

Christmas 1666 with the Graham Family

It took half the morning before Alex understood they had a new houseguest, hidden up in the attic.

"You tell her, your sister, before you tell me?" she barked at Matthew, so angry she could barely speak coherently.

"He needs help," Matthew said. "Joan can look after him."

Alex gave him a look that should have reduced him to a heap of smouldering ashes, pushed by him, and stalked up to the attic to examine Sandy Peden. He looked awful, cheeks sunk into grey hollows, eyelids a dark purple. His breath came in long, unsteady rasps, and even now, after hours under quilts, he was shivering. His leg was bandaged, but there was blood seeping through in places, indicating that the gash was not only long but also very deep.

"Not in our home," Alex said, turning to face Matthew. "You promised."

"He's hurt and ailing."

"I can see that, but you promised. And even worse, you didn't tell me."

"I couldn't leave him to lie like this on the moss! He'd be dead by morning."

Alex studied the pale man in silence. Maybe that would have been for the best, she thought uncharitably, feeling ashamed of herself.

"One night, that's all."

"He needs care," Matthew said. "We must help him."

"Two nights, no more," Alex compromised. She ducked beneath his arm and escaped down the stairs.

Joan bustled about, her cheeks bright with excitement as she carried up food, bandages and clothes to the hidden minister, in full view of the curious children.

"Irresponsible!" Alex said to Simon. "Do they expect children this small to hold their tongues?" She glared in the direction of her husband to whom she wasn't talking and stalked off, tagged by Rachel, who in a loud voice asked why Aunt Joan was in the attic and could she please go there too?

"Rachel, lass," Matthew's voice stopped his daughter. "Come here, I must talk to you."

"Yeah," Alex muttered under her breath. "Take the time to explain to her what you didn't bother to explain to me, you jerk." Matthew seemed to have heard, because she could feel his gaze burning into her back. Well she didn't care; she busied herself with preparing the Christmas dinner, keeping up a cheerful conversation with Simon and the children while cold-shouldering Matthew completely.

Late that afternoon, Alex took the tray up to Sandy, ignoring Joan's protests along the lines that this was her task. She set it down on a stool and concentrated on the nasty leg wound, making Sandy hiss when she prodded and re-bandaged the wound. It looked clean enough, so likely it would heal with time. The cough however... she rocked back on her heels and studied him, her inspection being returned like for like from watery, grey eyes.

"I know you don't like it," Sandy croaked, groping for his handkerchief. "And I wish I had no need to importune you thus." He smiled weakly. "But I do, lass. I'm not ready to die yet. Too much left to do." He closed his eyes, colourless lashes fluttering against his pale cheeks.

"Yes, I suppose being a cocklebur up the English arse is something of a vocation," Alex said, making Sandy laugh.

"I hear you think God is Catholic," Sandy said between coughs.

Alex raised a brow. "Discussing me with Joan? Or is it perhaps Matthew, looking for guidance on how to handle his difficult wife?" From the way Matthew squirmed, she had her answer. "It would've been better to talk directly to me, don't you think?" she said, before turning her back on him in a dismissive gesture.

"To answer your question, what I said was that He might be – just as He might be Jewish or Anglican. My point being that we don't know to what, if any, church He subscribes. It would be presumptuous to assume He's Presbyterian, given that the largest mass of Christianity is in fact Catholic."

Sandy struggled to sit. He fixed her with a stern look, the overall impression ruined by his running nose and red, puffy eyes.

"You can't say such. It's blasphemy."

"Not to the pope," she retorted. "To the pope it's a God given truth."

Sandy gasped. "The pope? He heads a church that has lost itself in idolatry, more concerned about trappings and riches than spiritual devotion." And, he added, she shouldn't forget that the Catholic Church was an instrument in their persecution, as was the Church of England.

Alex shrugged. "Not so long ago it was the Kirk of Scotland that was doing the persecution in the name of God."

