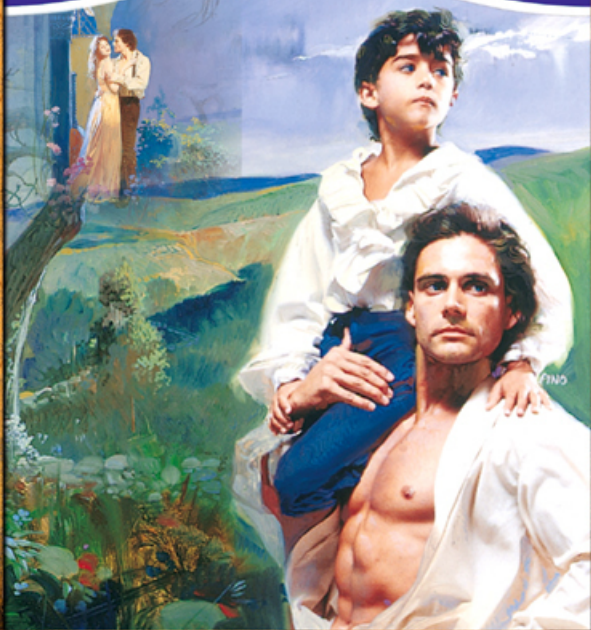


MILLS & BOON

Man Of The Mist  
Elizabeth Mayne



Historical

# **Elizabeth Mayne**

## **Man Of The Mist**

### **Аннотация**

Mrs. Evan MacGregor. The Mere Sound of It Sent Chills Up Elizabeth's Spine, for the knowledge of her marriage to Evan was a dangerous secret, one she hadn't enjoyed keeping over the last five years. And now he was back to claim her as his wife! But that could never be, for she could not risk losing her son to the father he had never met... . Damn Elizabeth Murray - MacGregor! It had taken Evan years to summon the confidence to right his youthful blunder, and return for the only woman he'd ever loved. And now, his beautiful wife was refusing to see him. And determined to ignore the undeniable passion that raged between them still!

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Praise for Elizabeth Mayne's first novel, All That Matters  
"...a terrific debut from a talented and imaginative new author..."

—Romantic Times

"The author has created a fictional world that will capture the hearts and minds of her readers."

—Rendezvous

"...the story of Cara Mulvaine and Gordon McKenna will captivate readers of Irish and Scottish historicals... a passionate and well-told romance."

—Affaire de Coeur

"Splendor of G—" Evan gasped.

His angry wife stepped gracefully out of her night rail, wadded the cloth into a ball and threw it at him. He barely caught his shout of triumph at the back of his throat and changed it into a grunt as the gown dropped to his feet.

“Now what, you unconscionable brute? Shall we have tea?” Elizabeth demanded.

“Unconscionable brute, is it?” Evan deliberately shook his head as he lifted one hand away from his rigid pose and crooked a finger at her.

“I’ll not apologize now, you rotten curl I won’t take back a single word I’ve said.”

“Then we’re right back where we started. Only you’ve taken it a step farther... coming into my room...intending to break my resolve with your woman’s wiles. I won’t be bound to your whimsy, Elizabeth Murray MacGregor. A husband has rights over his wife.”

Dear Reader,

In her third historical for Harlequin, *Man of the Mist*, Elizabeth Mayne tells the heartwarming story of childhood sweethearts who elope, yet, believing they have made a mistake, agree to keep their union a secret. Now, five years later, they must unravel their feelings of hurt and betrayal and learn to accept that their love was meant to be.

Romantic Times had great things to say about this month’s delightful new Medieval from award-winning author Margaret Moore. *The Norman’s Heart* is “A story brimming with vibrant color and three-dimensional characters. There is emotion and power on every page.”

Our other titles include *The Fire Within*. from longtime Harlequin Historical author Lynda Trent, a haunting love story

of two people who must choose between the past and the future. And Birdie, by Taylor Ryan, the Regency Bra story of a young woman who must battle countless odds on her journey to happiness.

Whatever your taste in reading, we hope Harlequin Historicals will keep you coming back for more. Please keep a lookout for all four titles, available wherever books are sold.

Sincerely,

Tracy Farrell

Senior Editor

Please address questions and book requests to:

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Man of the Mist

Elizabeth Mayne



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ELIZABETH MAYNE is a native San Antonian who knew by the age of eleven how to spin a good yarn, according to every

teacher she ever faced. She's spent the last twenty years making up for all her transgressions on the opposite side of the teacher's desk, and the last five working exclusively with troubled children. She particularly loves an ethnic hero and married one of her own twenty years ago. But it wasn't until their youngest, a daughter, was two years old that life calmed down enough for this writer to fulfill the dream she'd always had of becoming a novelist.

To Alice Maynard Lord

You've kept me sane this past year,  
cheered me and helped me remember all those  
good people and wonderful times.

God love you.

E.L.M.

Prologue

Edinburgh, Scotland

May 1, 1802 Belltane

"Stars! This bloody wool itches," William Grey muttered, scratching at his bare shanks underneath his borrowed kilt.

Evan MacGregor's laugh echoed down the narrow corridor leading out to the jakes. The inn's lighting was poor, but his vision very sharp as he leaned closer to a scrap of mirror tacked to the wall. He checked the folds of linen and lace spilling over the high collar of his black velvet jacket. Then Evan flattened three fingers and rubbed them upward, inspecting the results of his newly acquired skill of plying a razor blade.

"You'll never pass for a Highlander, Willie, if you keep

scratching your arse.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’ve worn a damned kilt all your life. I’m only stuck in this blasted skirt to get inside Bell’s Wynd, damn it all.”

Evan turned from the mirror. The knife-edge pleats of his red-and-green MacGregor plaid swung easily about his knees. He gave his Cambridge roommate a thorough inspection, then straightened the drape of Willie’s philabeg. Evan thought it best to cater to the Englishman a wee bit.

“It’s a rare man who wears a philabeg day in and out in Scotland these days, Willie. A whole generation got in the habit of wearing britches, like my da, and now me. ’Course, that’s because you English made wearing a tartan a capital crime. Holding on to it got a man and his whole family deported.”

Willie’s bulldog jaw twisted in a grimace. “Then why in the bloody hell do we have to get suited up in one tonight?”

“For the same reason we suffer silk stockings and knee britches to get inside Almack’s, you dolt—because that’s where the prettiest women are!

“Now, mind you...” Evan swung a conspiratorial arm around his English friend’s broad back. “Things here in Edinburgh are a bit different than in London. The important thing to remember is, you can’t just dance with any lass. You’ve got to be approved to dance with every girl you choose by presenting her to Aunt Nicky first. She rules this assembly with an iron hand. Never mind that she’s deaf as a post and a century older than Ben Nevis.”

“That’s the mountain, right? Ha!” Willie barked. “All right, I’ve got the rules down pat. You’ve been over them a hundred times already. Don’t ask any girl to dance who’s dressed in white...’cause she’s a debutante and looking for a husband. Girls with hair hanging down their backs are forbidden, underage and taboo. Widows will let me know they’re available by doing something with their fans.”

Evan clapped Willie on the back. “You’ve got the gist of it, mate. Let’s go!”

They both halted on the wooden banquette on High Street. Evan self-consciously flicked a speck off his cuff and crossed the street to join the queue lined up outside Bell’s Wynd. He’d timed it right. The doors of the renowned assembly hall had just opened, as scheduled, at six o’clock.

Dappled sunlight flickered over the mixed crowd of well-dressed matrons and ladies in radiant shades of evening wear, and men and youths of all ages clothed in an amazing array of colors themselves—clan tartans, dress plaids, cockades and bonnets and exotic fur sporrans.

Evan grinned as the strong and fragrant spring wind played havoc with the ladies’ curls, lifted feathers and sent sweet, heady perfumes surging into his nostrils.

At the top of the steps, he had to elbow his way inside the packed vestibule. He felt another surge of anticipation for the evening ahead—his first time out on the town of Edinburgh alone, without a henchman along, keeping close tabs on him.



Why shouldn't he be alone, when he'd turn eighteen in another week?

Once inside the vestibule, Evan found that the jostling crowd had crushed a young lass against the wall beside the door. He gallantly stood back, treading on Willie's toes, so that the tall beauty could squeeze ahead of him and regain her place in the line. She murmured a shy thanks and fit in where she could.

Evan noticed two striking things at a glance. The first was her ball gown. The pale blue silk was cut and draped in the latest, up-to-the-minute Empire style, which was only just taking fashionable London by storm. She couldn't have got past him in the crush if she'd worn the hoops that the rest of the Scotch ladies sported. In fact, he noted as he scanned the balance of the ladies caught in the vestibule, she was the only female not wearing hoops.

Which brought him to the second most obvious fact regarding her. Her soft brown curls were pulled back to the crown of her head and fastened with a nosegay of ribbon and heather, revealing her high brow and lovely oval face entirely. But from the crown of her head, down past her waist, her hair fell unbound and unrestrained.

Regrettably, the first beauty who had captured Evan's eye and stirred a warm feeling of lust in his loins was plainly not yet sixteen years of age.

That did not stop him from taking advantage of his height and looking over her shoulder to see what else he could learn about

the young lady below her pretty chin.

