

ANNA
BELFRAGE

*To
Catch
A Falling
Star*



SilverWood

Chapter 1

Isaac Lind should not have drunk quite as much as he did that evening, but flushed by the success of his latest exhibition, he allowed himself to be dragged along, to be toasted in pint after pint of lager.

By the time he left the pub, he was unsteady on his feet, but in a mellow mood. He stood for some moments by a high brick wall, sniffing at the lilacs that hung over it into the narrow little street. Late April was a nice time of the year, and even here in London, it was difficult to miss the advent of spring, the heady scents of flowering shrubs competing with the permanent smells of stone, exhausts and muddy tidal waters.

Isaac continued on his way, strolling towards the river. It was going to be a long walk home to Notting Hill, but the night was warm and Isaac was in no particular hurry. Veronica and Isabelle would be asleep anyway, and, knowing Veronica, it might make sense to walk off some of this agreeable buzz before showing up back at their little apartment.

He stood for a moment with elbows on the stone parapet and decided that someday he would paint this – a silhouetted London lapped by the returning waters of the Thames. He yawned and looked at the swirling waters below: multiple little maelstroms, murky waves slapping in irritation at each other as they jostled for space. He yawned again, his mind drifting over to his latest piece. An urge built in him to hurry to his studio, not his bed, and look at it again. So, instead of continuing on his way home, he turned to the right, making for the attic space he rented for his painting.

The eye-scanner at the main gate let him through with a loud beep. He shrugged off his leather jacket as he took

the stairs, making for the top floor. More security, and when he swiped his thumb on the keypad, the door swung open on well-oiled hinges. Yet another swipe, and the space came alive with lights, a soft whirring informing him his computer was back online. His fingers flew over the screen and music flowed out of the two narrow speakers, a slow monotonous Gregorian chant.

Paintings leaned against the walls, bursts of vivid colours that implacably drew the beholder's eyes into whatever little detail was hidden in the depth of the heaving brush-work. One was a study in reds and oranges, and in their midst one could vaguely make out a burning, twisting figure, mouth wide as it screamed out its anguish to the world. Isaac extended a finger to touch it and laughed nervously. He could feel his skin blistering with the heat.

"How can you do this?" his agent had said, shaking his head in admiration. "How on earth do you make it so vibrant? Hell, I can even smell the stench of roasting flesh!"

Isaac wasn't sure how he did it. His fingers worked, and he slipped into a subconscious state where colours flowed together on the canvas, and all according to an inner voice. It scared the hell out of him, but that wasn't something he was about to admit – not even to himself.

He flicked off the old sheet that covered his latest work, a painting that was very different from anything else in the room. Just looking at it filled him with unwelcome sensations of vertigo, a niggling feeling that he was walking a tightrope over forbidden zones – like he'd done all those years ago when, as a boy, he had painted the picture that allowed his grandfather to dive from this time to another. Impossible, of course, and yet it had happened.

He caressed the wooden frame of the picture, a depiction of a somnolent courtyard, an empty stone-flagged space, surrounded by arched walkways in whitewashed stone. In the middle a fountain, a constant welling of water, and Isaac knew exactly what the water would taste like and how cool it would feel to his fingers. In olive greens and muted browns, with the odd dash of whites and startling

blues, the water spilled over the fountain's edge to fall in transparent drops towards the ground.

Isaac reared back, and in his head he heard a mocking laugh. Too afraid to look deep into your own work? Well, yes, he was. Sweat broke out across his forehead, beaded his upper lip, and made him wipe his damp hands against his jeans. He tried to break eye contact with the falling water, but now he heard it as well, the pitter-patter of drops on wet stone, the trickling sound of water running through a narrow channel, and there, just where he had painted it, a minute point of white beckoned and promised, entrapping his eyes in a shaft of dazzling light.

Carlos Muñoz was walking back to his room when he saw the stranger lying sprawled half in, half out of the fountain. With a soft exclamation, he hurried as well as he could to the groaning heap of a man. Carlos wrinkled his nose. The man was drunk, but how on earth had he ended up here, in the monastery's secluded courtyard? He swept the cloister walks but they were empty, most of the monks hastening back to their beds from matins for a few more hours of sleep.

Carlos kneeled clumsily on account of his peg leg and turned the stranger over. He yelped and dropped the man back onto the cobbles, scrambling back a few feet. Ángel? Here? But no, it couldn't be – his cousin had died two years ago on Jamaica, hanged by the neck for spying on behalf of his royal Spanish majesty.

"Fucking hell," the stranger groaned, and Carlos scooted backwards, got back up.

"¿Inglés?" He hadn't spoken English since he returned from the New World. "¿Es Usted inglés?"

"No," the stranger moaned and sat up. "If anything, I'm Scots." He spoke passable Spanish, understandable but heavily accented, and looked about himself with trepidation. "Bloody, fucking hell," he cursed in English, and Carlos thought the young man reminded him of someone – apart from being a disconcerting copy of himself.

He extended his hand to help the man stand, and they

were nose to nose, of remarkably similar build – albeit that the stranger was a couple of inches taller – both with a soaring quiff of dark hair over the right brow, both with dark, lustrous eyes that were saved from being doe-like by strong, dark brows.

The stranger gaped. At one level, Carlos supposed it was most droll, this meeting between two men so alike as to seem twins, no doubt with identical expressions of disbelief painted on their faces. At another level, it was so disquieting it made Carlos' good leg dip, causing him to have to hop for a couple of steps to regain his balance. The stranger inhaled, barked a laugh, and, to Carlos' bemusement, pinched himself – multiple times.

