, making Alex smile. She pursed her lips but finally shook her head.

“No, it’s a cabin. A cabin with a veranda, but not a bungalow.”

“Well that’s a relief,” Matthew said, coming over to stand beside her. “I didn’t much like the idea of living in something that sounds like the name of a venomous snake.”

“A snake?” Alex laughed, shifting closer to him. “Anyway, it’s a very nice little house and I think we’ll be snug like bugs in it.” Given its size, she guessed at two rooms, with a spacious veranda and the river a stone’s throw away. Yes, she could see them living in comfort here.

“Mmm,” Matthew agreed, sounding less than convinced.

“And,” Alex added with a wink, “it has the benefit of being somewhat isolated.”

“Oh, aye,” Matthew smiled, “all of half a mile to the main yard.”

“A bit more. And look at all these lovely trees that separate us from them all.”

Matthew just chuckled. “Shall we go inside? Mayhap test the bed?”

“Matthew Graham! All of sixty-two and still insatiable!”

“You don’t mind, do you?” He had by now manoeuvred them into the little house, was leading her over sanded and soaped floors to their new bedroom.

“No,” she smiled, “not at all.” And then he opened the door. Alex came to an abrupt halt.

“Oh!” she said. “Oh!” she repeated, and took a hesitant step into the room that bathed in light. “How?” she asked, trying to understand where all the light came from. There were two windows, both quite large, but it was the coloured light that came from the roof that had her stretching her hands out, revolving slowly on the spot.

“A wee cupola,” Matthew explained proudly. “I used your coloured glass. Do you like it?”

“Like it? It’s wonderful!” She made as if to catch a red reflection and beamed at him. “A cupola, hey?” She craned her head back to see the green and red glass panes—a gift from him years ago, that had since then adorned their bedroom in the big house. Well, apart from these last few weeks when he’d refused to tell her where her precious panes had gone.

“I listen and learn, lass. And I liked the notion of sun spilling down on us from above.” He grabbed hold of her. “So, does your birthday gift meet with your approval?”

She just nodded, struck quite wordless. Matthew laughed and pulled her close enough to kiss the top of her head.

Later that afternoon, the entire family was invited down to visit the new addition to Graham’s Garden. While Alex and the other women spent their time inspecting everything from the hearth to the new bed—and a right nice bed it was, with four sturdy posts and a carved headboard—Matthew and Julian retreated to sit outside with Ian and Mark.

Matthew sat down on a largish rock and stretched out his legs, rubbing discreetly at his lower back.

“Bad business,” Ian said. His brows pulled down in a brief scowl. “All those poor souls in Salem, and now this with Carlos and Robert...”

Julian shifted on his seat. “Most unfortunate. And as to these preposterous witch trials, what can I say? How can educated men succumb to such ridiculous superstitions?”

“Mayhap they’ve not read Newton,” Matthew offered, hiding a little smile. It wasn’t Julian who ploughed through one scientific treaty after the other, no, it was his Ruth, his brightest child, who lapped up all this new knowledge and then shared it with her minister husband. He glanced at Ruth, as always impeccably dressed with not so much as a wrinkle on her apron or collar.

“Or maybe what little common sense they had has evaporated in the summer heat,” Julian muttered. “Ministers, listening to nonsensical ramblings from frightened men, women and children. What is the world coming to? Execute people for witchery in this day and age? I thought we were

beyond such superstitions.” He sighed deeply. “And then this matter with Daniel...” He studied his hands. “At times, I fear he and Temperance are too alike—too dogmatic, too young to be compassionate.” He gave Matthew a crooked smile. “Or maybe it is me, going soft after years of listening to Alex preach tolerance.”

“Aye, she does that a lot.” Matthew rolled his eyes, making Ian and Mark grin.

“Stubborn,” Ian offered.

“Oh, aye. And voluble,” Mark added.

“But loving and caring,” Julian said with a little smile. “And strange—very strange, at times.”