His covert inspection of two lovely, firm breasts assured him that she was very close indeed to reaching that momentous birthday when she would be allowed to put up her hair and dance with the gentlemen at Bell's Wynd.

But not tonight.

She fumbled for something in her reticule, preoccupied, unaware of Evan's speculative interest in her lovely bosom.

Evan was aching aware of how sweetly her cheek curved, as well as of the turgid fullness of her breasts, straining against the daring cut of her bodice.

The press of the restless crowd pushed him dangerously close to her, so close that he could detect the sweetness of lavender water drifting up from her hair. But that same waist-length drape of unbound hair intruded on his enjoyment of the arousal she stirred inside him. As a first-year Cambridge man, he felt ages more mature than she, and valiantly tried to direct his attention away from her.

The line at the door bottled up badly. Behind Evan, Willie jostled impatiently. The miss turned a lacy handkerchief and a tortoiseshell comb out of her reticule, but nothing else.

"Oh, dear," she whispered. "I've lost my voucher."

Evan cocked a sharp ear to catch her accents. Her diction was so precise, he was convinced she was English. She lifted her chin, peering straight ahead to the inner door, then looked to the right, scanning the crowded vestibule, searching for a familiar face.

Then she excused herself in general to the other people close to them and turned, facing Evan, trying to peer discreetly on tiptoe around and over his wide shoulders.

He was almost completely undone by the pleasing appearance of her face. Her brow tightened lovingly over gentle blue eyes and a slim, perfect nose. Very full lips pressed against each other, indicating that she wasn't, at the moment, happy.

The large man ahead of her shifted abruptly, sending the girl accidentally careering intimately against Evan. At least he was certain that it wasn't intentional on her part that she should graze his semi-erect shaft with her hip.

"Oh, pardon me!" She glanced up at him through thick, curving lashes. Her eyes simply seethed with passion and energy, overloaded by excitement and fright. They were the palest of blues, ringed with a darker circle, and wide and luminous and gently tilted at the outer corners, which imparted to her the soft, innocent appeal of a doe.

They seemed familiar, but then, Evan knew a lot of lassies with blue eyes. He knew many with brown eyes, too. They'd been chasing him relentlessly ever since he went away to school at Eton. She said, "I'm so sorry, but I've lost my voucher. I have to go and see if I dropped it outside, or left it in my father's carriage."

Evan started to reach inside his jacket to give her his own voucher, but he realized he couldn't very well do that and still get inside Bell's Wynd himself. He wanted in Bell's Wynd now

more than he had before.

He swung around, finding Willie stuck in the doorway and scowling like a bear. "Willie, can you change places with me? There's a damsel in distress ahead of me. Lost her ticket."

"That's a new approach. Never had that one tried on you before, have you, old man?" Willie leered and poked an elbow in Evan's belly. "You'd think they'd let you get inside the door before some lightskirt offers to drag you out. I don't know how you do it, Mac."

Evan grimaced with embarrassment, mostly because he didn't know what exactly to say to that. He hadn't given a thought to the girl having motives of the kind Willie alluded to, and he wouldn't know what to do if she did. Besides, she was most concerned with her missing voucher. She hadn't appeared to notice his looks at all. Sooner or later, though, every girl did, much to Evan's chagrin.

"Right you go, then." Willie gave ground a step or two, and Evan squeezed between his friend's large body and the door, then held the crowd back so that the girl could come out, as well.

"You didn't have to give up your place, too," she said as they reached the less crowded wooden banquette.

"Oh, I don't mind." Evan stopped on the edge of the crowd, looking right and left down the line of carriages that had discharged their passengers onto the banquettes but had yet to clear the traffic on High Street. It made him glad he'd taken a room in town for the night. "Do you see your carriage?"

The girl had turned away from him, searching around the boards, looking for her elusive ticket. Then she about-faced and stood on tiptoe, shielding her eyes from the glare of the low sun with her hand. “No.”

“You’re sure your voucher isn’t in your reticule?”

“Quite sure.” She moved her hand away from her face and looked directly at him. One look followed another, and then she jerked her head up and down, twice, searching him over from head to toe.

A lot of ladies fussed over Evan’s looks, but no one had ever done that to him, and he felt right peculiar because of it. She made him worry that he’d somehow forgotten some vital article of clothing or, worse, got his kilt hiked up over his belt so that he had his arse — or something more personal — exposed. Had he broken out in spots? Forgotten to shave a newly sprouted patch of whiskers off his jaw? “Is something wrong?”

“What’s your name?” she demanded.

Well, he almost lied and claimed to be a Campbell, because MacGregors had been doing that for ten generations, just so that their bloody heads remained securely attached to their shoulders. “Who is it that wants to know?”

The pretty girl blinked in obvious surprise at his defensive reply, which certainly didn’t answer her question. A little indentation sharpened the lines of her eyebrows, and she pressed her very full lips down. It was a full minute before she said, “Don’t you know who I am? I’m Elizabeth... Murray. Aren’t you

Evan...Evan MacGregor MacGregor?"

Well, Evan didn't say anything, because in all truth, she'd just knocked him speechless.

"You can't be Elizabeth Murray," he said foolishly. "Why, Elizabeth Murray is only fifteen years old—just turned that, in fact."

"And so I did, April the nineteenth. And if you're Evan MacGregor, you recently sent me a watercolor picture of a bluebird you bought from an art student in Paris by the name of James Audubon." She flashed him a smile that revealed beautiful teeth and a deep dimple in her left cheek. "And I might add, Evan MacGregor, you've changed, too! You're taller than Tullie, and ever so much more handsome. I didn't recognize you at all. Oh, Evan, it's been so long!"

There he was, standing on High Street, and Izzy Murray was squealing like any chit of ten and five. Worse, she was throwing lovely, slender arms around his neck and kissing him on the mouth and pressing those sweet, full breasts of hers flush against his chest, afore God and all of Edinburgh!

He thought he was going to die. Blessed Saint Cuthbert, he thought he was going to die. Else be hanged, drawn and quartered right there on High Street by the duke of Atholl's henchmen because here was this tender young lass — not a sennight beyond her fifteenth birthday — throwing herself all over him.

She turned what had only been mild arousal into the hardest bone he'd ever felt in his whole life, kissing him and squealing

like a happy piglet, bringing the attention and the ire of half the Highlands down on the good-for-nothing heir apparent of the Gregarach — the Children of the Mist.

Elizabeth Murray was a woman grown, at fifteen years old! He hadn't seen her in ages. In his mind, his Izzy still had plaits, and ankle-high dresses covered by pinafores.

But he'd written her hundreds and hundreds of letters, and she'd answered every one. Not one of which lately had hinted that the changes a lassie goes through to become a woman had already happened to her.

Somehow, Evan got hold of her shoulders and set her back, at the full length of his arms, scowling at that beautiful woman's face that he would never have recognized in a hundred years on his little Izzy.

"I can't believe it. You're Izzy?" He shook his head in denial. "You should have written me that you'd grown up. Why, look at you. I'm shocked. You should have sent me a miniature, or at least given me a hint or two. You could have said, 'Oh, by the way, Evan, did you know I'm five and a half feet tall and I weigh eight stone?'"

"But you've changed, too. I hate to tell you this, but your face is all shaped just like all the MacGregors'. That's what made me ask your name. When you didn't say your name outright, I knew it. You had to be a MacGregor. Anyone else would have said his name right out."

"You didn't need to remind me of that," Evan grumbled,

reminded of his not-so-respectable ancestors, who'd got the name MacGregor proscribed on pain of death. "So what are we going to do about this lost voucher of yours?"

"We could just wait out here and talk until Amalia realizes I'm not inside." There was definitely the light of flirtation sparking in her eyes... and something else, too. Evan hardly dared to guess what. "She's bound to come looking for me sooner or later. Later, I hope."

More than just mischief was dancing in her bright eyes when she linked arms with him and tilted her pert face upward, smiled and started walking toward Saint Giles's.

"Aye, but you'll still need a voucher to get past the dragon at the door." Evan nervously attempted to disengage himself from her arm.

"I suppose." Elizabeth glanced up and down the crowded street again. "Let's go look for Papa's carriage."

She tightened her hold on Evan's arm, and he had no choice except to escort her up High Street, searching for the duke of Atholl's carriage, which was parked under an overhang at Luckenbooths, next to the cathedral.

The coachman and footman took exception to the duke's youngest daughter showing up arm in arm with a stranger. Izzy's laughing explanation of who Evan was didn't pacify a pair of henchmen old enough to have hunted Rob Roy himself before the proscription act against clan MacGregor was repealed by Parliament in 1774. Both looked inclined to unsheathe their



claymores, part his head from his shoulders and then ask, after the fact, why they couldn't get paid the usual bounty.

"We'd best go back and wait on the steps outside Bell's Wynd," Evan said wisely. But Izzy insisted she search the carriage. The henchman and coachman grunted ominously as she did that.

"It's not here," she said with a disappointed shrug of her shoulders that was followed by the brightest smile for Evan. "Well, no matter. Come along, we'll go back and wait at the door. The aunts will miss me soon enough, even if Amalia doesn't."

That said, she threaded her arm through Evan's again, oblivious of the glares of her father's tail.

They returned the way they'd come, under escort this time, and remained under scrutiny the whole time they waited, until one of the Murrays inside Bell's Wynd came out.