“Where am I?” the stranger finally said.

Carlos studied this double of his in silence while smoothing down his cassock. Might the man be an English spy? But no, if anything, the stranger seemed utterly confused.

“*En Sevilla*,” Carlos said.

The stranger groaned, tore at his hair and groaned some more. “Bloody, bloody, bloody hell! This can't be happening, I'm just drunk – really drunk – and soon...oh God!” The man swayed, steadied himself against the nearby wall, thereby coming to stand in a patch of moonlight.

Carlos had never seen a man dressed like this before. With interest, he took in the wet, long breeches, the odd footwear in some kind of fabric, and the rather more normal shirt, even if it was narrow in fit and had small buttons down the front rather than laces. One of the sleeves was burnt, the skin below looking red and irritated. A leather belt but no knife; no sword – not even a pouch; no cloak; no hat; and hands as narrow and long as his own, but with the fingers liberally smudged with ink and paint.

The stranger folded his hands together under Carlos' open inspection. “I can't get it off,” he muttered.

“Are you a painter?”

The man nodded and looked about the courtyard. “I got it just right,” he muttered, and a shiver ran through

him. “The arches, the fountain – shit, even the crumbling plaster is just as I painted it.”

Painted it? Carlos followed the man’s eyes round the small courtyard, smiling as he always did when he took in this his favourite place: the arches in soft sandstone, worn to smoothness through very many years, the whitewash of the walls, the irregular stones of the walkways – all of it spoke of permanence. A huge stand of ivy clambered its way up to the latticed first-floor shutters, in a circle surrounding the fountain grew straggling roses and high tufts of lavender, and set into a niche in the wall stood the abbot’s pride and joy: an ancient statue of the Virgin.

“What is this place?” the man asked.

“A Dominican monastery,” Carlos said. “San Pablo el Real.” He shifted into English, and the stranger’s eyes grew round with astonishment. “My home for the past two years, a resting place for a battered soul.” He nodded at the man. “It would seem you are in need of some rest as well.”

“Rest? No way! I have to find a way back home.” The stranger scowled at the surrounding walls and went over to stare intently into the waters of the fountain, as if he were looking for something in the shallow basin.

“Hmm,” Carlos said, and then recalled his original question at finding the man. “How did you get here?”

The man shrugged. “I have no idea, I just—” He broke off. “I just fell.”

“Fell?” Carlos looked at the sky. There was nothing to fall from.

“I know,” the stranger said, his eyes full of anguish. He shook himself like a wet dog and extended his hand. “I’m Isaac, Isaac Lind.”

“Carlos Muñoz,” Carlos replied and grasped the hand. Isaac Lind? He recognised the name. He tried to place it but came up with a blank.

“Muñoz, you say?” Isaac said, and it seemed to Carlos the name had some relevance for him. Ah well, in truth not an uncommon name.

“Yes, Carlos Benito Muñoz.” Not Muñoz de Hojeda,

like his uncle and his cousins, not for a bastard this illustrious name. His throat tightened as it always did when he thought of the shame that clung to him like a wet cloak – something dear Uncle Raúl never let him forget.

“Pleased to meet you,” Isaac said.

“Likewise,” Carlos replied.

Isaac shoved his hands into his pockets and turned his back on Carlos, the slow, casual pivoting of a man taking in new surroundings.

“This may seem a strange question,” he said, “but what year is it?”

Carlos gave the slender back a surprised look, and all along his arms his hair rose to bristle in fear. What was this man, dropping out of nowhere in strange vestments to land in their courtyard? He crossed himself.

“1688,” he answered as calmly as he could.

Isaac closed his eyes. A strangled sound escaped him, and his frame bowed. Carlos was well familiar with dejection, and saw it now in every line of the man before him. His heart filled with compassion, and he decided that for now the important thing was to get this unexpected visitor dry and out of the beady eyes of the abbot, who would shortly be about.

“We had best get you out of those...err...clothes.” Carlos gestured at Isaac’s strange and rather revealing breeches.

“My clothes?”

“They are somewhat conspicuous – and wet.”

“Oh.” Isaac ran a hand down his thighs, and followed Carlos in under the cool arches, up some stairs, down others, along a straight passage and into Carlos’ little room.

As always, Carlos was washed with a sense of contentment upon entering this little space that was only his. At most sixty square feet, it contained his bed, a desk, a chair, a stool and a heavy wooden crucifix. Leaning drunkenly along the desktop were his precious books, propped up on one side by a heavy inkstand, on the other by the wall itself.

“Are you a monk?” Isaac asked, taking in the little space.

“No, I’m a priest. The monks are not accorded the luxury of private accommodations.”

“Luxury?” Isaac studied his surroundings pointedly, making Carlos irritated. There was a pitcher and a basin, a chamber pot tucked into a corner, and even a window, albeit set too high up to allow any kind of outside view. Few men aspired to such comfort, and even fewer achieved it.

Carlos chose not to comment, busying himself by digging through his chest. With a satisfied grunt, he produced breeches and a shirt.

“We are of size,” he commented, handing the garments to Isaac.

“Of size?” Isaac began to laugh, a high nervous laughter. “Yeah, I would say so. You could bloody well be my twin!”

“Yes,” Carlos agreed, unnerved by the shrill sound, “we are uncommonly alike.”

They inspected each other again, and in the dim light of Carlos’ little room, the likeness was even more extraordinary. Had Isaac worn his hair as long as Carlos did, it would have been difficult to tell them apart – bar the wooden leg, of course.

“What happened to your leg?” Isaac asked, shedding his strange leggings.