Matthew shared a look with his sons: they all chose not to respond. Of late, Julian had a tendency to fish for information, the odd casual comment thrown into the air, with all of him tensing in expectation. Their silence made him deflate, his face softening into an expression of relief—or chagrin, Matthew wasn’t quite sure which. What he did know, however, was that he had no intention of sharing Alex’s secret with his son-in-law. It sufficed that Ian and Mark knew, that his brother-in-law Simon knew, as did Mrs Parson and poor Carlos. He cleared his throat. Carlos: a papist priest whom he’d come to consider family—laughable, when one considered his early years fighting for the Covenant.

“Any news of Carlos?” Matthew asked.

Julian’s grey eyes narrowed. “Nothing good, I’m afraid. Not now that Richard Campbell has returned. He has goaded the Protestant Association into calling for his execution, and many listen.” He licked his lips. “If Carlos dies, God help Daniel—he’ll never forgive himself.”

“Neither will we,” Mark said. “Or Mama.”

“It would crush her.” Ian shaded his eyes, staring in the direction of the women, now inspecting the bench on the porch.

“So we’d best make sure it doesn’t happen.” Not that Matthew had any idea how to stop this farce.

Julian frowned. “I dare say that is exactly what Campbell is hoping you’ll do—try to save Carlos, and in so doing condemn yourselves.”

“Oh, aye.” Matthew stood. “Which is why we need to be very careful.”

Julian gave him an exasperated look. “What aim you to do? Ride into St Mary’s City and break him out of gaol?”

“Something like that.” Matthew studied his sons. “But we’ll need help.”

“And a miracle,” Julian muttered. “God help me, but I’ll do what I can.”

The day ended under the large white oak that stood in splendid isolation in their yard. Large branches spread out to offer shade over the trestles the men had set up, and soon enough the boards groaned under an impressive number of plates and dishes.

“Enough to feed an army,” Naomi said, one hand resting on the swell of her stomach. She looked peaked, purple circles under her eyes indicating just how badly she was sleeping. Twins, in Mrs Parson’s considered opinion, and Naomi was already the size of a cow, despite having another three months to go.

“You should be resting,” Alex said, giving her daughter-in-law a concerned look. With six children and Mark to take care of, Naomi had little time for leisure—and it didn’t help that her youngest, Elizabeth, was a fretful, grizzling child.

“Hannah helps as much as she can,” Naomi said, handing her eldest a jug of barley water. “But you know as well as I do that a farmer’s wife has little opportunity to rest.”

“I can help,” Betty offered. Neat as a pin—except for her hair, a reddish mass always on the verge of exploding from whatever confinements Betty put in place—she looked up from where she was slicing bread.

“You already do.” Naomi smiled at Ian’s wife. “But if you want to keep Lettie and Tom with you, please feel free to do so.” She shook her head. “Those two and your Maggie...”

“Little hellions,” Mrs Parson said. “Could do with a belting, the three of them.” She glowered in the direction of Lettie, at present prancing about in the yard with a wooden sword. “And God help the man who marries that little imp.”

“Or Maggie,” Betty said with a sigh, regarding her stepdaughter with resignation. “All of twelve, and she constantly looks like she’s been rolling in the hay—or mud.”

Rather unfair, in Alex’s opinion. Maggie was an exuberant child, and yes, quite often her apron had stains, there were burrs in her hair and tears in her skirts, but she was a hard worker, rising at dawn to milk the cows and goats—as did Lettie and Hannah. And as to the boys, weeks of harvest work ensured they fell asleep the moment they sat down. Graham’s Garden was a large farm, with so much land under the plough July and August disappeared in days of endless work for all of them.

But today, most of it was over, and it had become a family tradition to combine Alex’s birthday with a harvest feast—an evening of song and play and plenty of food.

“Here.” Mrs Parson shoved a covered dish into Betty’s hands. “Mind you set it down in front of Thomas. My dear man is partial to my pie.”

“We all are,” Alex said. “And you still haven’t given me the recipe.”

