

ANNA
BELFRAGE

The
WHIRLPOOLS
of TIME

Time
Light
press

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Dedicated to Erin Davies and Erin Al-Mehairi. What better role models for my Erin than two such generous and supportive ladies? I hope you will like your namesake!

A special thanks to Helen, Alison, Char, Annie, Cryssa and Liz for always being there when I need it!

Chapter 1

Duncan Melville held in his horse at the top of the lane leading down to Graham's Garden. He could count on one hand the visits he'd made to his grandparents' homestead over the last ten years, never entirely welcome among his Graham relatives. Not his fault, he thought, brushing back the lock of dark hair that had a tendency to fall forward over his face. How could he be blamed for resembling the man who had fathered him?

Today he was here to convey the sad news of his adopted father's death. He scratched at his chest, a futile attempt at soothing the grief that had his heart caught in a vice. He'd not understood just how much he loved the old man until Simon Melville had expired that last breath, his fleshy features softening into inanimation. Duncan sighed and clucked his horse into a walk. They were all dying, the old ones. Grandma Alex last year, Kate Jones bedridden since March and now his father. Likely Matthew Graham would be devastated at hearing Simon was dead—as close as brothers they were, had been through life.

He was halfway down the lane when he drew his horse to a halt. In the yard below, the Graham family was assembling, the men hoisting a coffin onto their shoulders. Slowly, they began the long trudge up the steep incline that led to the graveyard, and Duncan stood in his stirrups looking for his grandfather's tall, lean frame. Nowhere. He sank back down in the saddle. Too late to tell him Simon was dead, too late to bid him farewell.

He rode the horse down to the yard, dismounted, and hastened after the Grahams. Long legs ate their way up the hill, maintaining a distance to the weeping women in front of him. One of them was his birthmother, Sarah Connor, born Graham, and she preferred pretending he didn't exist, no matter that Grandma Alex had always

assured Duncan none of what happened to Sarah was Duncan's fault. After all, how could it be?

"The sins of the fathers," he muttered to himself. Not low enough, as one of the women turned. Aunt Betty came to a standstill.

"What are you doing here?" she asked when Duncan caught up with her.

"I come with sad news of my own," he replied. "We buried my father a week ago."

"Simon?" Betty's red-rimmed eyes filled with tears. "This last year has been a year of loss."

Duncan nodded. Unsurprisingly, in his opinion, seeing as both his father and his grandparents were old people.

"Did he suffer?" he asked, nodding in the direction of the coffin.

"Matthew?" Betty gave him a tremulous smile. "No. He was happy to go, I think, eager to reunite with his Alex. It is us that suffer, bereaved of his presence."

"No one lives forever," Duncan said, doing a quick calculation in his head: his grandfather had been born in 1630 which meant that in this the year 1715 he'd be 85 years. Few men lived that long.

"True enough. And next in line are we." Betty tightened her shawl round her shoulders. "Ian is the oldest man here now."

They reached the graveyard. The coffin was lowered into the ground, lying side by side with Grandma Alex's. Ian spoke a few words, the coffin was covered and just like that it was over, the Graham family trooping back down the hill. Duncan remained a while longer, resting his hand on the tombstone. It was evident Matthew himself had carved it, decorating it with flowers and vines. His grandfather had been quite the accomplished artist, and Duncan had a collection of small horses Matthew had made for him, detailed little sculptures that now resided on a shelf in Duncan's bedroom.

"You're welcome to join us."

Duncan started at Ian's voice.

"We aim to drink to his memory with good Scottish whisky," Ian continued. He offered Duncan his hand. A firm grip. "And I'm sorry to hear Simon is dead."

"At least it was quick," Duncan said. "I just wish Kate had been well enough to bid him farewell. He asked for her repeatedly at the end." He craned his head back to look at the sky. "I find it hard to believe they're up there now."

"They must be somewhere," Ian said. "All that life, all that passion—death cannot quench it."

Duncan didn't reply. His Graham family was surprisingly devout. He was not, a man raised by his lawyer father to question everything he could not prove. And life after death was difficult to prove. "Which is why it is called faith," Simon always used to say.

Someone had seen to his horse, so Duncan followed Ian inside, sweeping off his hat as he bowed to the assembled household. On purpose, he made no eye contact with Sarah, focussing instead on his male relatives and his two aunts. Betty and Ian had been wed for longer than Duncan had been on this earth, the same applying to Mark and Naomi. Duncan liked both his uncles, as tall and hazel-eyed as their father. Somewhat grey around the edges were both Ian and Mark, and even Betty's so exuberant mane of hair was now liberally streaked with grey. Duncan nodded a greeting to his various cousins, many of them older than him, most of them unusually subdued. Matthew Graham had been loved and would be sorely missed.

The younger children were soon sent off outside, leaving well over a dozen people round the large table. The women produced bread and cheese, Mark retrieved a bottle from a small cupboard and the kitchen filled with chatter as the various people present shared their memories of Matthew—and of Alex. Duncan laughed at some of

them. The notion of Alex chasing after her children with a broom when they tried to avoid their mandatory bath had him grinning.

“All that washing,” Malcolm said with a groan. “Grandma was always going on about the importance of keeping clean.”

“Don’t forget the toothbrushing,” Ian said, nudging his eldest son. “Mama considered toothbrushing more important than evening prayers.”

Malcolm laughed. “So does Betty,” he said, throwing his stepmother a fond look.

“After close to forty years with Alex, aye, I do,” Betty replied.

“Da didn’t agree, though,” Sarah put in. “He considered prayers more important.”