As luck would have it, James Murray, who was three years older than Evan and also studying at Cambridge, came to fetch his sister. He recognized Evan at once, and clapped him on the back with a high regard that went a little ways in reducing the glares coming from the duke's henchmen.

As the crowd at the entrance had dwindled, the matter of Elizabeth's missing ticket was easily covered. She wasn't just a daughter of the highest-ranking Scottish noble attending the assembly. Miss Nicky Murray of Mansfield, the patroness of Bell's Wynd, was Elizabeth's great-aunt.

Disaster was thus averted, and Elizabeth reluctantly released her hold upon Evan, to be escorted by James back to her plethora

of chaperones.

Cut loose and on his own again, Evan found Willie in the crush and introduced him around. There was no lack of available dance partners for the brisk reels and gay flings. Evan actually enjoyed the ceremony of bringing a pretty young lady forward to Aunt Nicky, who was enthroned on her dais, and securing a polite nod of her head at each of his choices.

During the interludes, he took time to visit with his rediscovered friend in the company of the numerous spinster aunts who acted as chaperones. Lady Elizabeth wasn't enjoying the assembly. What girl would when she wasn't allowed to dance?

Evan's heart went out to the lass over that egregious disappointment. He wasn't so old that he couldn't remember what it was like to sit on the side at a gathering and be unable to enjoy it because of the strict rules of etiquette held by their class.

Worse, he was most confused by his own physical reaction to her. He loved Izzy, in the loyal, altruistic way he loved all his friends and kinsmen.

Their six years of correspondence, following two years in the same schoolroom together, had made him feel closer to her than he did to his own sister. None of his feelings for Elizabeth tonight were at all brotherly. He couldn't help thinking that perhaps they never had been.

He'd always taken on the role of Izzy's protector in the schoolroom. It was so easy to slip back into that comfortable way of thinking of her as somehow weaker than he and needing

a champion. But Elizabeth was simply too young to stir in him the feelings of deep lust, desire and passion that alluring older women did. Despite his looks, Evan was painfully shy when it came to making advances to women. He couldn't have borne it if he was rejected, or failed to perform as expected by an older, experienced woman.

Knowing that, and thinking with a head that should have been rational enough to override the heavy ache in his cods, why then did he ask the too-young Elizabeth to dance without Aunt Nicky's permission?

And God only knew why Elizabeth threw caution and decorum to the winds and agreed.

Never, in all of his days, could Evan have predicted that one impetuous dance, one gay and happy highland reel, was to be the beginning of all his heartache and troubles.

## Chapter One

London

January 9, 1808

The ink of wintry midnight cloaked the nursery in the Duke of Atholl's London town house. Auld Krissy Buchanan couldn't see a thing. Yet what she heard in the heavy darkness made her eyes widen with alarm. She scrambled out of bed, snatched up her robe and tiptoed to her mistress's adjoining room, taking care not to wake young Robbie as she opened and closed the adjoining door.

The alarming clattering sound came again, louder and stronger

in the sleeping lady's bedchamber. "Milady," Krissy whispered. "Wake up! Do you not hear that noise?"

"Noise, Krissy?" From the deep cocoon of her tester bed, Lady Elizabeth Murray mumbled in a husky, caught-in-a-dream voice. "What noise?"

"Lady Elizabeth!" Krissy's harsh whisper rose a shrill notch. "Summat's breaking into yer father's hoose!"

"Krissy? What did you say?" Wide awake now, Elizabeth sat bolt upright, turning to the corner windows, seeking the source of that most peculiar and very distinct noise.

It came again, three — no, four — quick little smacks on the window glass. Krissy gasped, unable to believe that the frightening sounds came from the window glazing. There were no balconies on the third floor, where the duke of Atholl's womenfolk were quartered. How could anyone be out there?

Elizabeth's eyes widened in alarm. "I heard that! What is it, Krissy?"

"A bloody London cutthroat, that's what!" Krissy answered promptly. She snatched her warmest tartan robe closed and stoutly tied the sash before Lady Elizabeth's feet touched the cold floor.

"We'll just see about that!" Elizabeth insisted, rattled, but not panicked. After all, they were hardly alone. Her father wasn't in residence, but the dowager duchess and her entire staff were. Elizabeth glanced at the clock on her nightstand as she lit a lamp. Four o'clock in the morning. Everyone would be sound asleep!

“Summat’s outside, banging on the window glass.” Krissy armed herself with the iron poker from the hearth. “’Tis your lucky day I’m here to protect you. Miss Nicky gave me fair warning about the tricks and troubles of dealing with the blasted Sassenachs. I kin defend the clan’s honor, I kin.”

Elizabeth withheld comment as she deftly fastened her robe at her waist. Auld Krissy was clearly frightened, else she would have remembered that little harm could come to any resident of 19 Grosvenor Mews. Without further discussion, Lady Elizabeth hurried to her corner bay windows.

One overlooked the pleasant park fronting Grosvenor Square. The other gave a not-so-charming view of the gables and slate tile roofing of Lord Mansfield’s house next door. There was nothing remarkable to be seen on the roof.

Elizabeth opened the drapes and cautiously parted the sheers on the bay window facing the street. London’s ever-present deep winter fog enveloped the park and obscured the stately avenue. She could pick out very few landmarks in the thick, heavy mist. “All I can see is a carriage light on a hackney turning at the corner.”

Another shower of minuscule pebbles pattered against the glass. Krissy jumped and came within inches of putting the poker through the glass panes. “Blood and fury! Will the demmed bounders scale the walls next?”

“Whisht, Krissy!” Elizabeth warned immediately. “Don’t wake Robbie.”

“Yes, mum,” Krissy said contritely.

Elizabeth did what any sensible young woman safely ensconced on the third floor of her father’s abode should do; she disarmed her fractious abigail, urging her to more dignified silence, and raised the window sash. Then both she and Krissy leaned their cap-covered heads out the window to appraise the scene on the street below. After all, Elizabeth thought, twenty-and-a-half isn’t so abysmally mature that I can’t show a minimum of curiosity.

“Wait, mum.” Krissy laid a trembling hand on Elizabeth’s sleeve. “Do ya ken who they are?”

At first glance, Elizabeth couldn’t rightly say that she did. Thick and heavy fog curled against the walls of the house and lifted up to dampen her chin and cheeks. The mists swirled, stirred by a soft gust of wind, to reveal three men huddled on the doorstep, under the novel haze of a pair of gas-fueled coach lights. The thick fog softened all details of their identity.

“Och, I count three of ’em,” Krissy’s brogue overlaid the mist. “What kin they want at this hour?”

“Good question,” Elizabeth replied suspiciously. Anyone with a shred of decency would have properly rung the bell and summoned Keyes, regardless of the urgency or the hour. That was the way things were done in the duke of Atholl’s house. “Suppose I best find out.”

Leaning farther over the sill, Elizabeth called out in a chilly voice, to let the intruders know she considered it outrageous form

to throw stones at her windows. "Who are you and what do you want?"

The largest of the trio looked up, cupped his hands to his mouth and tilted his face toward the light gleaming on the near side of the entrance door. His voice echoed peculiarly, dampened and magnified by the fog.

"Ha! I'll be bound! So Tullie was right. You are to town. Get up, lass! Come down here and unlock the door. Be quick about it, Izzy!"

"Izzy!" Elizabeth repeated his last word in a harsh whisper, instantly drawing back inside the window. Her heart skipped a beat, then jumped to an escalated cadence. Only one ne'er-do-well in the entire British Isles had ever dared to call her by that dreadful remnant from the nursery in public. Evan MacGregor!

"Eh?" Krissy cupped her hand to her ear, leaning her white face closer to Elizabeth's. "What did he say? Who is it?"

Elizabeth ignored the question as she swallowed and sought her courage. She laid trembling hands on the damp windowsill to steady herself, leaning out once more. This time, when she spoke, her voice rang with the cool disdain of the bred-in-the-bone aristocrat. "Tell me one good reason why I should unlock the door of my house for the likes of you, Evan MacGregor!"

"What?" Krissy gasped, and laid her hand over her heart.

"Don't argue with me, Elizabeth Murray! Get down here!" Evan stepped onto the highest step, deliberately placing himself in the circle of lamplight. She caught a glimpse of her brother's

red hair as Evan raised his arm in a furious gesture. "Unless you prefer that I heave Tullibardine's bloody body in the bin out back. Make up your mind quick! The marquess has been shot, and he's bleeding like a stuck pig. As bad as he's wounded, he won't last long, left out in this weather."

"Shot?" Elizabeth cried. She backed out of the window so quickly she banged her head on the sash. So did Krissy.

"Shot?" Krissy parroted. "I dinna see Tullibardine."

Elizabeth had. Her brother, John Murray, the marquess of Tullibardine, had become recognizable the moment Evan MacGregor moved away from him. Tullie slumped heavily against the support of the third man.

"What in the name of creation is going on in here? Are you trying to wake every soul in the house?" Amalia Murray demanded as she imperiously swept inside her younger sister's chamber. "Elizabeth, who have you been shouting at on the street? Do you realize what time it is?"

"Hang the time!" Elizabeth exclaimed as she bolted past her sister. "Tullie's been shot! Krissy, make certain Robbie's sleep has not been disturbed, then come downstairs at once to help me."