Carlos gaped at the revealed undergarment: short of leg, in silk it would seem, deep blue, and decorated with flowers. He made even bigger eyes at the heavy gold chain that had lain concealed under Isaac’s shirt. Not an entire pauper, Carlos reflected, noting the gold rings and the strange, thick metal bracelet round one wrist.

“Your leg,” Isaac repeated.

“I lost it,” Carlos said.

“I can see that. I was more curious about the how.”

“It was in the colony of Maryland,” Carlos answered, frowning as he considered the issue of shoes. He himself only had one, no longer being in need of pairs. “I spent some time with the Indians. A wound I had festered, and so...” He shrugged.

“...and so?” Isaac prompted, inspecting the breeches narrowly before stepping into them.

“A woman I know cut it off.” Carlos sighed, but then

smiled at the memory of this remarkable woman. “Alex Graham, *que vaya siempre con Dios.*” And your daughter as well, he added silently. May the Lord always protect Sarah Graham, wherever she goes.

“Alex?” Isaac croaked. “Alexandra Graham?” He tugged at the shirt, entangling himself in the laces around the neck.

Carlos threw him a cautious look. “Do you know her?”

Isaac laughed again, making Carlos want to clap his hands over his ears. “Know her? Well, if she’s the Alexandra Graham who’s married to Matthew Graham, then she’s my mother.”

“Isaac, Alex’s son? But you’re dead!” Carlos reeled back against the door.

“Not last time I checked.” Isaac broke out in yet another bout of hysterical laughter.

“But Alex...” Carlos stopped and peered at him. “Oh my God!” he exclaimed and sat down with a thud on the bed beside Isaac.

“Yes?”

Carlos shook his head. Alex had known his father – she’d spoken so warmly of Don Benito whom she had met aboard a ship to the colonies. Carlos grimaced, his mouth filling with bitter bile as it always did when he thought of his father, a Catholic priest who broke his vows, and as a result Carlos had been born, taken in by his paternal uncle. *Quizás...maybe...* He eyed the man before him. Yes, that would explain the uncanny likeness, but it would also mean that Alex had bedded his father while married to Matthew, and somehow Carlos couldn’t get his mind around that.

“How old are you?” he asked, and Isaac’s eyes tightened at his tone.

“Thirty-two.”

Carlos gaped. He was not yet thirty, and he would have taken the man before him to be younger, not older. His hand found his rosary, recited his way through a decade, two decades, and finally opened his eyes again, somewhat more in control of himself.

“I don’t understand.”

“Welcome to the club,” Isaac muttered. “Who the fucking hell does?” He rested back against the wall and closed his eyes. He yawned, he yawned again, and just like that he was sunk in sleep, toppling over in the direction of Carlos.

Chapter 2

“Stop! I...” With that, Alex Graham slid off the horse, picked up her skirts, and ran back towards the main house and the people assembled before it. She didn’t want to do this – how on earth was she supposed to survive leaving her home and more than half of her family behind?

She slowed her pace, surveying her home for the last twenty years, and she had to clench her jaws to stop herself from screaming out loud that Matthew could ride off on his own, without her, because she was staying here, where she belonged.

Her eyes flew up the slope to the graveyard where her father and one of her sons lay at permanent rest. A choked sob burst from her. Who would now go and sit beside Jacob to tell him of what was happening in the lives of his family? Who would make sure his headstone was kept free of moss and lichen? Who would decorate his grave with a freshly cut rose on the date of his death?

A small, hunched figure detached itself from the group of people and came towards her at a brisk trot. For all that she was almost eighty, Mrs Parson was still quite agile, and stout enough to cope when Alex threw her arms around her.

“I don’t want to do this.” Alex buried her nose in Mrs Parson’s starched linen cap. “I don’t think I can.”

“Aye, you can. You have to, no?” Mrs Parson disentangled herself and gave Alex a brief pat on the cheek. “And you’d be right unbearable company should you remain here while Matthew sets off on his own. You’d wilt with anxiety.”

Alex nodded reluctantly, her eyes flying up to the graveyard.

“I’ll take care of Jacob, and of Magnus.” Mrs Parson kissed Alex on both cheeks and shoved her towards the waiting horses. “Go on with you.”

“I—” Alex hated it that the tears she had kept so tightly under control now were bursting from her. “Oh God,” she moaned, “I can’t.”

She cried and cried, hands wringing at her skirts, and there was Naomi, eyes as red as her own, and Alex hugged her daughter-in-law to her chest as if she’d never let her go. Mark’s children came next – Hannah, Tom, Lettie, Rosie and baby Peter. And there was Ian’s wife, Betty, wild hair firmly braided, and more grandchildren, four more little bodies to hug. Maggie was crying and begging her not to go, Grace and Timothy clung to her skirts, while Christopher retreated to stand with his cousins, eyes bright with tears.

Alex kissed them all repeatedly, and when she reached Mark, she just held out her arms. Mark pressed her to his chest, and her nose was too clogged for her to be able to draw in his scent, so instead she ran her fingers through his hair, down his cheeks, to memorise him and carry him forever with her, imprinted in her skin.

“Mama,” he whispered, and she could hear how close he was to crying. “My Mama.” He smiled down at her and ran a gentle thumb under her eyes. “You’ll be back,” he said, but neither of them knew if that was true, and Alex didn’t want to let him go.

“Alex?” Matthew’s hands closed on her upper arms, turned her to face him, and she could barely see the dark of his coat through her tears.

“What are we doing?” she groaned. “How can we even think of splitting ourselves apart like this?” She leaned out of his attempted embrace, slipping away from his hold like she’d been doing for the last few weeks, punishing him with her distance for a decision she had allowed him to take.