A short silence fell. Matthew had never quite reconciled himself to the fact that Sarah had converted to the papist faith, and Duncan found it unlikely that Matthew Graham would have encouraged papist prayers. It had taken some time for Matthew to accept that Sarah had married a papist. Even worse, Michael Connor was the nephew of the Burley brothers, to hear it the evillest men to ever walk this earth. Unfortunately, it was a Burley who had fathered Duncan.

Duncan spent the following minutes studying his birthmother and her husband. Sarah looked fraught, her eyes puffy and red. Eyes as blue as Duncan’s own, fringed with long fair lashes. She caught him studying her, two parallel lines appearing between her brows. Duncan did not look away—why should he? Sarah’s brows rose. It gave him some satisfaction that she broke eye-contact first. Instead, she reclined against Connor, who put an arm round her, now and then dropping a distracted kiss on the top of her head while participating in the ongoing conversation. Duncan recalled that Matthew and Alex had also been like that, incapable of not touching when they had each other close. Come to think of it, all of the Graham men at the table were sitting very close together with their wives, Malcolm’s great-

bellied Daisy perched on his lap. It made Duncan smile, remembering how Simon once had said that there had to be something in the water at Graham's Garden, how else to explain all those children?

"He's better off where he is," Mark said to the room at large. "This last year, it's been like watching a wounded beast."

"Love like that comes at a price," Ian said, tightening his hold on Betty's hand. "Mama's death left Da a gaping half, part of him torn out."

Really? Could you love someone so much life without them lost its meaning? Duncan found that doubtful.

"We all missed her," Mark said.

"Aye," Ian said. He raised his glass. "To Mama. And Da. May they find each other in the hereafter."

An hour or so later and the women had shooed the men outside as they busied themselves with dinner. They sat under the shade of the huge white oak, Ian and Mark taking turns to share stories about their parents. Duncan had heard most of them before—Simon Melville was a good storyteller who had known Matthew and Alex for most of their lives. So he reclined against the gnarled trunk and closed his eyes, the voices of his companions lulling him into an agreeable doze.

"...crossroads," Ian said. "Mama always held them to be dangerous."

"But why?" Malcolm asked.

"She just did," Mark replied curtly. His tone jerked Duncan out of his slumber.

"Crossroads?" he asked. "My father didn't like them either. Maybe it's some sort of Scottish superstition."

"Mama was not superstitious," Ian said. "She had no time for such nonsense."

“No?” Duncan snickered. “Yet she was afraid of crossroads? What did she think could happen? That the ground would fall away at your feet?”

“Something like that,” Mark said.

Duncan shared an amused look with his cousin Malcolm. Those that had come over from the Old World had a tendency to believe in all sorts of strange stuff, such as fairies and witches.

“Don’t scoff at what you do not understand,” Ian snapped, glowering at his son and Duncan. “Mama had valid reasons for avoiding crossroads.”

Malcolm held up his hands. “I am sure she did, Da. Or at least that she considered them valid.”

Duncan suppressed a smile. Grandma Alex had never struck him as fanciful, but he supposed all women were entitled to at least one fanciful whimsey, even if being scared of crossroads did sound right odd.

The conversation turned to other things, like the adventures of that rogue Selkirk, now lauded as a hero after surviving four years on a desert island God knows where. That story fascinated Duncan: how could a man emerge from such an experience with his sanity intact?

“Well, we don’t know that he did,” Mark said with a laugh. “But aye, having only goats to converse with for so many years must be right trying.”

“At least they don’t contradict you all the time,” Michael Connor said, brushing that unruly lock he shared with Duncan off his face.

“Oh, so rather a goat than Sarah?” Mark teased.

“In bed? No.” Michael grinned. “Otherwise?” he waggled his hand.

“Best not tell her that,” Duncan said, surprising himself. What did he care if his mother’s husband compared her to a beast?

Connor gave him a level look. “Do I look like a fool?”

Duncan shrugged and poured himself some more beer.

Ian cleared his throat and asked Duncan if there were any news from town. "I still think of it as Providence, not Annapolis," Ian grumbled, making Duncan smile. Most of the die-hard Presbyterians were of the same opinion, but these days they were in minority, the Anglican congregation growing in leaps and bounds.

"I like the name," Malcolm said. "Besides, what does it matter what it is called? What's in a name and all that."

"Aye, you're right." Ian helped himself to more whiskey. "I reckon it is only the old farts like me who have problems adapting."

"You're not old," Malcolm protested and Duncan saw something dark leap in his cousin's eyes. Malcolm leaned closer to his father. "Don't say that," he said in a lower voice. "Not today, when we've just buried Grandda." He gripped his father's shoulder. "You have many years ahead of you, Da."

In response, Ian enfolded his son in a hug. Duncan looked away, wishing he had someone left in his life who'd do the same to him should he need it. He could have had that closeness with his uncles, but he'd seen them too rarely as a child. Aye, he had one of his uncles living in Annapolis, but Daniel Graham was a man who saw life in shades of black and white. He frowned.

"Where's Daniel?" he asked.

"In Boston," Mark replied. "As is Ruth." He sighed. "They don't even know Da is dead yet. Ruth will be devastated: her mother, her husband and now her father in less than a year."

Duncan nodded. Poor Ruth.

He sat lost in his own thoughts as the Graham men discussed sheep and wheat. From where he was sitting, the ground sloped towards the distant river, a sea of man-high grasses that rippled in the wind. The meadow was dotted with cows and from further into the forest came the bleating of the Graham sheep. A beautiful and tranquil place—but not his place. He had no roots here, had never played with utter

abandon among the trees. With one exception his few visits had been short, usually coinciding with Sarah visiting elsewhere.

At that precise moment, the women emerged from the main house. A wave of resentment rose through him at the sight of his birthmother. There she was, safe and happy among her family members—his family too, goddamn—and here he was, somehow always on the outside of the close-knit circle. It had always been thus. Even his grandparents had treated him differently from his cousins, making too much of an effort to make him feel loved.