"What?" Amalia gasped. She stood stock-still, stunned, as Elizabeth ran past her to the staircase.

"What do you mean, Tullie's been shot?" Amalia snatched up her hems, following. "Oh, no! Dear God, no! Elizabeth, come back and tell me it isn't true!"



Elizabeth wasted no time getting down to the entrance foyer. But at the doorway her hands turned inept and clumsy, fumbling with the locks. Amalia caught up to her as Elizabeth swung the door wide open to the three men huddled on the step in the bone-chilling mist.

“What has happened?” Amalia exclaimed.

Elizabeth stood frozen on the doorsill, locked in a horror that went deeper than any life-threatening alarm raised for her brother. Some other portion of her mind recognized the grey breeks and scarlet jacket of a Highland volunteer cloaking Evan’s tall body. Her eyes came in full contact with his, and all sense of time and reality ended.

The panic surging into her veins wasn’t for the condition of her oldest brother. An unvoiced scream strangled underneath the tight compression of the fingers sealing her lips.

Evan! God help her, Evan sported the well-cut jacket of an officer of Graham’s Grey Breeks. He towered over Tullie, her brother. The Highlander’s jaw was set, his mouth a grim, dark and austere line that caught the night’s deepest shadows. His eyes locked with Elizabeth’s. She ceased breathing and thinking, and stood blocking the door.

“God save us!” Amalia whispered a fearful prayer behind Elizabeth. “John, what have you done?”

Elizabeth’s nostrils flared as the mist rolled past Evan and washed her burning cheeks. With it came the tang of burnt whiskey mingled with odors off the streets, horses, sweat, blood

and dank wool.

“Move, Izzy!” Evan commanded, in a voice grown deeper over long years. It touched her center, glazing her soul like the mists that swept around him and sank quickly to her darkest primordial core. Evan’s eyes remained inscrutable, sharp and hard. The mist shrouded him as he came ominously closer, her brother’s arm clamped across his wide shoulders. Stupidly, Elizabeth stood rooted to the floor, unable to make any part of her body move under her own volition.

“I said move, lass!” One hand snaked out, touching the silk covering her waist. It flattened and pressed intimately into yielding flesh, urging her backward, out of his way.

“Elizabeth!” Amalia’s voice roughened with a fine edge of fright. She caught Elizabeth’s arm, yanking her off the threshold, out of the way of the Highlanders bearing her brother John, the marquess of Tullibardine, into his father’s house.

Glowing lamps in the foyer illuminated the gap in John’s greatcoat. Elizabeth partially roused from the dazzled dream in which she was trapped and dragged her eyes from Evan to stare in mute horror at the wash of scarlet staining the marquess’s rumpled linen and cravat. Amalia gasped out loud.

Shaking herself free of the shock of Evan MacGregor’s return, Elizabeth gulped. “I’ll fetch Dr. Morgan.”

MacGregor caught her arm as Elizabeth reached for the cord to summon the servants, commanding, “No doctors, and no servants, Izzy. Corporal Butter can tend to the marquess’s injury.

There's not a better man in the regiment for bullet wounds. Amalia, fetch hot water, linens, and whatever carbolic you have. Don't wake anyone else in the house. Izzy, lock that door."

"You can't come barging in this house giving orders, Evan MacGregor!" Elizabeth sparked, recovering her wits.

Evan's dark eyes bored deep into hers, sharp and hard, like the eyes of a man sighting the barrel of a pistol on the heart of his enemy.

"Do as you're told," he commanded. He released her arm, but the impression of his strong fingers gripping her wrist remained as he turned to deal with the older Amalia Murray's sputtering protests. She looked on the verge of vapors, the back of her hand pressed against her mouth in horror. Krissy hurried down the stairs and quietly slipped an arm around Lady Amalia to support her, lest she faint.

"Amalia!" Tullibardine rasped. He caught hold of the newel post for support. "Do exactly as MacGregor orders!"

"Well, I never!" Amalia roused herself to the authority she was well versed in wielding with all of her siblings, including her eldest brother, the marquess. "John, I will have some explanation, this very moment!"

"No, you won't!" Evan MacGregor cut Amalia short. "You'll get an explanation once we've got Tullie's bleeding under control."

Amalia started to protest that order, but this time Evan MacGregor shut off her tirade before it could begin. "Woman,

the marquess's life is in more danger this minute than his bloody reputation. If you cannot be of good assistance to him, then kindly stay the hell out of our way!"

Without pause, he turned and took Tullie's arm off the newel post and helped him mount the stairs, leaving Amalia's and Krissy's jaws sagging in shock.

Elizabeth blinked, unable to take her eyes from Evan MacGregor's commanding back. Where had he learned to exert such overwhelming authority? Why was he, of all people, here? Her throat squeezed dangerously. Her knees felt as wobbly as ninepins hit solidly by a stone bowling ball.

Krissy had the sense to close the door, barring the cold and the wet from entering the house. She dipped in a deep and reverent curtsy. "So tha's the MacGregor," the servant said under her breath.

"Aye, the very devil himself," Elizabeth whispered between her tightly pressed teeth. She made sure the door was bolted and, leading the awestruck Krissy by the band, pulled her along in Amalia's wake down to the kitchens.

"Why can we not call a doctor?" Krissy asked.

Elizabeth grabbed the largest tray from Keyes's pantry and slammed it onto the central table. Shot... Heaven help them all, her brother had been shot! Why? How?

Amaha had gotten hold of her wits. She tilted her proud chin and stated unequivocally, "Tis clear enough. John has been involved in a duel."

“A duel!” Elizabeth protested. Duels were outlawed, and severe penalties were levied on those who engaged in the practice, if the king got wind of it. “What makes you say such a thing? If he had been in a duel, John would have had the sense to have a surgeon present. Think, Amalia. John’s never been in a duel in his life. He wouldn’t resort to secrecy if he had, not to us.”

“And how do you know that?” Amalia countered, obviously flustered. “I can assume he doesn’t want Father to know.”

Elizabeth muttered, “Oh dear...” She opened a drawer, fetching a stack of clean linens to add to the tray.

“A duel?” Krissy echoed with eyes agog. “Stars! A duel... Over who or what? Mrs. Hamilton’s latest memorial, do you ken? Can someone have accused the marquess of cheating at cards, and called him out?”

Elizabeth groaned inwardly. Amalia made hers more audible. They’d only been in town three days, but Krissy Buchanan had already learned the value of knowing the latest on-dit.

Dodging a pointed look from her sister, Elizabeth hastily took a cloth from the tray and blotted away a sheen of perspiration from her upper lip. God save her, Evan MacGregor was in the same house as she and Robbie! Her heart raked inside her ribs, and her brain felt paralyzed. Her hands and feet moved with the motility of cold lead.

“Krissy!” Amalia said sternly, fixating on something she could deal with properly. “While you are in the employ of the duke of Atholl, you will not engage in the disgusting habit of repeating

gossip belowstairs. Whatever happens in this house does not go one word further.”

“Beg pardon, milady.” Elizabeth’s maid cast a sidelong glance at Amalia, clearly hurt to be the focus of Amalia’s formidable ire.

“My dear sister,” Elizabeth said, defending her loyal servant, “are you forgetting that you are the one who just suggested Tullie’s been in a duel?”

“Well, heavenly days, I don’t know that for a fact!” Amalia sputtered. “Don’t either of you repeat it!”

“Amalia, please! That’s entirely uncalled-for. We both know better.” Elizabeth managed an apologetic murmur to Krissy, excusing both her and Amalia’s overreactions to their shock.

Amalia curbed her temper, despite the mutiny that sparked in the Scottish maid’s amber eyes. There simply was no one more territorial, proud and possessive than a Scots personal servant. Amalia well knew that Krissy’s loyalty was solely to Elizabeth. Moreover, Elizabeth thrived on being original and different. Together, the two of them made an unpredictable, unmanageable pair in the duke of Atholl’s household, for which Amalia was responsible.

Evan MacGregor! What next? Amalia thought as she vainly sought her lost composure. She flashed a warning look at Elizabeth. No matter what, she must see that Elizabeth was never alone for one minute with that Highland rakehell! He’d caused enough damage five years ago.

Misinterpreting the reason for Amalia’s scowls, Krissy flashed

a placating smile of apology, saying, "Forgive me, Lady Amalia. When I gets excited, I forgets myself."

"A proper lady's abigail never gets excited," Amalia said with authority. She was on firm ground here, knowing all the hard-and-fast rules regarding ladylike behavior. "Forgive my sharp words, Krissy. Rare is the day when Elizabeth sets you a good example."

"Well, and I thank you for that vote of confidence," Elizabeth interjected. It had been too much to hope that she'd escape Amalia's eagle-eyed circumspection. God clearly wasn't listening to her frantic prayers that the past be forgotten.

"Humph." Amalia hoisted the tray. "Fetch the water upstairs as soon as the kettle boils, Elizabeth. And before this progresses to disaster, I order you not to act like a hoyden." She sailed out the door muttering, "Hanging out the windows like bawds in Covent Garden..."

Krissy looked crushed at the severity of Amalia's scolding, and she promised Elizabeth, in her sister's absence, "I'll do better."

Elizabeth felt a burst of resentment, coupled with anxiety, surge into her veins. Damn Evan! What had brought him out of the seventh level of hell to which she had consigned him years ago?