“No need: I’m still here, aren’t I?” Mrs Parson’s dark eyes sparkled. She might be old as the hills, as wrinkled as a prune and plagued by swollen joints, but so far, Mrs Parson showed no sign of falling sick or dying—and thank heavens for that, as Alex had no idea quite how she’d survive that loss.

“You’re doing it again,” Mrs Parson said, leaning heavily on her cane as she made her way to the kitchen door.

“Doing what?” Alex asked, following more slowly, with a huge serving platter laden with meat.

“Looking me over to ensure I’m still alive.”

“And are you?” Alex asked. “After all, one never knows with you. You could be some sort of zombie.”

“A what?” Mrs Parson asked.

“Never mind.” Alex suspected Mrs Parson would not take kindly to being likened to the walking dead.

“You’re strange, Alex Graham—very strange. I knew it the moment I first clapped eyes on you, in those strange tight breeches and with your hair chopped short.”

“Jeans,” Alex said. “They’re called jeans.” And she would never wear a pair again in her life, she thought. Just as she’d never see a laptop, or a TV or dance with John, or... She sucked in her breath at the sudden pain that spread through her chest. Isaac. She’d never see him again, her son born in 1999. Of course she wouldn’t, she reminded herself bitterly. Isaac was dead, had been unfortunate enough to fall back through time only to die at Killiecrankie in 1689.

Mrs Parson set a gnarled hand to her face. “You belong here, lass, not there.” She used her cane to gesture at the assembled family—close to thirty people, all in all. “This was your destiny,” Mrs Parson continued. “This time and that man.” She pointed at Matthew, sitting surrounded by his sons under the oak. Her man. Alex smiled and blinked her eyes free of tears. Her man, her time—as God, or fate, had willed it.

“What’s the matter?” Matthew took his wife’s hand, guiding them through the dusk.

“Hmm?” She shook her head. “Nothing. Just one of those days, you know.”

“Ah.” He tightened his hold on her. “Want to talk about it?”

“No.”

He waited.

“I wish Samuel had been here,” she blurted. “I thought he’d be here for harvest like he’s always been, but this year...” her voice trailed off. “He’s not been back once since his birthday.”

“Mayhap he’s nowhere close.” Their Samuel lived among the Indians with his Indian wife and two bairns.

“Or he didn’t want to come.”

He didn’t reply. Samuel’s last few visits had been fraught—the lad insisted on being called White Bear, on having them recognise he’d made his choice and intended to live among the Indians. A repudiation of them, of their lives and their values, and strangely enough it had been Alex who took it the hardest, shrinking away from this Indian apparition whenever Samuel—White Bear—attempted to touch her or talk to her.

“I miss him,” she said. “Just like I miss David and Adam,

but with Samuel it's worse. It's almost like with Jacob." She turned to face him. "Somehow, it's as if my Samuel is dead—but I have nowhere to grieve for him, not like with Jacob."

He nodded, no more. Every morning, Alex disappeared up to the graveyard to commune with their dead son. Their bonny Jacob, tall and fair and with eyes that lightened into a greyish green in the sun. Jacob, shot through the heart by that accursed renegade Philip Burley, one moment roaring with life, the other tumbling to the ground with uncoordinated limbs. Matthew inhaled.

"Samuel is alive, lass," he said gently.

"No, he isn't. Samuel has been suffocated by White Bear. He is Qaachow's son more than yours and mine, and it hurts like hell."

Aye, that it did. And even more so as it had been Matthew's promise to Qaachow that had allowed the Indian chief to carry Samuel off to raise him as his foster son. A year: he'd promised Qaachow his son for a year, and his Indian friend had taken him for life.

"He might come back," he said.

Beside him, Alex snorted. "When pigs fly, Matthew. He's made his choice."

"Sometimes, fate intervenes," he said, refusing to give up on this glimmer of hope that one day Samuel would be restored to them.

"Yeah." But she sounded unconvinced, and they walked the last stretch to the river in silence.