With a muttered excuse, he rose, waving Malcolm down to sit when he stood too. “Too much beer,” he said with a shrug.

He sauntered off, noting out of the corner of his eye how the women joined their men. A sequence of touches, of lips brushing kisses over foreheads or cheeks, and his gut tightened with longing. He’d grown up with a single father, a man who’d loved him but was not much given to casual intimacies, not like women were.

“Do you hate us?” a voice asked, and Duncan turned on his toes.

“Hate you?” He looked at the young girl, trying desperately to find a name for her. Not an easy task, seeing as Graham’s Garden swarmed with children, but to judge from her thick fair hair and her blue eyes, this lass had to be Sarah’s daughter.

“Esther,” she said with a little smile. “I’m your half-sister.”

“Oh.” None of his other half-siblings had ever given him that recognition. “Should you know who I am? After all, to judge from how your mother reacts in my presence I must be kin with the devil himself.” Too much bitterness, he chided himself, watching the lass recoil.

“It’s not your fault,” she said. Her chin lifted. “Grandma Alex always said so.”

“Did she talk about me?”

Esther shook her head, causing her thick braids to bounce. "But I asked." She sidled closer. "It's not my fault either." Blue eyes so similar to his own gazed up at him.

"No," he conceded. He gestured in the direction of the river. "I am going for a walk. Will you join me?"

She giggled at his formality and skipped to his side. "Gladly, sir." Barefoot and gangly, she was somewhere between childhood and pubescence, her neat bodice outlining a budding chest. As they walked, she chattered, pointing out the swing, her favourite horse, the best tree to hide in. At one point, she took his hand without breaking off her constant stream of words. She made him laugh when she imitated the enervating raccoon that had made it his mission in life to attempt to raid the smoking shed, had him shaking his head when she asked if he'd ever dived for pretty stones in the river.

"Why not?" she asked.

"I wasn't here that often."

She fell silent. "I can give you one of my stones," she offered when they reached the shore. The look on her face made him swallow his snide remark about worthless pebbles. Instead, he said he'd be honoured by such a gift. It made her grin, and for a moment he wondered if this was what his mother had been like. Before the Burleys, before him.

He was up at dawn next morning. Dinner had been a stilted affair, Sarah looking at him as if she'd gladly flay him and all because Esther insisted she wanted to sit beside her brother. A night of restless slumber in the hayloft ended when the cock crowed and as he had no reason to stay, Duncan saddled his horse and packed his few belongings.

"Leaving us already?"

For a man who struggled constantly with an injured back, Ian could move with the stealth of a cat.

"I am." Duncan tightened the girth one last time. "Matters to sort at home."

"Ah." Ian squeezed his shoulder. "We're here if you need us."

"Thank you," Duncan said.

"I'll have Betty pack you some food." Ian rolled his eyes. "Knowing her, she'll hand you enough to last you a week."

But it wasn't Betty who came with the food, it was Sarah.

"Here," she said, extending the bulging canvas bag to him from a safe distance. He took it, demonstratively ensuring he didn't touch her. She flushed. "Take care," she said. "It's a long ride south."

"I am flattered by your concern. Not that I believe it's genuine," he retorted, deriving quite some satisfaction when her flush deepened.

"Of course it is." She raised her face, blue eyes flashing. "I may not love you, but I bear you no ill will."

"Aye you do," he replied calmly. "You blame me for being the living reminder of what was done to you all those years ago. And you conveniently forget that I am as innocent as you are."

Sarah looked away. "Seeing you makes me relive it. Can't you understand that?"

"Can't you understand how abandoned I felt?" he retorted. "You hated me so much you wouldn't even let me grow up here, among my own kin."

She blanched. "I couldn't bear the sight of you," she whispered.

"Yet as your daughter so succinctly put it yesterday, it wasn't my fault."

Sarah shrugged and looked away.

"You'd have preferred it if I died," he said, and all the bitterness he usually kept under such tight control bubbled up. "I even heard you say so, to Grandma."

Her chin lifted. "I never—"

"Yes, you did! You said as much that winter when I was here after Nicholas Farrell nearly beat me to death, and all because I wouldn't stand for it, when the other lads called you a papist whore."

She didn't protest. Instead, she crossed her arms over her chest. "You had yourself to blame for that. I never asked you to defend my honour."

"I had no choice. What you are defines who I am. If you were a papist whore, what was I? A papist bastard? A whoreson?"

"A bastard, at any rate," she replied coldly.

"Aye." He finished securing the bag to his saddle. "And all because you disobeyed your father."

"How dare you!"

"What? Tell the truth? Had you not been disobedient, I would not have existed and your brother Jacob would likely still have been alive. Everyone knows that."

"It was their fault!" she hissed. "It was them, the accursed Burley brothers who are to blame!"

"Which is why it is so difficult to comprehend how you could wed their nephew." He swung astride. "Me, you could not stand. Him, you could not get enough of—and yet he is as closely related to them as I am."

"Michael is not like them. He never hurt me."

"Neither did I."

"Oh, yes you did! For nine months you were a gnawing thorn inside me, a constant weighty presence I wanted to—" She came to an abrupt halt and took several deep breaths. "Well, it no longer matters, does it?"

"It does to me," he said.

She gave him a long look. "I know."

He waited, hoping for something more. Nothing. With a sigh he turned the horse and set it to ambling up the lane. When he reached the top,

he twisted in the saddle. She was still standing where he'd left her.
She lifted her hand. Duncan just rode off.

Chapter 2

“You’ll have to handle it for me.” Henry Jones threw the documents onto the desk. “I can’t leave everything and travel to Boston.”

Duncan grimaced. He had no desire to travel all the way to Boston.