"Not me," Sandy said.

"No? So you've never spoken out against the fiendish popish practices?"

Sandy squirmed. "We must hold to the true faith."

"That's what they say as well, and who's to know who's right and who's wrong?"

"Surely you don't mean that," Sandy spluttered. "You must bring your wife to her senses, Matthew. She's wilful, and speaks of things she has no understanding of."

"I'm sitting right beside you, so kindly address yourself to me, not him," she said.

Sandy sneezed, folding together as yet another coughing fit racked him. He waved away Matthew's hand, taking a few gulping breaths before facing Alex.

"You think too much," he wheezed. "That's unseemly in a woman. You should trust your husband's counsel on all matters spiritual and then perhaps you may hope."

"Hope for what? A place in heaven ruled by a bigoted God? No thanks."

Sandy blinked at her, his mouth falling open. Jesus! Alex reared back; he had the breath of a dead stoat.

"You speak of things you don't understand," Sandy said, "and you forget your place. You're but a helpmeet to your husband, and must in all matters of any greater importance bow to his will."

"Really? And is that what he thinks as well?" Alex gave Matthew a barbed look. "Well, is it?"

"Nay, of course not," he replied with a sigh.

"That's good, seeing as I'd never consider any man to be my intellectual superior. Anyway," she went on, "now that we're having a theological discussion, I might just as well come clean and tell you I have major problems with all this predestination nonsense."

"Nonsense?" Sandy's voice squeaked. He coughed and coughed, glaring at her over his sodden handkerchief.

"You can't say thus," Matthew said. "It's the truth. God has preordained that some of mankind will be given eternal salvation, as indication of His mercy and justice, while the greater part will not, in just punishment of the burden of sin which all of us carry."

"Sounds very fair," Alex said sarcastically.

“Predestination is no nonsense, it’s a principal tenet of faith,” Sandy put in, now sufficiently recovered to be able to speak. “God extends the possibility of grace to a few chosen amongst us, and only to those.”

“Well you would say so, wouldn’t you? I assume you’re counting yourself in among the elected few.”

Even Matthew smiled at the bright red flush that rose through Sandy’s face.

“I don’t know,” the preacher mumbled.

Alex snorted and shook her head. “Whatever... predestination takes away an element of accountability. If God has already preordained, then why bother? To me it’s much more clear cut; we have free choice and can choose to shape our destinies as we want. It’s the choices we make, and the actions we take, that ultimately will count, not some haphazard divine lottery. That’s what I believe, in any case.”

Well, that shut them up. Had Sandy been a Catholic he’d have been waving a crucifix and possibly a bunch of garlic at her, so shocked did he look. And as to Matthew, to her surprise he was nodding, trying out a weak smile in her direction. Forget it; she stared him down, dumped the loaded tray on Sandy’s lap and left.

“You must punish her,” Sandy said. “For her own good you must beat these misconceptions out of her.”

Matthew gave him an incredulous look. “Beat her? Nay, I’ll never lay a hand on Alex.”

“She’s imperilling her immortal soul, the poor woman has her head filled with nonsense – but dangerous nonsense. What would our brethren think had they heard her speak out as she just did? She would be chastised, cast out from the Kirk.”

Matthew just shook his head. “I’m fortunate in my wife, she travelled the world for me, she risked her life to find me and bring me back home.” He broke off a piece of bread and chewed it. “Alexandra Ruth, that’s her full name. She has more than proved herself my Ruth. I can live with her not being Martha – I don’t want her to be, I want her to be just as she is.”

Sandy exhaled loudly. “I’ll talk to her myself then,” he said in a doleful tone. “I must try and set her on the narrow path.”

“You do that,” Matthew replied with an encouraging nod.

It had been a horrible Christmas Day, and the evening was none the better. Battle lines were drawn across the parlour, with Simon and Alex sitting together, while Joan settled herself on a stool at her brother’s feet. The children flitted from one parent to the other; affected by the strained atmosphere they became loud and quarrelsome, forcing Matthew to bark at them to sit down and listen, for was he not about to read them the gospel according to Luke?