They shed their clothes and walked out hand in hand into the cold water of the river. After a day of browbeating heat, it was a relief to cool off, and usually they would linger in the water, but tonight Matthew had other plans, so he chided her into dressing and led her off in the direction of their new little cabin.

"Do you think David will ever come home?" Alex asked.

"Do you?" he countered.

"Not so sure. But Flora seems to have ditched him."

Matthew laughed. "And this you base on the fact that he no longer mentions her in his letters?"

“Letters?” Alex scoffed. “Messages of 300 words four times a year do not qualify as letters. But yes, of late, he never mentions Flora. And, more to the point, neither does Adam.”

Matthew smiled. If David kept his missives short, their youngest son was adept at writing long and detailed accounts of his life in England—and was generally well-informed as to what his older brother might be up to. His chest expanded with pride: David was now an educated man of law, and Adam was—according to Luke’s reports—doing so well his tutors at Oxford were labelling him a prodigy.

“David might find it difficult to find an adequate position here. Last Luke wrote, he was attempting to find him a place at the Inns.” Just saying his brother’s name made Matthew’s throat clog. Aye, Luke had been good to Adam and David—and to Jacob, all those years ago—but the bitterness between them was difficult to let go of, and after hearing how close Luke had come to forcing himself on Alex...Matthew’s hand tightened into a fist.

“Let it go, honey,” Alex said, her hand smoothing over the taut muscles of his forearm. “And he’s been good to our boys.”

With an effort, he shook himself free of thoughts of Luke. Instead, he turned to show her his final surprise.

“A swing?” Alex grinned. “It’s like a giant armchair on ropes.”

“Big enough to fit us both.” He helped her to sit, joined her and pushed off. They soared upwards towards the moon, towards the star-studded sky, and beside him Alex laughed out loud.

“Higher!” she yelled. “Faster!”

Chapter 3

Luke Graham set aside his correspondence, pulled off his elaborate wig and scratched his head.

“Done for today?” Marie asked, rising with grace from the settle where she’d been sewing.

He smiled at his daughter.

“Done for now. I still have that pile to go through.” Buried among the other sealed letters was one from his son, but Luke feared the contents would put him off his dinner, so chose to delay reading it. Probably, Charlie would be asking for more funds, presenting yet another ludicrous business proposal.

Luke sighed: he loved his son, but his unfortunate participation in Monmouth’s rebellion and the subsequent year as an indentured slave on Barbados had changed Charlie into a man who hid his scars and anger behind a mask of insouciance. Or maybe he had always been thus, a man without the energy or inclination to pursue a future. Luke no longer knew—he did not know how to speak to his son, and other than that short period when he’d served in King William’s army, Charlie spent all his time on frivolous amusements and idiotic attempts at making a fortune. Charlie, however, did not believe in working for his success: no, he gambled on luck, and rarely did Fortuna bless those who slouched about and lapped wine out of silver goblets.

Of late, Charlie was often to be found in the company of young rakes, including one John Law. While Luke had a certain admiration for the young Scotsman, he disliked his influence over Charlie. Law made his money at the gambling tables—in between spouting a lot of theoretical nonsense about paper money and financial politics—but in contrast to Charlie, Law could count, rarely placing a bet unless he knew the cards were in his favour. Unfortunately, Charlie was most enamoured of Law’s lifestyle—late evenings in the company of rich men and

handsome ladies more than made up for any losses he might suffer.

Luke rubbed at his eyes and adjusted his silver nose-piece. His son was a disappointment to him but also a cause of substantial guilt. Had Luke not sent him to Holland to curry favour with William and Mary, he might not have fallen under the spell of charming, dazzling Monmouth, and then he'd not have been involved in the rebellion that cost Monmouth his head and Charlie two years of his life—years he refused to talk about. Not that Luke did not have some sort of idea what his son had been through; he'd seen the brands on his chest, the welts on his back.