“They expect you to be there,” Duncan said. “It is a serious matter.”

Henry clapped him on the back. The man was well over two decades his senior but twice his girth, lending considerable force to his palm. Duncan managed to look unperturbed.

“Time for you to cut your teeth on a real case,” Henry said. “All that expensive schooling must have left you prepared for matters such as these.”

“Credit is rather due to Mr Hancock and my father,” Duncan replied. He’d enjoyed his years in Glasgow and the months he’d been in London with yet another of his uncles, the most successful David Graham. But this was home and the knowledge that his father missed him had led him to return, despite being offered the opportunity to remain in London. He rested his hand on the beautiful ink stand that stood on his desk and smiled sadly. He’d bought it for Simon when they visited Paris together, not much more than a year ago.

“How is Kate?” he asked as he followed Henry to the door.

“Still clinging on to life with everything she has,” Henry replied.

“Ah.”

Henry had been wishing his mother dead for quite some months by now, eager, no doubt, to finally come into the inheritance Kate had so capably managed. To give Henry his due, he was a conscientious son and had not stinted when it came to Kate’s care—nor had he allowed his harpy of a wife to boot Kate out of the large bedchamber she’d slept in for the last thirty years or so.

“I shall miss her,” Duncan said.

“As will we all,” Henry replied.

“Is it that urgent?” Jeremy Jones leaned over the table and stabbed his knife into a choice piece of Duncan’s chicken.

“According to your father, yes,” Duncan said. It annoyed him, that Henry Jones should order him about as if he were a servant, especially when they both knew this legal matter was neither that urgent nor that complicated. A case to cut his teeth on indeed! Duncan swallowed back a snort.

“Do you want us to come with you?” Jeremy asked.

“You have matters to see to here.” The Jones family had business interests throughout the colonies, being rich like the mythical Croesus.

“If you want us to come, we will,” James said, smiling at him. “Father may grumble a bit, but Jeremy and I are old enough to decide for ourselves.”

Duncan sat back and wiped his mouth. The Jones twins were the closest things he had to brothers. A year or so older than him, they’d grown up together, spent their days together—until that day when the twins had been sent to Boston to attend school. The following year had been a bad year for Duncan—at least initially—and it had been with great joy he’d joined the twins at their school back in 1696. Just ten, he’d been accorded the opportunity to reinvent himself, become someone else than the lad who’d been fathered by rapist thugs and abandoned by his birthmother.

“Shouldn’t you stay here?” Duncan said. “With Kate hovering at death’s door...”

Jeremy grimaced. “Aye. If nothing else to ensure dear stepmama Iris doesn’t smother her.” There was little love lost between the twins and their father’s second wife. They were too young to remember their mother, the intriguing Lucy, Simon Melville’s beautiful and deaf daughter who had entranced Henry, wed him, given him three children and then literally gone up in smoke. Well, Duncan privately

held that to be impossible, but as a rule no one spoke of Lucy Jones and his attempts at asking his father about this unknown sibling had never resulted in anything but a vague “she’s gone”.

There were rumours, of course. Duncan had never spoken to Jeremy or James about it, and to this day the brothers seemed remarkably uninterested in their mother, even if he’d hazard they’d also heard the tall tales about how Lucy Jones had lured innocent girls to disappear with the help of a magic painting. He scoffed. Any educated man would tell you there were no such things as witches or magic.

James laughed, recalling Duncan to the ongoing conversation. “Father would throw her out if she did something like that.”

“True.” Jeremy sighed. “But this extended dying is a dreary business.”

“I reckon she doesn’t want to die,” Duncan said.

“Who does?” James held up his hand to catch the attention of a serving maid. “More beer?”

“Why not?” Jeremy extended his long legs. “And then maybe a little wench.”

Duncan shook his head and laughed. “What would Mistress Malone do without the Jones men?” he teased. Henry Jones was as much of a regular as his sons, happier here than he was in the company of his wife. Tonight, the older Jones was sitting several tables away with some of his friends—all of them respected men here in Annapolis.

“Oh, she’d survive.” James made a sweeping gesture. The tap room was full of men, many enjoying the excellent food and beer for which Mrs Malone was famous, just as many planning to end their evening with a romp in one of the rooms upstairs. The whores at Mrs Malone’s were on the whole pretty and young but Duncan rarely succumbed to this carnal temptation. Bedding a whore potentially meant bedding a woman who had no choice, was coerced by circumstances to sell her body, and the thought sat badly with Duncan.

“Coerced?” James chucked when he said as much. “Where do you get that from? Mrs Malone pays her girls well. Some years here and they can flit off to reinvent themselves elsewhere.”

“Aye, and therein lies the rub, does it not? That they must reinvent themselves, because what woman would want to remain a whore throughout her life?” He glanced at the madam, sitting in a corner which offered her a view of her little empire. Old, was Mrs Malone, but rumour had it she was more than adept at using her cane as a weapon.

“No woman could,” Jeremy said. “Who’d want to bed an old hag with her dugs hanging to her waist?” He clapped Duncan on his shoulder. “You make too much of it. The girls are here, our cock-stands are here. They have something we want, we have something they need. A mutual understanding, a business transaction, no more.” He stood and beckoned for one of the girls to join him. A pretty thing, with big round eyes and unbound curls that fell to well below her shoulders. “I’ll leave you to your musing. I have other things to do.”

James watched his brother make for the stairs, the whore in a firm grip. “He’s right,” he said. “They need our gold, we need their loving.” He gave Duncan a rueful smile. “An hour or so of pretending they might actually care for us.”

“Jeremy doesn’t need that. He just wants to swive them.”

“You think?” James shook his head. “He gets little affection at home.” Aye, that was likely true. Jeremy’s wife was beautiful, rich and exuded about as much warmth as an icehouse. Duncan studied his friend. “And you?”