“I thought we were in agreement,” Matthew said.

No they weren’t, not really. But how could she deny him this? And so they had decided that this was what they should do, but now, on the day of departure, she didn’t want to – no more than she had wanted to during the long, tortuous countdown. This was her home, here were her roots, her family, and to ride away from all this was like tearing a limb off.

“I have to go. I must see Hillview again.” Matthew took a step away from her, and his hands slid down her arms to clasp her hands. “I don’t want to go without you, but if you don’t think you can do this, well then...” Eyes a bright hazel burned into hers, a wordless plea that she come with him.

“Will we come back?” she said.

“I’ve said so a thousand times. If you want to, we will.”

If? There was no if about it, and he bloody well knew that, didn’t he?

He tried to gather her close, but she stepped away from him, dried her face with the end of her shawl, drew in several steadying gulps of air, and turned to face her family.

“Don’t you dare die before I come back,” Alex said to Mrs Parson.

“I’ll do my best.” Mrs Parson smoothed at her apron. “Last I looked, I was as healthy as I’ve been these last twenty years or so, no?”

“Hmm,” Alex snorted, “pure luck, in my opinion. It’s not as if you actively do anything to keep hale and hearty, is it?”

“I eat, sleep and knit. Seems to be working, no?”

“Obviously.” Alex leaned forward to hug Mrs Parson once again. “And be gentle with Thomas, okay?”

“That is none of your business, lass,” Mrs Parson said huffily, shaking out her skirts. “We are both old enough to know what we are doing.” She threw a look at where Thomas Leslie was sitting on his horse, waiting for the cavalcade to set off, and grinned at Alex. “It will do him good, to be away from here for some days.”

“Poor man,” Alex muttered, feeling composure return to her in leaps and bounds with their habitual bantering. “You’re wearing him to the bone.”

“And feeding him back into shape,” Mrs Parson reminded her with a chuckle, guiding her gently but insistently towards the horse.

Mark offered her his hands, and she stepped into them and sat up behind Matthew, looking down at her son. She leaned over and brushed at a strand of dark chestnut hair,

letting her fingers linger for an instant on his cheek.

"I'll be back," she mouthed. Mark just smiled and nodded. She threw one last look at him when she reached the top of the lane. Her son was clinging to his wife, Naomi's arms tight around his waist.

She didn't speak to Matthew during the day, and once they stopped to make camp for the night, she chose to sit with Ian, ignoring Matthew's extended hand.

"Bloody Luke," Alex said, using a long stick to poke at the glowing embers. "This is all his fault."

"But it's a generous gift. Hillview restored to Da, and on top of that, he's paying for the passage."

Unfortunately, in Alex's opinion, as otherwise they would not have been in a position to go.

"Well, we did save his beloved Charlie from certain death," Alex said, unimpressed.

Luke Graham, viper that he may be – and in Alex's book her brother-in-law remained a dangerous, unknown quantity – had done very well out of life, and was, as far as she could understand, filthy rich. She doubted his generous gesture had made much of a dent in his purse, and surely his son was worth it.

Having survived eight months in gaol after the Monmouth rebellion, Charlie Graham had been transported to serve out the remainder of his life as a slave in the West Indies, but Matthew and Alex had found him two years ago and managed to buy him free, returning to Maryland with a skeletal young man, permanently marked by his ordeal.

"Are you saying you wish he hadn't given Da Hillview?" Ian said, keeping an eye on where Matthew was conversing with Thomas Leslie.

Alex hugged her legs. "Yes, I really wish he hadn't. But I can never tell your father that, can I? The moment I saw him holding the deed to Hillview in his hands, I knew that he'd go back." She uttered a small, strangled sound. "I have to go with him, there's no choice in that. But Jesus, Ian, it's tearing me apart."

“But you said how he has promised that you’ll come back.” His voice shook, making him clear his throat.

Alex hitched her shoulders, overwhelmed by a longing for chocolate, something she could binge on to keep the anguish that was growing in her belly at bay. She looked across the fire at her husband, and he smiled in her direction before resuming his conversation with Thomas.

It pissed her off. Here she was, so obviously split in two, and he was so elated by the thought of finally going home that he had been uncharacteristically obtuse when it came to picking up on her distress. To be fair, she hadn’t exactly told him, because she couldn’t put into words just how much it scared her to be leaving most of their children here. Even if they’d agreed that this was not necessarily a permanent return to Scotland, it wasn’t exactly a sedate little Sunday outing, was it? No, it was month after month on a creaky wooden ship that, in Alex’s considered opinion, made it over the sea due to sheer luck and nothing else, and who was to know they didn’t drown or get boarded by pirates? She swallowed hard and turned her wedding ring round and round, her eyes lost in the flames.

Ever since Luke’s letter reached them last April, they’d planned for this. Or, rather, Matthew had planned for this, his eyes acquiring a distant look whenever he thought of his home, the grey, weathered manor in Ayrshire that they had been forced to leave back in 1668 on account of the persecution of men such as he, Covenanters to the core and stubborn enough not to want to give in when the King requested they bow to him and the Anglican Church.

So they had come here, to Maryland, he and Alex with five live children and one in the making, and for the first few months, she’d been worried Matthew would never get over the loss of his home. But that was twenty years ago, and the children that came with them were adults, they had grandchildren and friends, and had built a new life for themselves here. And if Luke hadn’t waved that tempting deed at him, Matthew Graham would’ve been content with what he had.