Dinner was intimate—just Marie, Luke and his nephew, David Graham. Like most of Matthew's sons—and to Luke's chagrin, dear brother Matthew had many—David was an unsettling copy of his father: the same dark hair with touches of fiery chestnut, the same hazel eyes under dark well-defined brows. Like all the Graham men, David was tall, but unlike Matthew, David was a light-hearted young man. Luke could never recall Matthew as being anything but dour and determined, a lad who went to war with his heart full of dreams and returned home a man of convictions—rock-hard and inflexible.

Fool. Luke sipped his wine. Matthew had gained little from holding to his beliefs. In fact, he'd lost most of what he'd had and been forced to start anew in distant Maryland. Luke on the other hand...He slipped a finger in under his cravat and smiled. Sir Luke Graham was rich and respected, wealthy enough to purchase everything Matthew owned without it making much of a dent in his fortune. For a little while, he toyed with the rather pleasing scenario of himself as owner of Graham's Garden—a paradise on Earth if one was to believe David and his younger brother Adam—and Matthew forced to come and beg.

“Father?” Marie's voice recalled him to the present. “Not in your dotage yet, I hope,” she added lightly.

“I was thinking,” Luke replied, pouring them all some more wine.

“A strenuous effort for one so old,” Marie said.

Luke raised his brows. “Aye, I’d best take to my bed for the rest of the week to recuperate.” He’d laced his voice with ice, and Marie flushed.

“Forgive me, Father,” she said. “I—”

He waved her silent. Of his three children, Marie was the one who most resembled him, having inherited not only his red hair but also his gift for cutting wit. Too cutting at times, which served to explain why her dullard of a husband had abandoned home and fled to distant Muscovy on an extended trading venture. An unwise marriage—one his headstrong daughter had insisted on, seeing only James Miller’s physical attributes. Yet another child he’d failed by not interfering. Luke frowned, wondering just what it was that had him in this maudlin mood. Could it be age? No, he decided after mulling it over. It wasn’t age—it was loneliness.

“So, how are you finding London?” Luke directed himself to David, not out of any genuine curiosity, more to distract himself.

“Big,” David replied with a grin. “And full of pleasures that were difficult to find in Glasgow.”

“What sort of pleasures?” Marie asked.

“Coffee houses,” David replied, “theatres. Gambling houses.” He shrugged. Luke hid a smile. He’d wager David Graham had discovered some of the more carnal pleasures as well.

“Surely all those exist in Glasgow as well,” Luke said.

“Aye they do—but not quite as many or quite as grand. And the ladies here are like gaudy butterflies in comparison.”

“Oh, you like butterflies?” Marie asked, stroking the dark red silk of her sleeve.

“I like ladies.” David’s features darkened. “And I aim to enjoy myself.”

“What will Flora say?” Marie teased.

David looked away. “I wouldn’t know. Ask her.”

After dinner, they returned to Luke’s parlour. A beautiful room, decorated with Dutch paintings, French mirror glass

and elaborately carved furniture. But tonight, it seemed mostly empty to Luke. Truth be told, it had been empty since his Margaret died, twenty years ago.

His letters beckoned, and leaving Marie and David at a game of chess, he spent the following hour working his way through the pile until only Charlie's letter was left. It took Luke at most a minute to read it.

"Damnation!"

"Father?"

In response, Luke shook the document he was holding. "You'll never guess!"

"Charlie." Marie sighed. "What now?"

"Yet another venture that has backfired and left him without funds. This time, he was approached with a promise to make his fortune importing snails—to England! When will he ever learn?" Luke crumpled Charlie's letter up. "A grown man with the sense of a spaniel!"

"Mama always says a lad inherits his wits from his mother," David said with a laugh.

"She would, wouldn't she," Luke muttered. "Her sons are all a credit to her, while mine..." He sighed.

"And the daughters?" Marie asked.

"From their father." David served himself some more wine. "She says it is an indisputable fact."

"Well, we all know your mother is a somewhat opinionated female," Luke said. Alex Graham was an uncomfortable itch, arousal mingling with shame as he recalled a relatively recent incident between them.