"It's not your fault," she told Krissy.

No sooner had she spoken than a more worrisome thought took root. Good God! What was she thinking of? She'd let

Amalia go up alone! What sort of interrogation might Amalia put Evan through when they came face-to-face—alone for the first time in almost six years?

Elizabeth slapped her palm against her cheek. She didn't dare let Evan be alone with any member of her family! She prodded the red-hot coals under the kettle with a vengeance, muttering, "Boil, damn you!"

Amalia was the unofficial mother of all the duke of Atholl's unmarried children. She had even delayed her own wedding to Lord Strathallen until next January. Granted, Strathallen had spent the past four years in India, repairing the financial gaps in his inheritance. Amalia had made it plain that her most ardent wish was to have Elizabeth settled before she married herself. In her sister's estimation, time was running out for Elizabeth.

"What got her in such stew?" Krissy asked boldly, once she was certain Amalia was out of hearing range. "'Tis no' like we did summat improper."

Elizabeth stared at the black kettle. A wisp of steam wafted out the spout, swirling like the mist that had swirled up and around Evan MacGregor as he came through the front door. How could she have forgotten the impact of his eyes?

"Milady, did you not hear me?" Krissy asked.

"Oh!" Elizabeth yanked her gaze from the steam and made a futile, belated effort to compose her face. "What was that, Krissy?"

"Och, I knew it! Ya felt it, din't ya?" Krissy executed a fey



pirouette between the worktable and the stove, on amazingly nimble feet for one of her years. Her voice sounded so wishful, she could have been reading Elizabeth's mind.

"Did ya ever see such a bonnie mon? Why, what one of me friends at home would believe I saw the bra' MacGregor himself, striding out of the mists... across our own step...in London! Do ya no' realize, lass, that he's the first of the Gregarach born in ten generations to walk tall and proud, boasting his true name, in London, afore God, king and country? I never thought to see such a sight, ever!"

"You're exaggerating just a trifle, Krissy," Elizabeth commented, without a trilling burr in her speech.

"Faith! I din't!"

"Every MacGregor we know took back their clan name the day the proscription ban was lifted," Elizabeth argued.

"Tha's no' the same thing." Krissy shook her head vehemently. "God strike the bleeding Sassenach all around us, din't the mon walk straight in from the mist, with his head still attached to his shoulders? He did! The old laird, God rest his soul, never set a foot in England in his life. He didna trust the English. There's a new breed of Scotsmen a-coming, and don' tell me I didna just lay eyes upon one who's no' afraid of any mon."

"Krissy, the tribulations of the Children of the Mist aren't important right now," Elizabeth reasoned.

"He's no cadet, lassie. He's the Man of the Mist, the MacGregor!" Krissy insisted, gravely insulted by Elizabeth's

apparent lack of respect.

“I’ve more important things on my mind. Nor is this the time to delve into the tangled history of the clans, Krissy. Save your tall tales for Robbie.” Elizabeth folded a hotpad and took a firm grip on the steaming kettle. “The water’s boiling.”

More important to Elizabeth was to discover how her oldest brother had wound up in the company of the dangerous Evan MacGregor. What mischance had brought Evan from the wars on the Continent at the same time that Elizabeth had to be in town herself?

“Come along, Krissy.” Elizabeth hurried through the swinging door to the back stairs.

Krissy harrumphed deeply and followed, muttering under her breath, “Och, ya got no proper upbringing, lassie, ya din’t.”

Elizabeth was much too troubled to pay heed to what Krissy said. Why hadn’t she left Krissy to bring the water up when it was ready? What was she thinking of, leaving Tullie and MacGregor alone? Worse, why had she let Amalia go up without her? What if Evan let slip their secret?

At the landing on the second floor, Elizabeth took a deep breath, stamping an iron resolve on her composure. “I’ll take it from here, Krissy Please go and stay with Robbie. I’ll come to bed as soon as I can.”

“Och, the wee wean willna turn over once he’s to sleep. Are you sure you don’ want more help than that?” Krissy asked incredulously.

“I’m sure,” Elizabeth answered firmly. “Please make certain Robbie doesn’t wake up and go wandering out of his room. We mustn’t forget, this is a new house to him. He’s never been to London before. I know I’m asking a lot of you, but just keep an eye on him tonight, Krissy. I’m sure we’ll have a new nanny for him soon.”

“Yes, mum. I’ll do me best.” Krissy bobbed a curtsy and hurried up the steps to the third floor.

Elizabeth swallowed down the dryness choking her throat as she watched the plump woman retreat up the back stairs. Elizabeth took another moment to remind herself that no one knew the truth about Robbie... no one, not even her sister Amaha. She didn’t have to feel so frightened...just because Evan MacGregor was in the house.

## Chapter Two

The marquess’s valet opened the door of Tullie’s room at Elizabeth’s knock. The valet appeared unflappable as ever as he took the steaming kettle from Elizabeth’s hands. He had a kind glance for the worry knotting her brow as she asked, “How bad is it this time?”

“Not so bad as it would seem, milady. You may speak with His Grace, if you would like. Perhaps you can help keep his howls to a minimum as Corporal Butter removes the bullet.”

Elizabeth didn’t hesitate to attend her brother. Murray women were known for their fortitude. She marched across the chamber and found Tullibardine seated on his barber’s chair.

Four lamps had been placed on the marble-topped commode at his side. He'd been stripped to the waist, and the lamplight made his fair skin seem unnaturally pale. Elizabeth spared a quick glance at his windburned face before looking for the wound that threatened him.

A small, circular hole steadily seeped blood and fluid just below the upthrusting ridge of his collarbone. The wound mutely testified that a bullet had entered at an acute angle. The freckles glazing John's shoulder were stretched to odd shapes because of internal swelling. Elizabeth thought it was a good thing he'd been hit on the right, being that her brother was irrevocably left-handed.

"Not very pretty, my lord," Elizabeth announced, withholding her questions about the darkening bruises and knots on his face. It was obvious on close inspection that he'd been involved in an exchange of fisticuffs. Funny, she thought, even the battered twenty-nine-year-old John Murray looked more boyish than the grim-jawed Highlander attending him, though Evan was only twenty-three.

Elizabeth's eyes reflexively went past Corporal Butter to seek Evan. He'd shed his coat and was in the process of rolling up the sleeves of an immaculate linen shirt. He turned his back to her and stooped to scrub his large hands in a basin of hot water.

The linen strained at the seams across his shoulders, which had widened considerably since the last time Elizabeth had seen Evan. Her gaze followed the long curve of his back, reluctantly

noting that he hadn't gained an ounce of surplus flesh in five years. Maturity had not caused him to let out his belt.

Her mouth tasted drier than ashes, and she tried in vain to moisten it with swallowing. She had as much luck whetting her tongue as she had tamping down the memories that sent her pulse singing and heightened the color staining her cheeks... Evan MacGregor had come home at last.

Elizabeth drew in a shuddering breath and turned to her brother, determined to focus only on him. Amalia grimly handed a glass of amber liquid to Tullie, ordering, "Drink this, my lord."

"How do you feel, John?" Elizabeth asked, in a shaken voice.

"I'll live," Tullie stated matter-of-factly before tossing the contents of the glass down his throat. He coughed deeply, then grimaced. "Get on with it, Butter. Do your worst, before I toss my accounts."

He turned his face away from the injury, stared balefully at Elizabeth and motioned her closer. "Elizabeth, come shield me from Amalia. She'll badger me all the way to Traitor's Gate with her relentless questioning. Come, lass, distract me while MacGregor's henchman fingers the lead inside me."

"My lord!" Amalia sputtered, patting his clenched fist solicitously. "You mistake my concern. How can you make light of such a dread injury?"

Elizabeth wanted to roll her eyes. Amalia and Tullie being civil to one another was as rare as sunshine on Ben Nevis in February. Tullie couldn't stay out of trouble any more than

Amalia could mind her own business. Looking him squarely in his now dull eyes, Elizabeth said, "All right. It's time for truth or consequences. What's the woman's name this time?"

Tullie burst into laughter that was quickly squelched by pain. With his good hand, he pinched Elizabeth's cheek, quipping grimly, "Och, dinna ask such a cheeky thing with Amalia listening. God's truth, she'd transport me down under, she would, did I divulge the wrong lady's name."

"That's an idea worth entertaining," Elizabeth bantered. "Imagine the rest our hearts would take if you were out of sight and out of mind for a year or two? You nearly scared my abigail to death, my lord. Throwing rocks at my windows at four in the morning!"

"Och, well..." He grinned sheepishly. "One of my Highlanders suggested we mind the elders and not wake the whole house. Discretion, I believe it's called."

Amalia tutted, shook her head and warned Elizabeth, "Don't encourage any of them."

"And why not?" Tullie argued, a tad drunkenly. "I'd be in a lot worse shape had I not encountered a few fellow Highlanders this night, I'll tell you."

Elizabeth watched as Tullie's approving and grateful glance went to Evan MacGregor. That brought her own gaze into direct visual contact with Evan's penetrating eyes again. Caught, she couldn't have taken her gaze away from his then to save her life.

She felt exposed, like a butterfly in a cold glass case. A

thousand dark questions loomed in the depths of Evan's wintry blue eyes, but he said nothing as he raised a lamp aloft, above Corporal Butter's adept hands.