Alex slumped: she didn’t want to go, she wanted to stay

here. Instead, in less than a week, she'd be aboard a ship destined for Edinburgh with her husband, his nephew and their three youngest sons, the latter presently sitting some distance away, discussing the merits of muskets over bow and arrows.

Ian put an arm over her shoulder and pulled her close. "You have to come back."

"Tell your father that," Alex said.

"Oh, I have, Mama. All of us have."

"And what did he say?" Alex asked.

Ian didn't reply at first. "That you'll be back – God willing."

"Hmph," Alex snorted, but was glad all the same.

Once in Providence, Alex succeeded in evading Matthew all the time. Not that hard to do when she could escape into fussing about Ruth, big as a bloated cow in the last month of her pregnancy. When she wasn't with her daughter, she had errands to run, friends to visit, studiously ignoring his silent presence.

At night, she retired before him and pretended to sleep when he came to bed. In the mornings, she flew out of bed on the pretext of helping Ruth – a major lie as their red-headed, capable daughter needed no help in running her household.

Matthew grew more sombre with each passing day, constantly attempting to corner her. Alex was having none of it, so when she saw him coming yet again in her direction, a determined look on his face, she wheeled, deciding then and there that she had to visit the apothecary.

She bumped into Kate Jones on her way into the little shop. As always, Kate looked gorgeous, her silvered blond hair swept into a becoming knot and only nominally covered by a rakish blue hat. Dark brows rose in well plucked arches over dark eyes. The facial skin was albeit somewhat flaky, the mouth surrounded by a fine web of shallow wrinkles, but, all in all, Kate Jones looked younger than her fifty-odd years.

"You have to come back." Kate gave Alex's hand a little squeeze. "This would be quite the dreary place without your occasional visits."

"Mine and Matthew's, right?" Alex said, following

Kate's eyes to where they had locked on her husband, loitering a few yards down the street.

"Well, he's a good dancer, is Matthew, and, yes, I'll miss him too, of course I will – as will Simon."

Alex smiled obliquely. Kate Jones was since some years involved in a relationship with Simon Melville, Matthew's widowed brother-in-law, a relationship Matthew seemed to have difficulties accepting, no matter that he assured Alex he didn't care that Simon was bedding bonny Kate.

Yeah right. Alex would now and then catch Matthew looking at Simon with a displeased expression on his face – and all because once, very many years ago, Matthew had been Kate's lover. It still made Alex swallow down on a rush of jealousy, and she narrowed her eyes, making Kate squirm.

"Alex," Kate sighed, "that was ages ago. And we both know it only happened because of circumstances."

"Huh," Alex said, even if she knew this to be true.

"He's a man – a man that at the time was close to death, a sick and hurting man, holding on to life in whatever way he could."

"Maybe," Alex shrugged, "but I still don't like it."

"No, that's very apparent." Kate laughed. "I suppose I should be flattered, that you still see me as competition for a man so totally yours."

"You think?" Alex smiled, taking in Kate's impeccable exterior with substantially more warmth.

"Alex Graham, that man eats out of your hand. Always has, always will. Now," Kate continued, "if you're hoping for a miracle cure for seasickness, I'm afraid you won't find one here either."

She propelled Alex further into the dark shop, and together they spent the next half-hour discussing potential remedies for greensickness with the knowledgeable wife of the apothecary. In the end, Alex exited with a small twist of paper containing a piece of ginger and some dried mint.

"Probably better to drink myself silly," she grumbled to Kate who laughed, kissed Alex on both cheeks, and hurried off.

“Promise,” she called back over her shoulder.

“Promise what?” Alex asked.

“That you’ll be back!”

“I promise,” Alex said, throwing eye darts at her husband who was still waiting for her. She swivelled on her toes and walked the other way.

She was crossing the small square by the meeting house when she heard a shriek, a loud sound of pain, and without thinking overmuch, she picked up her skirts and hurried over to where three boys were huddled round a fourth.

“He fell, mistress,” one of them stuttered. “He just fell. We never did him no harm.”

“Hmm,” Alex voiced, too experienced a mother to be taken in by the wide round eyes of the three boys. The fourth boy was lying on his back, eyes squished shut, one arm at an odd angle.

“From the tree,” one of the other boys said. “He fell off the branch.” He pointed at a tree some yards away.

“Oh dear,” Alex said, hands examining the hurt boy. A dislocated elbow, no more. She helped the boy to sit, took a firm hold of his forearm, told him it was going to hurt, and pulled, ignoring his high-pitched yelps as she eased the elbow joint back into place. “There,” she said with a smile, “as good as new.”

The boy snivelled, cradling his arm. He needed some sort of bandage, and seeing as she had nothing else at hand, Alex hiked up her skirts and tore off a piece of her worn petticoats. The boys gawked at the exposed legs, and one of them tittered, but Alex ignored him, concentrating on tying her makeshift bandage into place. Only when the combined shadows fell over her did she realise she had adult company, and she stood up hastily.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Mrs Graham,” Minister Macpherson said, small eyes travelling from the bandaged boy to Alex and back again.

“Minister Macpherson.” She nodded and made as if to pass him by.

He blocked her with his considerable bulk, shaking his

head at her. “And what, pray, were you doing, exposing yourself to these boys?”

“Exposing myself? What are you on about?”

“We saw,” the minister’s companion said, and at the sound of his voice, Alex started, turning to properly inspect the small, reedy individual.

“Saw what?” Oh my God! Richard Campbell himself, much more worn than when she last saw him fifteen years ago, but as self-inflated as always, his lower jaw jutting out in a way that gave him an uncomfortable resemblance to a human toad – very much in line with his general character, according to Alex.