“Charlotte and I rub along well enough,” James said. He stood. “But sometimes I have needs she cannot quite fulfil, genteel lady that she is.” He winked and left Duncan to his beer.

He sighed. A man of his age—he’d be thirty next year—should have been married but so far he had not found a woman he wanted to wed.

Fool, he berated himself, you set your standards too high. But he could do no other: having seen his father's love for Kate, his grandfather's love for his grandmother, Duncan wanted something similar for himself. Aye, he wanted a woman who would flay him should he ever consider going elsewhere with his needs, who would make him laugh, who would hold him and love him, who would welcome him to her bed, lay and whisper secrets through the nights. A woman who would love him—all of him—and expect him to love her as fully in return. Fool, he repeated, such women do not exist. Except that they did—of that he was sure.

The business in Boston was concluded quickly. The threat of a lawsuit had the odorous Jacob Carter backing off, grumbling that no one had told him the land in question was already spoken for.

"Of course he knew," Samuel Graham said with a sniff when Duncan told him this. He poured them both some more beer. "He was merely hoping that Henry Jones would not care about those few paltry acres."

"Paltry acres?" Duncan laughed. "They sit on the shoreline."

"Aye, marshy, useless land—according to Carter."

"For farming, yes. To offer an expanding town land on which to build..." Duncan shrugged.

"Everything the Jones family touches turns to gold," Samuel said. "Ill-gotten wealth to begin with, but no one cares about that."

"Ill-gotten?" Duncan asked.

"Oh, aye: Mama always insisted that the Jones' fortunes were built on the inheritance they stole from a certain Fairfax—whom Dominic Jones murdered."

"He did?"

"According to Mama and Da, yes." Samuel smiled at his wife as she set down a bowl of steaming soup before them. "But I wouldn't repeat it. No proof—besides, it no longer matters." He half-rose to help his wife

to sit. Shoshanna Graham was a beautiful woman who wore her years well, her carriage slim and upright. They were joined at the table by their daughter, Karen, but the lad Exundas was no longer living at home, having been apprenticed to a gunsmith over in Saybrook. Duncan liked his cousin, a quiet contained woman who in everything resembled Shoshanna—which was odd, seeing as Karen’s real mother was Uncle Samuel’s Indian wife. Shoshanna had never had any children of her own, a cause of grief to both her and Samuel.

“Have you seen Ruth?” Duncan asked. He’d been shocked at seeing his normally so vivacious aunt reduced to a hollow-eyed apparition in black.

“More or less daily,” Samuel said. “She took the loss of Julian badly, and now Da... It is fortunate that Daniel is here. He has always been her favourite brother.”

“They are staying here, *non*?” Shoshanna said. Several decades here, and she still retained a French accent.

“As I hear it, aye.” Samuel made a little face. “Daniel can be insufferably righteous,” he muttered.

Shoshanna laughed. “I do think he considers you a lost case.”

The conversation turned to business. Samuel oversaw a sizeable operation that traded far and wide for furs, spending months each year travelling the wilderness to meet with various Indian tribes. In return for pelts, he offered muskets and knives, glassware and decorative beads.

Once back in Boston, the pelts were sorted. High quality furs were sent to London where Uncle David and Charlie Graham—yet another of Duncan’s many, many Graham relatives, this particular man being the son of Grandda’s brother, Luke—would sell them on.

“At least I do not have to worry quite as much now when he sets off,” Shoshanna said, taking her husband’s hand. “Now that the war is concluded.”

Samuel shook his head. “Concluded? It is more of a pause, I fear. The French are actively courting the tribes who have every reason to hate the British settlers, and soon enough, violence will rear its head again.”

Duncan agreed. The French were anxious to expand their hold on the New World and would use any means to achieve their goal. “Is it dangerous?” he asked. “For you, I mean.”

“For me?” Samuel shrugged. “Man has an allotted time. When it is time to die, it is time to die.” Beside him, Shoshanna gasped. “I do not take unnecessary risks,” he continued, smiling at his wife. “After all, only a fool does that, and my Indian father taught me that life is a precious gift, something to be savoured in full.” He leaned closer to Shoshanna. “I have not had my fill of it yet.”

Duncan averted his gaze, struggling with a flare of jealousy. Yet another man who adored his wife, was adored in return. It seemed to him that since Father died, everywhere he looked he was surrounded by happy unions while he was always alone. Always. Stop being so maudlin, he told himself. After all, there were plenty of examples of less-than-successful marriages, such as Jeremy Jones’s to the frigid Frances. Except, of course, that Jeremy didn’t care: he found what he needed elsewhere—companionship with his brother, willing women at Mrs Malone’s.

“Any thoughts as to what you’re going to do with all that land of yours?” Samuel asked, interrupting Duncan’s musings.

“No time,” Duncan said. “what with Father being so ill and Henry Jones’ demands to fulfil, I’ve had no time to consider it. Not that there is any urgency. The land’s there once I decide what to do with it.” A huge tract of land on the uppermost western shore of the Chesapeake—compensation from the Farrell family for a beating that near on killed him years ago. “Grandda was of the opinion I should build a mill.”

“And will you?”

Duncan shrugged. “We’ll see. Truth be told, I have little hankering for living so far from civilisation.”

Samuel shrugged, muttering that sometimes the wilderness was far less savage a place than a town.

“Savage? Aye at, times. And full of hopeful fools like Carter.”

“Fool?” Samuel snorted. “More of an opportunist. But speaking of fools...” He shared a look with his wife. “I had a letter,” he said, before busying himself with pipe and tobacco. The neat little clay-pipe was a gift from Grandda, and the pouch holding the tobacco was clearly the work of Grandma Alex. Duncan reached across to stroke the carefully embroidered S that adorned the worn velvet.