Ian sank down beside Alex when Matthew opened the Bible, leaning against her legs. He’d spent most of the day at the top of the lane scanning for soldiers, made as nervous as she was by Sandy’s presence, and had over supper left his normal place beside Matthew to sit beside her instead.

She tousled his hair. Ever since the incident at the Cumnock garrison, there was a special bond between them, both of them members of the let’s-keep-Matthew-safe club. Not that he was making it easy for them. Her hands clenched; and if the soldiers came now? What then? She rose to her feet, interrupting Matthew halfway through the story of the birth of Jesus, and without a word ushered her children up to the nursery.

She started at every sound the coming day. Repeatedly she walked up and down the lane, all of her tense with fear. When Matthew tried to talk to her, she moved away, when he came after her she wheeled and left the room. If there was someone she didn't want to see or touch or talk to, it was him, which was why she'd spent the night in the nursery with the children, ignoring him completely when he'd appeared at the door in only his shirt, asking her to stop this and come and sleep where she belonged.

She counted hours until nightfall, relaxing with relief when darkness fell. No soldiers, not this Boxing Day, and now there was only one more night to go and then he'd be gone. It made her feel small and petty to so look forward to throwing a sick and wounded man out of her house, but she had her priorities firmly in order, and on that list Sandy Peden came very much at the bottom.

Tight-arsed little man, she thought angrily, but recognised that wasn't fair. Peden had his moments of pig-headed righteousness, but he also had moments of deep spiritual insight and instinctive kindness. She spent the second night as well with her children, in a combination of protectiveness towards them and anger at her husband. Well before dawn she was up, and by the time the rest of the household woke, she was already out in the yard, keeping her silent vigil.

"Is he gone?" Alex asked Simon when he joined her.

"Nay, last I saw Joan was preparing his breakfast."

"Fucking great, I said two nights, not two nights and three full days." She looked off in the direction of Cumnock. Nothing; no dust cloud, no glinting reflexes. "Will you stay? Keep an eye out?"

He nodded and pulled the cloak tighter around him. "And you?"

"Me? I have a houseguest to get rid of."

"When will he leave?" Alex asked Matthew when she entered the kitchen. "I want him out of my house now."

"But he's ill! His cough is as bad as when I brought him here."

Alex pointed up the lane. "What will you do if – no, when – a troop of soldiers materialises up there? Pick him up on your shoulders and rush for the woods? Hide him under the bed and hope they don't look there? You promised me, Matthew Graham, that you wouldn't put us at risk, and yet that is what you're doing every minute he remains in our home. Don't touch me," she snarled when he attempted to put an arm around her. "Don't try to cuddle me into acceptance. You promised."

"He's a friend in need."

Alex shook her head slowly. "He's an outlaw, and his presence here puts all of us at risk. Do you want to see us all bonded into slavery? Do you want your sons to live out what life they have as slave labour on a tobacco farm in Virginia?"

That was very underhand; a kick that hit him squarely in the balls. He jerked as violently as if she'd slapped him, his eyes shifting into a muddy green.

"You know I don't."

"And still that's what you're risking. Me abused, your children slaves, and yourself a slave or hanged." She didn't like herself for saying that, not when all of him paled, an arm flung out to steady himself against the wall.

"You know..." he began, swallowing so hard she could see his Adam's apple bob up and down. He raised agonised eyes to hers. "I don't want that, but I can't leave Sandy to die." Their eyes locked and held.

"It's a question of priorities. Your family or your friend; your marriage or your friend, your life – all our lives – or his life. Take your pick, but be prepared to live with the consequences."

He said nothing for a while. She held his gaze, listening to the sound of her breathing, his breathing.

“He’ll be gone by noon,” he said and turned on his heel.