“How you bared yourself.” Richard Campbell sniffed, looking her up and down.

“You have a shallow mind, Mr Campbell,” Alex said coldly, “but then that’s nothing new, is it? I was helping the boy with his dislocated elbow.”

“Oh? And how would you know that it’s dislocated? Are you perhaps a physician?”

“I’m the mother of several boys. Anyway, what are you doing here? Last I heard, you were in Boston.”

“Called to serve, Mrs Graham,” Richard Campbell said, expanding his chest as far as it would go. “Sent here to further strengthen the morals of our little community, what with the upcoming final battle with the papists.”

“As tolerant as ever,” Alex muttered, looking this her least favourite minister ever up and down.

“As wayward as always,” Richard Campbell snapped back, “consorting openly with papist priests, even to the point of having your youngest daughter lured away from the true faith.”

Alex’s cheeks heated. “When Sarah had need of God, it was a Catholic priest who helped her.”

“Had need of God? And why was that? Everyone knows, Mrs Graham, how she brought it on herself. Wilful and disobedient, she was.” Minister Macpherson shrugged.

“From her mother,” Richard Campbell commented with a sigh, “undisciplined and wayward.”

“Get out of my way,” Alex hissed. “Get out before—”

“See? I told you. Aggressive and lacking in respect towards her betters.” Richard Campbell shook his head. “It is fortunate that she’s leaving – no longer our headache.”

“My wife has never been your headache, minister,” Matthew said from behind them. The ministers jumped, backing away from the forbidding look on Matthew’s face. “If anything, she’s mine. And I won’t have my wife – or my daughter – vilified by two tight-hearted, uneducated boors, be they ministers or not.” With that, he bowed, extended his hand to Alex, and without another word led the way towards the harbour.

“If Richard Campbell’s here, it almost makes me consider never coming back,” Alex joked weakly once they were back at Julian’s house. “Almost,” she added, before retaking her hand and with a mumbled excuse about seeing to their packing, darting inside.

“Alex,” she heard him call, “Alex, we must talk.”

Too late, she thought, escaping up the stairs to their little room.

“Will he fly away from me, at sea?” Adam asked, stroking his pet raven over its gleaming back.

“Given that he so far has proved himself quite intelligent, I doubt it.” Alex gave her twelve-year-old a brief smile before going back to rolling together clothing as tight as it went prior to packing it into bulging bags.

They were leaving tomorrow, and Alex had retreated into a functional mode, packing, repacking, ticking off items on her long lists, inspecting the two cabins that were to house them for the six- to eight-week journey, counting the coins she was to carry in her pouch, sewing in the ones that were to be hidden in hems.

She kept her distance from Matthew, and instead talked to Ruth and Sarah, repeated her constant admonishments about washing and cleaning your teeth, eating vegetables and drinking milk, until her daughters hugged her into teary silence. She hugged Malcolm, Ian’s eldest, she kissed

her baby grandchildren, and all the time, Ian hovered in her periphery, and Alex had no idea how she was to survive saying goodbye to him.

And then it was dawn, and the tide was turning, and Alex felt her mask crack wide open as she cried in Ian's arms, unable to let go of this her beloved boy.

"I...oh God!" She swiped at her eyes and attempted a smile. "I love you, Ian Graham, but you already know that, don't you?"

"Aye," he said thickly, "but mothers always love their bairns."

"Yes, we always do. And especially when we have sons like you." Her best friend, the one she whispered all her secrets to, including the ones she couldn't share with Matthew, the stepson she had welcomed into their family as a twelve-year-old and since then loved with the protectiveness of a lioness.

She stood on tiptoe to smooth at his hair, rested her hand against his cheek, and hated Matthew for putting her through this. A long steadying breath, yet another, and she was capable of giving him a blinding smile. "My son, the child of my heart."

Ian didn't speak. He just smiled down at her, a slow smile so like his father's. Alex kissed him one more time and whirled away, convinced her heart was actually breaking, so much did it hurt.

Ian stood apart from his sisters, his eyes never leaving the swiftly disappearing *Diana*. He could still see Mama, the dark cloak fluttering like a banner behind her, and he stretched out his hand, fingers splayed in a last attempt to grab her and hold her here, with him, with them all.

"Carry them safe," he said, "and please God, carry them home, back to me." Especially her.

Chapter 3

Isaac woke slowly. A flicker of an eyelid, a huge yawn and with a groan he sat up. God, no! He scrubbed at his eyes, at his face, he blinked and blinked, and still his surroundings remained the same: a narrow little room very different from his own bedroom. He looked down at the coarse breeches he was wearing, stroked the sleeve of the worn linen shirt, and pressed his mouth closed round an urge to scream.

The painted fountain, Carlos Muñoz... Fucking hell! Isaac shoved his hands in under his legs and sat like that for a long time, drawing in breath after steadying breath. Not that it helped – not much – but his heartbeat dropped, the tightness in his throat receded, and with a loud, protesting rumble, his stomach informed him it was hungry – starving, actually.

Light streamed from the little window, and on the table someone had set a tray containing a piece of bread, a thick wedge of cheese, and watered down wine. Isaac wolfed it all down before moving towards the door.

He wasn't sure if he dared leave the room. What was he to do if he was confronted by someone other than Carlos? He cracked the door open and peered out into the corridor. Empty, very empty, and in the distance, he could hear the sound of men singing, a steady rising and falling of voices that transported him back to his studio and his Gregorian chant music. Not surprising. This was a monastery, and he presumed the brothers were busy with Mass. He had only a vague idea of monastic life, but seemed to recall that there were six or seven services a day – very excessive, in his opinion.