“Do you miss them?” he asked.

“Aye.” Samuel lit a taper and for a while all there was were the soft sucking noises as he lit his pipe. “But they had good lives—long lives. And they were blessed in each other.” A sudden flare in one of the candles lit up his face and the ancient tattoo that marked his right cheek. Once, Uncle Samuel had been an Indian, White Bear, a proud brave of the Mohawk tribe, and from what Ian had told Duncan, it had near torn the hearts out of Alex and Matthew to have their son choose a life that so pointedly excluded them.

Samuel rose and disappeared into the little room he used as his study. It was a well-known fact that mostly it was Karen who handled the accounting and the correspondence, Samuel being less than adequate when it came to ciphering and writing, but now and then he’d laboriously pen a missive or two, either directed to his parents or his beloved brother, David.

“Here,” Samuel said, handing Duncan a neatly folded letter. The seal had been broken but he recognised David’s signet in the cracked wax.

“Read it,” Samuel said.

The heavy paper crackled when Duncan unfolded it. His lawyer uncle wrote fluidly, his beautiful handwriting leaping across the page. He read. He read again, and then he raised his face to stare at Samuel.

“But...” he said. “He cannot be fool enough to consider this! This is treason!”

Samuel just sucked at his pipe.

“There’s no support for them,” Duncan went on.

“No?” Samuel asked. “I think there are many who’d prefer a Stuart king to that fat Hanoverian. Especially those who still embrace the papist faith.” He sighed and set his pipe aside. “But I agree: it would be a foolish thing to do. The United Kingdoms would no more accept a Catholic king than I would sup on skunk. An opinion I aim to share with my dear brother in my next letter.”

“You are hoping to dissuade him with a well-written diatribe?”

“Aye.” Samuel folded the letter together. “Likely an impossible venture, but I must try.”

“Hmm,” Duncan said. David Graham was very much his own man—and a man of firm convictions. But he didn’t say that.

Chapter 3

“Damn the man!” Duncan said again. He scowled at the dark skies, at the track that extended before them and back at his clerk. “I should have told him to send someone else.”

“You are his man of business,” Edward Lewis said, wiping his face free of sweat. It was infernally hot, had been so throughout the day. Duncan swatted at the persistent flies and scowled again. God’s blood, but he was sweating so badly his shirt was plastered to his skin.

“Hmph! I am right tempted to tell him to find someone else.”

No sooner had the sloop from Boston berthed, but Henry Jones had come marching towards Duncan, telling him he had to ride to St Mary’s City immediately. A fat purse of gold coins, a leather satchel containing deeds he told Duncan to review along the way, and Duncan was ordered to set out immediately.

“This is a matter of extreme urgency,” Henry Jones had said.

“Again? Like the matter I just settled in Boston?”

“This is much more urgent,” Jones had snapped. Out of the woodwork had appeared a certain Mr Fairfax, insisting he had proof the Jones’ family had built their fortune on his rightful inheritance. Interesting, given what Samuel had told him some days previously. Likely not that much of a threat, seeing as the events in question lay so far back in time Mr Fairfax would be hard put to find any witnesses—or documents. Whatever else one could say about the Joneses, they were not fools.

“It would likely be best if you were present.” Duncan had suggested.

“I can’t. Not when my mother is still clinging on to life with everything she has,” Henry replied.

So here they were, he and Lewis, halfway to nowhere and with clouds so heavy with rain they threatened to drench them before they arrived safely at their destination—if they did not drown in their own

perspiration first. Duncan flapped his cocked hat in front of him in a futile effort to cool his face and glanced at Lewis, looking as unperturbed as always. A former indentured servant, Edward Lewis was from somewhere in Ayrshire and had bonded himself overseas in an effort to build a new life for himself. After twenty years here he had a wife, two small sons and supplemented his earnings as Duncan's clerk with scribing work.

Lewis was not much given to talking—not beyond discussing the legal contracts they were carrying in their satchels. They'd ridden most of the first day in agreeable silence, Duncan lost in thoughts about Simon and Grandda Matthew, Lewis likely dreaming of his wife. It made Duncan smile: Edward's wife was one of those women he himself dreamed of, albeit that he hoped to lose his heart to someone less nondescript than Mistress Lewis.

Today had not been much different. After a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast, they'd set off, despite the clouds that promised rain and a wind that blew in gusts. At first they rode along the shore of the Chesapeake bay, an expanse of grey water to their left. Soon enough, the track turned inland, meandering in the direction of Bourne Island and the Patuxent River. Summer heat had the air vibrating, clouds of flies hovering round them as they rode through shrublands and forest. They reached Bourne Island just before noon. No sun due to the overcast skies, just this infernal heat that had Duncan considering throwing himself in the river. The ferryman took their coin and hurried them aboard, yelling at a half-grown lad to cast off the moorings.

The crossing did not take long. The waters of the river swirled sullenly below, as grey as the sky above. And then they were back on their horses with St Mary's City at most two hours away. The road was nigh on deserted. An old man on a cart laden with rags nodded a silent greeting, the girl sitting beside him staring up at them. They exchanged greetings with a couple of riders going the other way,

passed a small homestead a mile or so further on and then it was just them and the rutted road, bordered by scrub.

“Storm coming,” Lewis said laconically. “I can smell it.”

Duncan studied the sky. If anything, the clouds had sunk even lower, dark and menacing they seemed within touching distance. What little wind there had been fell away, and sweat dewed Duncan’s face, his neck.

“Best increase our pace,” he said.

“Won’t help,” Lewis said. “We’ll be caught in it anyway.”

Duncan gave him an irritated look.

Lewis merely shrugged. “One does not die of rain or thunder,” he said.