A muscle twitched high on Evan's cheekbone, and then his gaze slid indolently down her exposed throat and lingered on the deeply shadowed crevice between her breasts, crisscrossed by silk. Elizabeth's hands itched to clench the silk wrapper and draw it tightly closed around her body. His look made her shockingly aware of the night rail she wore in his presence.

Only Evan MacGregor's eyes had the ability to send shivers raking over her skin, to draw her nipples taut and contract the smooth flesh of her belly.

The sun creases at the corners of Evan's eyes deepened with pleasure, confirming that he knew the full extent of his effect upon her. An amused twist lifted one corner of his mouth in a wry, mocking smile that made her racing pulse boil, even as she hardened her expression to one of ire and displeasure.

He met her angered glare with his own arrogant challenge, deliberately cocking a brow above his long-lashed, sensual eyes. That look discounted everyone else in the room except her and him. His bold eyes confirmed that only his wants and desires mattered.

"Damnation! Go easy, man!" Tullie swore, jerking his shoulder sharply.

Corporal Butter grated out a curse and lost a pair of long-nosed tweezers. The tool clattered to the floor.

Evan looked back to the serious business at hand. Elizabeth let a whisper of relief escape through her parted lips as Evan bent to retrieve the tool.

“I’ve got two fingers on the bloody ball. Just a wee bit more, Yer Grace, and I’ll have it loose. Give me that.” Butter stuck out his hand for the fallen tool.

Elizabeth blurted out unthinkingly, “You must wash that before it is used again!”

Both officer and soldier-surgeon straightened at the same time, staring at her as though she’d lost her wits. Evan’s arched brow dropped to a harsh line. His expression now said clearly that she should mind her place.

Elizabeth flushed instantly at the effectiveness of his unspoken rebuke, then let out another sigh of relief as Evan handed the bloody tool to Maxtone. He rinsed it in hot soapy water and put it back in Butter’s bloody hand, while Tullie complained in a raw voice, “Balls of fire, Elizabeth! We aren’t diapering babies here!”

Elizabeth gulped. More color stole into her cheeks. How she hated to be the focus of everyone’s censure! She swallowed again. Amalia nudged her furiously, hissing her concern about Tullie’s pain-flecked gray orbs.

“So tell me, my ladies.” Tullie bit off each word, matching his speech to the erratic beating of his heart. “How long have you been in London town?”

“Three days. We’ve just nicely settled in.” Elizabeth realized his request for words was a plea for distraction. It didn’t matter



what she or Amalia said.

“Aunt Charlotte came down first and opened the house. Elizabeth and I accompanied Father to Leinster. He stayed over to ride the foxes with Reverend Baird and Uncle Thomas. They should all arrive promptly at noon tomorrow.” Amalia added, for clarity.

“Humph,” John grunted. “You needn’t have reminded me Colonel Graham is due back on the morrow, thank you.” He shot a queer look at MacGregor that Elizabeth couldn’t decipher. Corporal Butter grunted, as only a Highlander could. His “humph” could mean anything.

“There’s no hope this will be healed by morning, is there, Butter?”

“Not a Chinaman’s chance,” Butter told him reprovingly.

“Ah, well, that canna be helped.” Tullibardine sighed. His pained gaze wandered back to Elizabeth. “And what prompts your rare appearance in London, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth normally needed little prodding to explain her reasons for avoiding the social life in London to her brother. It was no secret that she preferred living the retired life in Scotland, but with Evan MacGregor able to hear every word she uttered, she preferred to keep her own counsel. Not on her life would she mention that her visit to town had been prompted by a wee imp named Robbie.

Consequently, she failed miserably to come up with any sort of answer to her brother’s question. But that didn’t keep her

concentrated gaze from straying every other moment to Evan.

On the surface, there wasn't any wonder about that. Evan MacGregor was so achingly handsome, most ladies would simply have stared until their eyes were sated. The last time Elizabeth saw him, he'd been the most shockingly beautiful seventeen-year-old she'd ever laid eyes upon.

Now, Evan was a man, nearer to twenty-four than twenty-three. A little taller than she remembered, he'd grown into the whipcord strength that had always served him well. She judged his height to be three good inches over Tullie's six feet. Evan's hair no longer had the wild, untrimmed look of a Highland lad's. Close-cropped waves feathered about his noble head, as black as raven's wings.

Devilishly wicked whiskers, which hadn't been there before, now emphasized the handsome angularity of his jaw. Elizabeth jerked herself out of another fawning display of childish adoration before she made a complete fool of herself.

She wasn't a child anymore. Neither was Evan MacGregor. Try as she might, she couldn't call what had happened between them years ago the actions of impulsive children, either. Grimly Elizabeth forced all memory back into the past. It was best dead and forgotten.

Amalia gasped aloud as a strong spurt of blood shot across Tullibardine's chest. Fortunately, Evan had angled his body so that Elizabeth couldn't see the tools Butter pushed in and out of John's shoulder.

What Elizabeth did see was the amount of color seeping from her brother's normally ruddy face. Beads of sweat now glazed Tullie's brow and neck.

Amalia pressed another tot of brandy into John's left hand. As he gulped that, Elizabeth shot a meaningful look at MacGregor's back, asking, "Pray tell me, brother dear, the rationale behind your taking a murdering cattle thief and his henchman as your seconds tonight?"

The marquess scowled deeply, making Elizabeth wonder if it was pain that caused his expression, or disapproval of her deliberately disparaging words. "Damn me if I didn't have the bad luck to get assaulted on my way to White's, Elizabeth, and felt the need of fellow Highlanders' sure arms. Bullets are terribly debilitating, don't you agree?"

"Assaulted!" Amalia declared. "In Saint James?"

"Regrettably so," Tullie conceded with a gasp. Several moments passed before he forced his voice to continue. "A rather violent group they were, too. The mob did some damage to the club, and other buildings along the way."

"Whatever for?" Elizabeth couldn't prevent shock from showing on her face. "A mob, in Saint James?"

Evan MacGregor cast a considering glance at Amalia, then looked levelly at Elizabeth. "'Twas a pack of rabble whose real target was the Prince of Wales. Carlton House was their intended destination, until they ran afoul of the watch on Saint James. That's where the melee turned into a riot. They overturned

several carriages, whose occupants received a sound thrashing. Several shots were fired before the mob finally dispersed. Luckily for His Grace, we Grey Brecks were available to help the Horse Guard put down the riot.”

“There you have it,” Tullie said sloppily, showing the effects of undiluted liquor. But Elizabeth took exception to his slurred words implying it was normal happenstance.

Incensed, Amalia demanded, “Did they take whoever shot you into custody?”

“Well, now, there’s a question I canna answer.” John’s eyes seemed to glaze over with more pain than he was able to override. “Demmed miserable piece of business, is all I have to say. I’d almost fought my way to White’s before the soldiers arrived, but the sight of uniforms and muskets threw another torch under the bloody anarchists.”

“So I am to take it you weren’t involved in a duel this night, Tullie?” Amalia asked, deliberately changing the subject.

John Murray quirked his brow, and laced his reply with a rolling brogue. “Och, forgive me, Amalia, for setting the honor of Scotland back another decade, but I found myself without weapons more damaging than my own two fists. You understand that the king takes a dim view of us Scots tramping about his capital city armed to teeth with dirks, claymores and Doune pistols.”

“A crying shame, milord,” Elizabeth said impudently. “The king should give you a medal for your forbearance and courage.

’Tis a dangerous city, I fear.”

“Not so much as you may be inclined to believe.”

“Got it!” Butter crowed. He straightened all at once, holding the gruesome lead ball between his bloody fingers before John Murray’s astonished eyes.

The coppery stench of fresh blood invaded Elizabeth’s nose, making her want to retch from the taste of it, but a Murray never flinched at the sight, much less the smell, of blood.

“So you have.” The marquess exhaled a deep shudder of relief. “Now, which of you ladies can take the neatest stitch?”

That said, the marquess of Tullibardine promptly fainted dead away.

### Chapter Three

John Murray would have slid to the floor in a boneless heap if Evan MacGregor hadn’t caught his elbow and forearm under the man’s sinking chest and pressed him firmly back into the upright barber’s chair.

Maxtone stepped on the levers, tilting the chair. Between the trio of strong men, they managed to get Tullie firmly secured in his tilted seat.

With his mouth open and his jaw slack, Tullie presented the most ungraceful pose for a grown man that Elizabeth had ever seen in her life. Even so, her pride in her brother’s courage went up another notch.

Not one shout against the pain had escaped his lips. He’d chatted through the whole ordeal as if his pain were of no import.

Elizabeth knew from her own haunting experiences that the truth was, the human body could only endure so much before one's courage dwindled to nothing in the face of body-racking pain.

She didn't think John's loss of consciousness was taken as a sign of weakness by any person in the room with him.

His muscular arms dangled limp over the sides of his chair. A steady rivulet of blood cascaded out of the deep surgical cut and dripped on the oak floor.

Amalia took advantage of Tullie's loss of consciousness to smooth an errant lock of damp hair from his brow. She bent and placed a sisterly kiss on his cheek. "There, there, my bra' laddie, sleep while you may."

While the surgeon and Tullie's manservant reached for towels to begin mopping up, Evan focused his full attention on Elizabeth. His black brows twisted, and those censorious eyes of his became aching more intimate. He said pointedly, "Well, then?"