Isaac took a step out onto the cool tile floor. He took another but, when he heard a door bang open close by,

scurried back inside, the door still at a crack.

Carlos was coming down the passage, accompanied by a man Isaac supposed to be the abbot, a tall man who walked with his hands clasped behind his back while he listened to what Carlos had to say.

“A relative?” the abbot was saying just as they came up abreast with the door.

Isaac retreated to lie on the bed, his back to the room. He heard the door open. Thick cloth rustled when two cassocks swung into the room, and then the men were leaning over him.

“Hmm, yes,” the abbot said in a hushed voice, and Isaac was so glad he had taken Spanish instead of French in school. “Astounding!” the abbot added. “One could almost take you for twins.”

“He looks very much like my dead cousin,” Carlos said.

“And he’s from the colonies, you say?” the abbot asked.

The colonies! Isaac almost sat up to tell the old man that he was absolutely not from any colony. He was from Scotland – 300-odd years in the future. And if you do, you burn, he admonished himself. They’ll tie you to a stake and burn you for a witch.

“Yes, from somewhere over there,” Carlos replied.

“But he’s of the faith, I hope,” the abbot said, and Isaac could swear the man was sniffing him as if there was a common scent to all Catholics.

“Of course.” Carlos sounded affronted.

“And he does what?”

Carlos’ finger touched Isaac’s right hand, tapped lightly at his paint-stained fingers. “He paints.”

“Ah.” The abbot sounded interested. “He’s welcome to stay, Brother Carlos. And once he wakes up, bring him to see me.”

“Yes, Father,” Carlos answered.

The door creaked shut.

“So now I’m related to you and from the colonies.” Isaac rolled over and opened his eyes.

“Well, I had to tell them something.” Carlos sat down

on the bed and with a relieved grunt, took off his peg. “It chafes in the heat,” he explained, and proceeded to jump quite nimbly on one leg to where the pitcher and basin stood, dipping a linen towel in the water with which he first washed his stump then hopped back to clean the cup of the peg. “As per your mother. She is most adamant when it comes to hygiene.”

“She is?” Isaac shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t seen her since I was seven.”

“She thinks you’re dead.”

“She does? No, I don’t think so.”

Carlos shook his head. “Alex Graham would never abandon a child of hers. There must have been a reason. A good reason.”

Isaac buried his head in the pillow. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. A sudden thought struck him, and he opened one eye to squint at Carlos. “You’re a priest, right?”

Carlos nodded that yes, he was.

“And if I tell you things, you can’t tell anyone else, can you?”

“What you tell me under the seal of confession remains between the two of us and the Lord,” Carlos said.

“No matter what?” Isaac was by now sitting up, eyes locked into eyes identical to his own.

A worried crease appeared between Carlos’ brows. “Are you a Catholic?”

“Yes,” Isaac lied. Not too much of a lie given that his grandmother, Mercedes, was from Spain and definitely Catholic. After all, the poor woman had converted already in the 1470s together with the rest of her family. As always when he thought about Mercedes, which was very rarely, he had to stop himself from bursting out in high, incredulous and panicked laughter. His grandmother a time traveller as was his mother, and now so was he. With a sidelong look at Carlos, he settled himself on the bed, took a deep breath, and began to talk.

Carlos was so pale Isaac worried he was about to faint.

“Born in 1999?” he squeaked. “And – *Dios mío* – Alex was born in 1976?” He shook his head, slowly.

“Just as I told you, a young woman falls through time and lands well over 300 years before her own birth. She meets a man – the love of her life, apparently – and she doesn’t even try to return to her own time and her own people. Consequence is one abandoned child, me. Not that I ever truly missed her. I was only three at the time.”

Carlos had stopped shaking his head, and was now opening and closing his mouth instead. “Does Matthew know, do you think?”

Isaac nodded. “Of course he does. And I know that for a fact, having met him myself.”

“What?” Carlos clutched at his rosary, cross lifted high enough to give the impression he was warding off demons or something.

“I...” Isaac had to clear his throat. “Well, I found a magic painting and fell through it to where Mama was.”

There was a sound like that of a horse neighing. Carlos was laughing – or crying – the sound clambering further into the higher registers with every breath he took.

“That’s impossible,” he said once he’d regained some control.

“And yet...” Isaac spread his hands.

“How can you fall through a painting?” Carlos hiccupped.

“Trust me, you can,” Isaac said darkly, and went on to describe the last time he’d seen his mother, a long gone summer when he was seven and had plunged from 2007 to land in 1663.

Carlos moaned, hiding his face in his hands. And when Isaac explained that Alex had found another of those magical paintings and so had been able to help him back into the future, Carlos stumbled to his feet and retreated to stand as far away from Isaac as possible in the little room. Isaac pretended not to notice.

“But who?” Carlos said. “Who can paint such pictures? It must be a witch or a necromancer.”

Isaac decided not to share his own obscure talents with

him, and just nodded. He supposed telling the priest about Mercedes would be too much. It was she who had painted the majority of those small blue and green time portals, in her desperate attempts to get back to her time: fifteenth-century Spain.

“And now? How do you come to be here, now?” Carlos asked.

“Another painting.” Isaac fiddled with one of his rings. “I have a daughter, she’s four.” Isaac had to bite his lip to stop it from wobbling. Veronica and Isabelle – would he ever see them again? He raised his face to stare at Carlos. “I want to go back, God, how I want to go back.”