"Aye." David rolled his eyes. "But Da says it keeps him on his toes, like."

Luke blew out his cheeks, incapable of stopping himself from looking at the Lely portrait that hung in pride of place in his parlour. There she was, his Margaret, captured forever in the full bloom of her beauty. Now she was dead, and her half-sister Alex was alive, ironically enough wed to Matthew. Luke licked his lips. He'd almost forced himself upon her, submerged in a fantasy where Alex was his Margaret.

"If what your mother says is true, then God chose to give

our dear mama great beauty but little wit,” Marie said, she and her cousin laughing.

“No.” Luke held up his hand. “In this house, we do not speak like that of my Margaret.”

“We were jesting,” Marie protested.

“Not about her. Never about her.”

Next morning, David Graham woke to a heavy weight landing on top of him. The bed creaked in protest, and David swung wildly, for an instant fearing himself in an inn and being robbed until the smell of clean linen reminded him he was in his uncle’s home.

“Ouff!”

Well, his elbow had hit home, David thought, sitting up so abruptly he spilled his attacker onto the floor. Adam glared up at him, his hand covering his eye. David grinned. “Teach you not to attack unsuspecting gentlemen.”

“There’s nothing gentlemanly about you.”

“True enough. Can’t take the rough colonies out of a lad like me—or so Flora tells me.” He scowled, his good mood evaporating at the thought of false Flora.

“What happened with her?” Adam asked, joining David in bed.

“Why? So you can tell Mama?”

“No, because I want to know.” Adam drew his legs up.

If it had been Samuel, David would have told him everything—from the first kiss he’d shared with Flora to their last humiliating meeting when she’d told him she had to think of her future, and David was not what she needed—or wanted. They’d argued, and by the time she’d left, his pride had hung in shredded tatters, every single demeaning word she’d used engraved in his memory. The long and the short of it was that he wasn’t good enough—not for Flora Hamilton. But this was Adam, and so David restricted himself to saying they’d had a disagreement.

“A disagreement?” Adam sounded incredulous. “Last I saw you, you said it was but a matter of time before you wed.”

“That was then.” David got out of bed. “For the best,

really.” He set the chamber pot on a stool and turned his back on his brother. For an instant, his vision blurred, but by the time he’d voided his bladder he was back in control. Flora had wiped him out of her life—he had to do the same.

“Have you heard from home?” he asked instead.

“Aye.” Adam stretched. “They’re all alive.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

“Do you miss it?” Adam asked.

“Home?” David pulled on his stockings, gartered them and stepped into his breeches. “Aye, at times.” Mostly, he missed Mama and Da—and Samuel. Last he’d heard from Mama, he’d read between the lines how devastated she was by Samuel’s decision to fully embrace his Indian identity, insisting they all call him White Bear. David grimaced: as if he’d ever call his brother anything else but Samuel! “And you?”

“All the time.” Adam’s mouth curled into a little smile. “Futile, isn’t it? Even once I go back, I’ll not be living at home—not much work for a physician at Graham’s Garden.”

“One would hope not.” David adjusted his coat and dragged a brush through his long hair. “So you’re going back?”

“Aye. Soon.” Adam grinned. “Mama would not forgive me otherwise. And you?”

David shrugged. Some months ago, the answer would have been an adamant ‘No’, as he’d expected to spend his life with Flora in Glasgow. “I don’t know. I fear returning to work as a clerk for Uncle Simon will be very boring after all this.” He swept out his arms to encompass all of London, all of England and Scotland. But he missed Samuel, shied away from the thought of never seeing his brother again.

“No need to make up your mind yet,” Adam said, going over to open the door. He whistled, and something big and black came swooping towards him. Hugin cawed a polite greeting to David before perching on Adam’s shoulder. “But Hugin and I will be going home.”

“Why, has he expressed an opinion?” Truth be told, he considered the raven intelligent enough to do so.

“He doesn’t talk,” Adam replied, stroking his bird’s gleaming plumage. “But he belongs there—as do we.”