"Well, then, what?" Elizabeth bristled, not liking his peremptory tone, or his blasted appraising look, either! Again he had made her acutely aware that she was barefoot and dressed only in thin gown and wrapper. Hardly suitable attire for a confrontation with a renowned rake.

"Which of you is going to sew Tullie up? That's what." Evan cast a dismissive look at Elizabeth, and settled on Amaha.

"Och, nooo... Not me!" Amalia protested. "My hands are shaking so bad, I can't thread a needle, much less poke it in a

man's flesh. I've never done such a thing."

"I'll do it." Elizabeth contradicted all her instincts, which demanded she fade quietly into the woodwork now. Heedless of her revulsion for blood and her deep-seated fear of physical pain, she stepped forward and briskly washed her hands at the basin on John's marble-topped commode. She was one Murray who would die before admitting a weakness to a MacGregor.

Her hands were nowhere near as steady as she wished they could be. The real truth was, she'd never poked a needle into living flesh, either. But she'd go gladly to hell and back before granting that truth to Evan.

Not twenty-four years old, and the man had already made a legend of himself by his valor in battle. Elizabeth had heard her uncle, Colonel Thomas Graham, rattle off chapter and verse throughout the entire Christmas holiday about the adventures of the Grey Brecks, his privately recruited company of Royal Highlanders. The MacGregor had figured largely in nearly every harrowing tale of the ongoing battles with the French on the Peninsula.

But Uncle Thomas had made no mention of having brought his entire company back to England. She'd pose some pointed questions of her own on the morrow, when her father and Thomas Graham arrived from the countryside.

Pretending to a calm she was far from feeling, Elizabeth took needle and thread in hand and lifted the towel draped across her brother's surgical wound.

Butter's stubby fingers pressed the bloody flesh together, showing her where to begin. Elizabeth glanced at Butter's face. His pale blue eyes revealed concern for her brother. Elizabeth vowed to make the neatest stitches she could.

"Had some experience at this, have you, Corporal Butter?" she asked.

"Och, aye, an' then some. Though I daresay I've spent more time sewing up foolish Sassenachs than I have the loyal clansmen that remain. Yer doing fine, lassie. The bullet went in clean. Stuck in the gristle, not the bone. He'll heal quick enough. I've seen worse. Cannonade, now that makes a mess of a man."

"I can well imagine," Elizabeth added dryly. She blinked her eyes to clear them, and concentrated on making small, neat stitches and tying firm knots in the wet boiled thread. An even twenty saw the large incision firmly shut.

Finished, Elizabeth stepped aside so that Butter could apply a liberal washing with carbolic and a clean dressing. She put the needle aside and washed her hands in hot water.

"Good work, Izzy." MacGregor splashed a healthy tot of whiskey in a clean glass and extended the drink to Elizabeth as she folded the towel she'd used to dry her hands.

"My name is Elizabeth, and I never touch whiskey, thank you." Elizabeth had lived long enough to know that whiskey had ruined more good men and their families that she cared to count.

"Drink it. It will do you good," MacGregor insisted.

"Aye, think you so? How much liquor had those men in the



mob consumed this afternoon? It doesn't take all that much to make good men forget common sense, Christian duty and the virtue of prudence. You've just come from witnessing the results of unlimited excess, I would say. So I'll pass, thank you."

"Oomph." Evan MacGregor straightened to his full height. Elizabeth feared that his six feet and three inches somehow went much further than it should in intimidating her. "You always did have a tongue that was sharper than a blade honed on a razor strop, Izzy. I see you have added fastidiousness and sanctimoniousness to your store of unpleasant virtues, as well. Suit yourself. Hie yourself back to bed, and see how well you sleep with the smell of blood in your nose. It's no' a pleasant task."

He set the glass down, untouched by her, and moved away. The marquess's bandage was in place. Dismissing the two other men with a wave of his hand, Evan MacGregor slid his arms under John Murray's back and hoisted him out of his chair. He strode across the room, bearing Murray's twelve stone as if it were six, and put the marquess in his bed.

"I believe I can manage from here, milord," Tullie's valet said gratefully.

"I'm certain you can," MacGregor replied. Butter had already taken up their jackets, gloves and hats. "I'll see myself out. Send word immediately if His Grace has any further difficulties. I'll be at my barracks, if he or the duke has need of me."

Silently Elizabeth followed MacGregor and his man to the

front door. Evan moved down the staircase with resolute purpose, smashing his diced cap down on his head. Were his spine forced to be any more erect, it would have shattered into brittle pieces with each determined step.

Not once did Evan MacGregor look back at Lady Elizabeth Murray. Even though he knew she followed him down the stairs, and saw her reflection in the remarkable two-story bank of glass windows that graced the rotunda foyer of the town house. Even though his own batman, Corporal Butter, paused at the door to touch the rim of his cap in a salute, and audibly bid Lady Elizabeth, Godspeed and good-night.

Elizabeth deliberately doused the flow of gas to the experimental lights fronting her father's town house. That action cast their portion of Grosvenor into fog-shrouded darkness. She pressed the door firmly shut and locked it. She remained at the glass-banked door, peering out longingly after Evan until she could no longer see the man striding so purposefully into the night.

There were so many questions she could have asked...so many bits and pieces of news she could have told him... but she'd kept silent. And so had he.

She closed her eyes, feeling the chill of the night seep into her skin where her forehead rested on the windowpane. Mayhap it was better this way...better that nothing be said, that none of the old feelings of the past be stirred up and brought out into the open.

The big house surrounding her seemed to settle at once into its normal late-hour silence. She could hear the sonorous ticking of the grandfather clock and smell the damp that had come in with the fog, mixing with the familiar scents of her father's pipe tobacco and Aunt Nicky's talc.

She took a deep, calming breath and ordered the racketing clatter of her heart to cease. Calm, quiet and peace were all that counted in this world. Decorum and appearances mattered, not desire and impulse. She had to dig very deep inside herself to find the resolve she needed to put this unexpected meeting with Evan MacGregor in its place. When she found it, she vowed with a vengeance that she wouldn't think about Evan MacGregor.

By sheer force of will, Elizabeth suppressed all curiosity regarding MacGregor's unexplained appearance in London. What Evan MacGregor chose to do with his life was his business.

Elizabeth repeated that fact over and over again. The MacGregor wasn't worthy of a single minute of her thoughts, and she wouldn't give him that. After all, she was a Murray, and every soul in Scotland knew there was no one more determined and strong-willed than a Murray.

Evan MacGregor cursed loudly and fluently as he threw off his jacket and dropped his pistols on the rude table serving as his writing desk in his quarters.

He already hated being assigned duty in London. Blast Colonel Graham's orders to hell and back! The moment his superior returned from his holiday, Evan vowed, he'd demand

a transfer back to the Continent. Hell! He'd take six months in Newcastle working with raw conscripts over six months in London recruiting and grooming officers for the king's army.

Damn Elizabeth Murray! Why couldn't she stay home in Dunkeld, where the blasted chit belonged? And if he couldn't have that, why hadn't the divine providence that moved all things turned her into a gross, shapeless, cow-eyed sow?

He'd escaped her siren's wiles five years ago, when she was naught more than a willful, ungrateful, beautiful spoiled brat. What was he to do now that she'd turned into an exceedingly clever and lovely woman of the world?

"Merciful heavens!" Krissy wagged her head and clucked her tongue as Lady Elizabeth quietly shut the door of the adjoining nursery. "There now. Did I not tell you wee Robbie never fluttered a lash through the whole commotion?"

"So you did," Elizabeth said promptly. "But I do like to see that for myself."

"Humph." Krissy grunted in response.

Lady Elizabeth was like that, always putting four-year-old Master Robbie's welfare before her own, as if the sweet little boy were her very own bairn. Not that Krissy could fault her lady for that, especially since Robbie had taken his grandam's death so hard. The poor little mite had spoken nary a word in the three months since auld Abigail Drummond had been put in the ground. Lady Elizabeth had every right to be worried about him.

"Och, what a night of nights this has been. Come, milady, best

you get to bed. God save us, we should all drop off to sleep with the ease and peace of a bairn.”

Krissy bustled across Lady Elizabeth’s boudoir to fluff the pillows on her lady’s tester bed, straighten the rumpled coverlet and smooth the sheets. “Do you think Tullie will be able to rest at all, milady? What if the watch should come asking questions? Should I run and tell Mr. Keyes the marquess is indisposed?”

“No. Amalia will see to that. As to Tullie’s condition, I’d warrant he’s sleeping better than we are at the moment,” Elizabeth wisely answered.

“Tut-tut, you just climb up into bed and drink this warm milk I heated for you. It will soothe you right down,” Krissy urged. “I canna help noticing you dinna like talking about the MacGregor. Is there summat between the two of you, then?”

“Not that I can think of.” Elizabeth evaded a more direct answer to the loyal servant who had been with her for the past three years.

She sat motionless on the side of the bed and stared at the closed door of the nursery—the nursery that everyone in the household probably thought housed a much-loved by-blow of His Grace the duke of Atholl. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Krissy handed her the cup of heated milk, grinning. “I dinna mind admitting the MacGregor’s no strain on the eyes, is he, now?”