“Of course you do, but instead you’re shipwrecked here, in a time and place very far from your own.” Carlos looked at Isaac for a long time. “And your father? Is he still alive in the future somewhere?” The priest’s voice had regained its normal timbre, making him sound remarkably unperturbed.

“My father?” Isaac shook his head. “I’ve grown up with my adoptive father, my Dad, John, but my real father was a most unsavoury character called Ángel Muñoz who...well, I don’t really know what he did to my mother, except for kidnapping her.”

“Oh.” Carlos swallowed. “A future relative.” He gave Isaac a wavering smile. “No wonder Alex in her more unguarded moments regarded me with apprehension.”

“Not your descendant at any rate, right?”

“No,” Carlos said, “most definitely not.”

Once the initial shock had worn off, Carlos bombarded Isaac with questions, and Isaac patiently replied, describing a life that had Carlos making huge eyes. Electrical light, central heating, water at the turn of a tap – luxuries Isaac had always taken for granted, but that had Carlos muttering ‘I don’t believe it’ over and over again. Even more, he gaped when Isaac told him that, in the future, man could fly.

“Fly?” Carlos said. “Up there, in the sky?”

“Mmhmm.” Isaac nodded.

Carlos wet his lips. “And God? Have you...have you been able to fly all the way to Heaven?”

Isaac nearly burst out laughing, but the intensity in the other man's eyes stopped him. "No," he said instead, "that high we can't fly."

"Oh. As it should be. Man is not meant to stand before God's magnificence while alive," Carlos said in a relieved tone, and shifted the conversation to more practical issues.

"Your cousin tells me you're a painter," the abbot said to Isaac some time later.

"Yes," Isaac said.

A slight frown appeared on the other man's face, and at Isaac's side, Carlos nudged him.

"Yes, Father," Isaac amended, and the abbot's brow smoothed itself out.

"And what do you paint?" the abbot asked.

Isaac considered this for some moments, trying to recall what kind of pictures were being painted in this day and age. "Family groups, city lives, and, on occasion, a painting or two of the Virgin, Father."

"Hmm," the abbot said, his hand fingering the crucifix that hung round his neck. Under his sharp eyes, Isaac tugged at the sleeve of his borrowed shirt, trying to cover the tattooed Celtic cross that decorated his left forearm.

The abbot placed his hands on his desk and rose, overtopping Isaac by an inch or so. "I've already told your cousin you're welcome to stay. I understand you had a harrowing experience getting here."

"Yes, Father." For now, that was all Isaac could say. He had to talk to Carlos first.

"And while you're here, well then, maybe you can help me with a small matter." The abbot was already leading the way out of his little room. In the open courtyard, he stopped and indicated the wall opposite the entrance, behind the fountain. "I'd like there to be a mural of the Virgin there."

"There?" The artist in Isaac was doubtful. The wall was far too much in shadow, and damp would quickly harm a mural, he explained, suggesting instead the western wall.

"I'm not sure," the abbot said.

Isaac moved closer. “There, and the morning sun will hit it squarely.”

The abbot rather liked that, Isaac could see, tilting his head this way and that as he considered the suggested location. He submitted Isaac to an endless stream of questions, and Isaac explained about pigments and plaster, did a cursory structural inspection of his chosen wall, and at the end of all this, the abbot told Isaac to order whatever he needed.

“And how will you depict her?” the abbot asked.

Isaac was stumped. The Virgin Mary was generally depicted with the Holy child or, perhaps like Michelangelo’s Pieta, the adult dead Jesus cradled in the despairing mother’s arms. Hesitantly, he said as much.

“We have plenty of those.” The abbot waved him off. “I want something different.”

“Ah.” Isaac nodded and creased his brow in frantic thought, dredging through his scant knowledge of religious things. “Maybe when the Holy Spirit came to her?”

The abbot thought about that for some time, and then nodded, twice. “Yes,” he said, “I like that.” With that, he was off, cassock flaring round his legs to reveal a long undershirt in bleached linen.

“How the fuck did I get myself into this?” Isaac hissed to Carlos once the abbot was out of earshot. “I have no knowledge about all this stuff.”

“Stuff?” Carlos gave him a stern look.

“Well, you know, about the Virgin, and how she was impregnated by the Holy Spirit.” Isaac made a slight face.

“Haven’t you read the Bible?” Carlos asked, and at Isaac’s head shake looked horrified. “Ever?”

“Never.”

Carlos took him by the arm, towed him up a flight of stairs, and flung open a door to one of the most beautiful rooms Isaac had ever seen.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, stepping reverently into the monastery’s library. Smooth arches rose up along the walls, embracing high, narrow windows that flooded the reading carrels with light. Along the further wall, tomes of huge

books lay open, displaying a brilliance of colour on vellum that had Isaac knotting his hands round the need to touch them.

The floor was of small, well-worn tiles, a mosaic of blues and whites; the massive bookshelves were of polished wood; and all along the wall ran a line of sconces, each of them decorated with what Isaac assumed to be the statue of a saint.

Isaac gawked, craning back to peer up at the roof, several storeys higher up. So many books... He drew in the smell of dust and leather, smiled a greeting at one of the brothers, who was busy at one of the desks, and followed Carlos to the carrel furthest from the door.

“Here,” Carlos said and opened a gigantic Bible, “read and learn.”

Isaac peered down at the text. “It’s in Latin.”

Carlos muttered something about ignorant but after some rooting about and a heated discussion with the librarian, he returned with a Bible in Spanish.

“Thanks,” Isaac said, not about to admit he found this very difficult as well. Instead, he bent over the illuminated pages, and, word by word, made his way through the story of how a young girl was chosen to carry the son of God.