“I recall—”

Whatever Lewis remembered was drowned in a clap of thunder. And just like that, the storm was upon them. Daylight disappeared, replaced by a murky half-light that made it difficult to see much more than the road before them. Rain fell in torrents from above, and all around lightning flared.

Duncan’s horse balked, shying from something Duncan could not see. He heard Lewis call out, tried to locate his man but could not make out anything but the whipping branches of the trees. Now and then the darkness was seared with light when a bolt of lightning flashed too close, and every time that happened, Duncan’s mount skittered sideways, throwing frantically with her head.

The road was still visible, widening into a crossroads. Duncan wiped at his face and tried to take his bearings. They were at most a couple of miles from Bourne’s Island. Something crackled overhead. This time, lightning struck very close. Thunder roared, the ground shook.

Duncan’s mare reared and neighed.

“Easy lass,” Duncan said, clutching at her mane to keep his seat. She reared again, bucked, and Duncan was sent flying. He landed painfully in the gravel. His head connected with a rock and for a moment he lost

consciousness. Long enough that when he looked up the horse was gone, racing back the way they'd come.

"Damnation."

Duncan tried to stand. His head hurt, his face stung and there was blood on the knees of his breeches. Yet another clap of thunder had him jumping backwards, pain shooting through his left leg. The crossroads was a slurry of mud, and the ground tilted this way and that. Once again lightning flashed overhead and the road beneath his feet shook. He had to find cover but standing under trees in a thunderstorm was never a good idea. Duncan shivered and took a shuffling step towards the closest oak. At least it would offer some cover from the rain and lashing wind.

Step by careful step, he made his way over the crossroads. God's fish, but his leg hurt, and to judge from how his vision blurred, the blow to his head had been hard enough to do some serious damage. One more step and he was at the centre of the crossroads, gaping at how the muddy water swirled around his feet. And then something changed. Instead of dirty brown water, wisps of bright colours coiled themselves around his feet. Green and blue bands tightened round his legs. He couldn't move, transfixed by the colours. With a roar, the ground at his feet parted. Duncan fell, his last conscious thought being that Grandma Alex had been right: crossroads were dangerous places indeed.

Erin Barnes leaned forward to crank up the volume, squinting at the road before her. Her wipers swished back and forth like a couple of high-speed metronomes, but with the rain coming down in torrents they did little to improve visibility.

She took a right and lowered her speed as she approached the old crossroads. In weather such as this, the old gravel roads became water-logged, and she definitely didn't need the complication of an accident. Not after this shitty day. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. She threw a look at the rear-view mirror: no headlights following her. Idiot, she told herself, they wouldn't dare.

"No, of course they wouldn't," she said out loud but the knot of tension that lived in her stomach remained where it was, an uncomfortable weight that had her glancing back the way she'd come over and over again. Steve might. He'd looked ready to throttle her earlier and he had a damned short temper.

Had her grandmother Emily been alive, she'd have told Erin that some crusades were best left alone—unless one was willing to pay the price. Crusade? Erin snorted. This was no crusade, this was her sinking her teeth into a story that would make her career as a journalist *and* avenge Emily's death. Well, unless the story got her killed first.

She'd spent months getting an in on it, swallowing down the desire to throw up that afflicted her whenever Steve kissed her or pawed at her body. And now...She tightened her hold on the wheel, recalling just how quickly Josephine Wilkes' expression had changed, from mildly interested to icy rage when she studied the pics in Erin's phone. Okay, so she'd done a lot of illegal snooping to take those pics, using the hot romance between Steve and herself as a cover to access his family home on several occasions. Too bad Mama Josephine wasn't as dense as her youngest son—but then, if she'd been that dumb she would not be heading the racketeering business she'd inherited from her husband years ago.

So here she was, driving madly for the safety of her home, south of the air field. Safety? Please! But now that they had her phone, now that they'd slapped her around a bit, maybe they thought she'd do the smart thing and just keep her head down. Huh. When she'd squeezed

out of the narrow bathroom window and sprinted for her car, Erin had been as determined as ever to bring the Wilkes family down. Even more, actually, given that now it was personal, her face swollen and puffy after the repeated “love pats” from dear ex-boyfriend Steve.

Thunder crackled through the night and Erin jumped, the car swerving slightly. Shit! More thunder, and if anything the rain intensified, a veritable deluge that had her slowing her speed to a crawl. A flash of lightning illuminated the landscape and a huge bundle lying right in the middle of the crossroads. Was that a man? An outflung arm? Erin stepped on the brake. Too late. There was a dull thump when her fender connected with the object. For some moments, she just sat there, her hands clenched so tight round the steering wheel they hurt. On the radio, someone was singing about perfection.

From outside came a loud howl. It made her jump. Definitely a human voice and with a deep sigh Erin concluded her day had just gone from bad to worse. She’d just hit some poor idiot, although to be fair, it was just as much his fault as hers. What sort of moron would just lie on the middle of the road. An injured one, her brain told her, one that is even more injured now that you’ve run him over.

There was a gun in the glove compartment, and she tucked it into the waist of her jeans before getting out. One never knew, this could be one of Steve’s more subtle attempts at getting his hands on her, but the moment she thought it she dismissed it as ridiculous. Steve had little finesse, was way more into brutal intimidation. She shivered, uncertain if it was the rain or the thought of Steve that chilled her to the bone. The pile on the road groaned.

A man, she concluded some moments later. Dark hair plastered to his forehead, something that resembled a linen shirt stuck to his torso and long legs encased in weird pants and knee-high boots. Erin rolled her eyes. One of those Renaissance Fair types, she thought, placing a careful hand on his back to make sure he was still breathing.

“Hey,” she said, wiping at her face. “Are you okay?” Stupid, stupid question. The man’s eyes fluttered open.