David chose not to reply. He had no idea where he belonged—not now that Flora had cast him adrift. So he turned the conversation to Oxford, listening with half an ear as Adam detailed his studies and tutors. By far the most gifted of the Graham siblings, Adam was consuming knowledge in huge swallows rather than sips, and it sounded as if he'd be through with Oxford come next spring.

“No lasses?” David punched his brother lightly on the shoulder, was amused by the fiery red that coloured Adam's beardless cheeks. At sixteen, he was more of a lad than a man, and David would wager his monthly wages that Adam had never as much as kissed as a girl.

“My concern, not yours,” Adam mumbled, causing David to laugh.

“You need any advice, you know where to come.”

“From you?” Adam snorted. “Whatever you do, it doesn't seem to work all that well, does it?” David whirled to hide his face from him. Too late. Adam was at his side, his hand on his back. “I'm sorry. That was inconsiderate of me.”

All David did was nod. He inhaled. Flora was gone.

“Ah, the prodigy and the lawyer,” Charlie said when his two cousins entered the dining room. Luke fixed him with a warning look and Charlie muttered an excuse before sitting down to breakfast. As always, he was elegantly dressed, various shades of green contrasting pleasantly with his colouring, and he'd placed wig and hat on a side-table together with his gloves. Newly shaved, accompanied by Jane, his great-bellied wife, Charlie had appeared some minutes earlier, saying he had urgent matters to discuss with his father.

Urgent indeed: Luke toyed with his spoon while studying his son intently. Charlie was here to reinforce the message in his letter, and from the way his mouth kept twitching, Luke guessed he'd lost—again—at the gaming tables. But this time, Luke had no intention of giving him what he wanted. He took a breath, preparing for a heated argument, just as one of his manservants entered, carrying a letter.

“For Master Adam.”

“For me?” Adam lit up and turned the heavy square round and round. “It’s from Mama.”

“We can all see that,” Charlie said. “Aunt Alex has a most distinctive handwriting.”

“Aye, but best not tell her that.” Adam broke open the seal, and David came close to read over his shoulder.

“No!” David gasped.

“What?” Charlie asked.

Even Luke was curious, but not about to reveal it. Instead, he sipped his ale and watched his nephews’ faces. David’s jaw set, Adam’s brows pulled together in an impressive scowl.

“What?” Charlie repeated. “Has something happened to Aunt Alex?”

“Not to her—to Carlos.”

“Carlos?” Luke set down his mug. “The papist priest?”

“That holier-than-thou Daniel sold him out to the militia!” David straightened up.

“Ah.” Luke dabbed his mouth.

“Ah what?” Jane turned pale blue eyes David’s way. “And how sold him out?”

Adam threw her a look. “He betrayed him, and now they’ve locked him up, and Mama fears they might well condemn him to hang.”

“Oh.” Jane went back to her breakfast.

“Why would he do that?” Luke asked, mostly because it amused him to see David and Adam so incensed with their brother. As he’d heard it, Daniel Graham was a minister of the kirk, and in his experience, such men often bordered on the fanatical. Like brother Matthew had done, back in his youth. No: better to have few convictions and keep those one had safely hidden.

“To curry favour with the new government in Maryland,” David replied. He took a turn around the room. “If it is as bad as Mama says—”

“...then Da and Mama will have to do something.” Adam gulped, sharing a look with his brother. “Just what Richard Campbell is hoping for.”

“A trap?” Luke steepled his hands before him. “You underestimate Matthew—and your dear Mama.”

“Richard Campbell is a man with a mission,” David said. “He detests Mama.”

“Ah, yes. I wonder why,” Luke murmured. An outspoken and intelligent woman who did not hesitate to humiliate a narrow-minded preacher—Luke would have paid good money to see that famous scene in which Alex went after this unknown Campbell with a ladle.

“We must help,” Charlie said, standing up. “We must—”

“Do what?” Luke snatched the letter out of Adam’s hand. “This is dated early in August. By now, the matter is resolved or Carlos is dead.”