“Hi,” she said, trying out a little smile.

“Hi?” He scooted out of reach and sat up, groaning loudly. He looked at her. His eyes widened. He blinked and looked again.

“Can you stand?” she asked him, wondering if it would be totally uncharitable to help him to the side and then drive off.

“Aye.”

Aye? And what an odd accent. He sounded British, somehow.

The man lurched to his feet, took a step and promptly fell to his knees.

“Are you drunk?” she demanded. He clutched at his left leg and she was suffused with guilt. She’d broken his leg or something, and here she was accusing him of being drunk.

He looked at her. “I wish I was,” he said. “It would explain my hallucinations.”

“Hallucinations?”

“Aye.” His eyes narrowed. “Or are you real?” Once again, he stood, favouring his left leg. He was tall, well over six feet, and that shirt of his displayed an impressively broad chest. He was also bleeding from a gash on his forehead, his right sleeve was badly burned as was the forearm and hand, and he grimaced when he put weight on his left foot.

“Of course I’m real.” She grabbed hold of him when he swayed. He yelped and shied away, landing yet again on the ground.

“God’s fish!” he exclaimed. “You *are* real!”

What was the matter with him? She took a couple of steps away from him, uncomfortable by how he stared at her, as if she were some sort of apparition. Sort of rich, seeing as he was the one wearing weird clothes, not her.

“Where’s Lewis?” He filled his lungs. “Lewis!” he yelled. “Damn it man, where are you?”

“Not here,” Erin told him.

“But he was right behind me when...” He broke off, stared down at the crossroads and shuffled hastily to the side. “Where’s my horse?”

Erin shook her head. No horse. And who in their right mind would go riding in this weather? Some people took all that re-enactment stuff way too far.

“Who...” he began, but whatever he was about to say drowned in the sound of a large, revving engine. A huge van skidded to a stop and Erin hurled herself towards her car. Too late, and here came Steve, with that oaf Johnny and his dear cousin Marco. Johnny had hold of her before she reached the car. A twist, and he had her arm high up on her back, making her scream with pain.

“Let me go!” She kicked and fought.

Johnny just laughed. “Don’t think so. You’re coming with us.” He pulled her in the direction of the van.

“What, you thought we were done?” Steve asked. He glanced at the stranger, who was swaying on his feet. “Who’s he?”

“No idea. Let me go, you bastard!”

“Now, now: you know what we want. You give it to us and we’ll let you go. You don’t, and...” Whatever else Steve had planned on saying she’d never know—not that it took that much imagination to fill in the blanks. Instead, Steve was staggering back, staring at the stranger. An arm flew out, a fist connected with Steve’s face and he toppled backwards. The stranger turned her way.

“The lady said to let her go,” this oddly dressed apparition said. He pulled his sword as he advanced on Johnny.

“Seriously?” Johnny said with a sneer, pulling his gun. Erin took the opportunity offered, stomped down on his toes and pulled free, fumbling for her gun. Steve was back on his feet, stalking towards them.

“Watch out!” she yelled. The stranger swirled. His blade sliced through the air, Steve yelped. He wheeled again and his blade rapped down sharply on Johnny’s hand, sending the gun flying.

And then there was Marco, bringing down a cudgel on the stranger’s head. The stranger stumbled, regained his balance, ducked the next blow and punched Marco in the gut. With a growl, Johnny threw himself forward. Steve joined the fray. The stranger disappeared in a flurry of arms. Three against one was impossible odds—especially against someone like Johnny. But the stranger held his own for a while, giving as good as he got. At one point Steve screeched. The cudgel came whistling through the air and the stranger collapsed.

“Bastard!” Steve snarled, kicking at the poor man. “Who do you think you are, some sort of fucking Zorro?”

A number of dull thuds, booted feet lifted to stomp and Erin raised her gun and shot. Once. “Get away,” she yelled. “Back off or I’ll shoot you.” Johnny laughed. “I’d like to see you try.”

“What? You don’t believe me?” She squeezed the trigger. Johnny collapsed, clutching at his thigh. She aimed at Steve. “You’re next,” she warned. “But this time I’ll aim for the head.”

“Let’s go, man.” Marco had hold of Johnny, was dragging him backwards. “We can always come and find her later.”

Erin shifted her aim and squeezed the trigger again. The bullet whizzed by Steve, close enough to make him yelp, nowhere close to actually hitting him.

“I see you anywhere close to me again and I’ll shoot first, ask questions later,” she said, trying to sound cool and unconcerned. She slid the stranger a look. He was lying very still on the ground. Was he dead?

“You’ll pay,” Steve said, retreating towards the van. “For Johnny, for fucking spying on us!”

“Yeah? Maybe I should tell dear Mama Josephine just how sloppy you are, leaving all sorts of information lying around.”

Even in the dark she could see him stumble. “Bitch!” he hissed. “You’ll regret this. And you’ll definitely regret not killing me when you had the chance.” He hauled himself into the van. The engine roared, gravel spitting every which way as the van sped off. Erin carefully reengaged the safety on the gun and fell to her knees, the adrenaline rush receding so quickly it made her feel faint. Steve was right: she should have killed him.

A couple of deep breaths and she’d pulled herself together sufficiently to crawl over to the wheezing man.

“Hey,” she said, and one eye opened. “Can you stand, do you think?” “I can try,” he mumbled and ever so slowly he rolled over onto his front, got on his knees and swayed upright. She had hold of him, steadying him towards her car. He managed to fall into the passenger seat, yelping out loud when his back connected with the seat.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said.

“For what?” he croaked. “Not your fault.”

But it was. Had he not interfered, he would not look like he’d been mauled by an entire football team.

“Hospital,” she said. He didn’t reply, his head lolling to the side.