“If you say so.” Elizabeth remained noncommittal, all the

while silently praying Krissy would stop. Enough was enough.

“Och, he’s verra nice to look upon.” Krissy happily voiced that opinion. “He appears to know you well, Lady Elizabeth...I mean everyone. Seems I remember he was often about years ago... at the clan gatherings, weddings and games and such. Am I right?”

“Oh...aye.” Elizabeth sighed. She finished the drink and put the cup and saucer on her nightstand, tucked her legs under the covers and said firmly, “Go to bed, Krissy. Get some sleep.”

“Aye, well, good night again, Lady Elizabeth. I’ll try not to make a nuisance of myself. Pleasant dreams.”

Not likely, Elizabeth thought grimly as Krissy bustled to the nursery door.

The servant paused with her hand on the doorknob, remembering something else. “Och! What time must I wake you up?”

“Seven at the latest, if I am to dress, have breakfast and make it to church on time.” Elizabeth doused the light beside her bed.

The next suggestion came through the dark. “Milady, I could tell the dowager you’re ill...or something...so you could sleep in a wee bit longer.”

“Absolutely not,” Elizabeth answered firmly. “I’d need gory, bleeding wounds more serious than Tullie’s to be excused from attending church with the dowager.”

“Well. It was just a thought. Good night, then.”

The room became quiet at last. So long as Elizabeth didn’t count the steady ticking of her clock, and the ever-audible drip of

London's abysmal wet fog, gathering on the upper cornice of the bay windows and plopping noisily onto the stone window sills.

Judging by the soft snores that soon came from the adjoining room, Krissy, who hadn't a serious thought in her head, had dropped off to sleep in the blink of an eye. Not so Elizabeth.

But then, the good and the righteous always slept in peace and tranquillity, while the wicked and the damned were doomed to spend eons atoning for their sins. Elizabeth accepted that as a merciful God's justice.

She didn't deserve to sleep with the ease of an innocent like Krissy. Elizabeth's soul was nowhere near as pure, and her heart was ten times more jaded.

People who lived a lie and kept dark secrets were never blessed with peace in the dead of night. Elizabeth's thoughts drifted far, far away from this bed in her father's London town house...to a tiny room in a Scottish border town. A room where the wet had penetrated the thatch time after time, leaving countless stains on sour whitewashed walls.

Time mercifully blotted out much of her memory. Sheer force of will obliterated details and sensations she never wanted to revive. But no matter how strong a discipline she forced on her thoughts, certain things remained fresh, clear and vivid.

The smell of a greasy quilt. The thick taste of a heavy fog that lingered over the village at high noon—flavored with the aroma of haggis and cabbage. The sound of buttons snapping their threads as hasty, too-eager hands tore a sark apart and cast

it to the shadows. The heat and texture of Evan's hands spreading across Elizabeth's belly and cupping her breasts.

No, try as she might to force will to overcome and direct all memory, Elizabeth Murray would never, ever forget Gretna Green, and the day she'd eloped and married Evan MacGregor — May 28, 1802. Only weeks after she'd tossed propriety aside and danced with her childhood sweetheart at Bell's Wynd.

That day had left unalterable, indelible impressions. Never mind the fact that only three living souls knew of that truth—Master Paisley, who had married them, Evan, and herself—the truth was and always would be unforgettable.

Elizabeth blinked dry eyes and glared at the shut door, wondering what in heaven's name she would do now. How would she get through tomorrow? She had asked herself that question every night since May of 1802. All the brash and reckless courage of youth had failed her then, turned her into a sniveling, terrified coward once the deed was done.

Every day of her life since, she'd fought with herself to have the strength and fortitude to go forward, in spite of the dishonor and shame she had brought on herself and Evan, and might have brought on both their families.

In the beginning, that had only been for herself — so that she could continue to hold her head up and look her father and her brothers and sisters in the eye.

Living a lie all the while. Denying the truth. Until it was too late to rectify the wrong that had been done by any honorable



means. Until it was no longer possible to hide the ever-evident truth that she was carrying a child inside her.

By then it had been way, way too late to own up to the truth. Evan had gone and done the unthinkable, joined the army and been shipped off to war. Alone, Elizabeth couldn't find the courage to admit what she'd done.

But tonight, the cards in the hand she'd been dealt had turned. Evan had come back. For the first time in almost six years, Elizabeth couldn't guess what suit the next trump was going to be, and she didn't know what her next move should or could be.

God save me, she thought, and closed her dry, aching eyes. Willpower and determination would get her through. It had to. It had failed her only once in her life, that dreadful day—May 28, so long, long ago. Dear God, she prayed, please, don't let Evan discover Robbie. Let me keep my secrets, let me keep my son.

## Chapter Four

Sunday was bitterly cold from start to finish. A little weather never kept the duke of Atholl's hardy ladies housebound on the Sabbath — not when the dowager devoted a Sunday to pursuing the Lord's work.

They began with services at nearby Saint Mark's, which were followed by the annual ladies' guild winter bazaar, a monstrous undertaking that took up the balance of the cold and dreary afternoon. Throughout the whole long, cold afternoon Elizabeth sold rose cuttings to enhance next summer's gardens. The bazaar made a long day longer.

Elizabeth couldn't wait to get home and exchange her somber, very damp walking dress and pelisse for a warm gown of velvet and lace. She spent an hour in the nursery telling stories to Robbie in another effort to elicit whole sentences from her monosyllabic son. Since his nanny's sudden death in October, Robbie had all but quit speaking entirely.

Elizabeth tucked her arm around Robbie's wee shoulders, drawing him close. "How many beans did Jack get from the peddler, Robbie?"

"Dunno." Robbie's shoulders lifted under the light compression of Elizabeth's loving arm. His thick cap of dark curls brushed against her cheek as he turned his face toward the windows overlooking the park.

"You don't know?" Elizabeth asked, cognizant of her inner fear that there might be something wrong with her beautiful, perfect son.

It was bad enough that she was not allowed to claim him as her own, to openly act or be his mother. Her father's acceptance and support of the child came with the stricture that appearances must be kept up.

Elizabeth's father had guessed her incipient condition before Elizabeth, in her youthful ignorance, discerned it herself. Robbie had been born at Port-a-shee, on the Isle of Man, on March 4, 1803, and legally named an orphan and a ward of her father, under his privilege as Lord Strange, lord of the Isle of Man.

For the past four years, Elizabeth had engaged in an ongoing

battle to spend as much time with her son as her father would allow. Considering the circumstances of Robbie's birth, she was fortunate to have any contact with Robbie at all, and she knew that. Hence, she had always showered the child with loving attention every chance she got. That wasn't enough for her. She feared her limited concern wasn't enough for the child, either.

Ever restless, Robbie wiggled off the settee to dart across the room to his low shelf of toys and books. He pulled out book after book, discarding one for the next, until he came to a well-worn favorite, a volume of illustrated fairy tales. His cherubic face was as somber as a choirboy's as he leafed through the pages, searching for the story of the giant and the beanstalk.

When he found the picture of Jack trading his mother's cow for three beans, he popped back onto his sturdy feet, ran across the room and laid the open book on Elizabeth's lap. She rumbled his hair and smiled.

"Ah, I see. You brought me the picture. How many beans is that? Do you know?"

Robbie tilted his face up to hers and sighed, deep and long. He held up four fingers, which was wrong, but he said, "Three," which was correct.

"That's right, three beans." Elizabeth smiled as she tucked his first finger under the tight compression of his thumb, making his gesture match his words. "Three beans and one, two, three, four, five fingers. Very good, Robbie."

Unconcerned with numbers, he whirled away and sat in the

midst of his toy soldiers and castle blocks. In the blink of an eye, the child was engrossed in his toys and oblivious of Elizabeth's presence.

Fascinated, as always, by everything Robbie did, Elizabeth watched him build a new wall and line a squadron of tin soldiers on its rim, then flop onto his belly to maneuver the pieces.

The door to the nursery opened, and Krissy bustled in, bringing Robbie's supper on a tray. "Well, and himself does love the wee soldiers Colonel Graham gave him, doesn't he? Good eve, milady. I've brought your supper, Master Robert. Come. Up to the table with you."

Elizabeth stood. "Robbie, I'm going to go now. I have to speak to His Grace."

"Bye," Robbie grunted, engrossed in the toys, oblivious of both Elizabeth and the servant setting up his supper on the nursery table.

Krissy cast an indulgent smile at Elizabeth that, in effect, excused the child's bad manners. Elizabeth made her own allowances for Robbie's not standing when she did. He was so young, a baby still in the nursery. Manners would come in time.

She could no longer put off the necessity of speaking privately with her father, and the sooner the better.

Elizabeth slipped through the door joining her and Robbie's rooms and closed it quietly, but as she checked her appearance, she kept one ear cocked to the activity in the other room. Krissy could talk the ear off a marble statue. Robbie's infrequent

mumbled grunts made no difference to her.

Elizabeth ran a brush through her hair and vainly tried to loosen the tightness out of her chestnut curls, tugging on the cluster that draped across her shoulder to stretch it. The moment she let the end of the curl go, it corkscrewed back where it had been.

“Drat!” Elizabeth said. It did no good to brush the wayward curls, or tie them, or do anything but let those curls do what they might. Hence, she rather liked her newly cropped head of hair, adorned in the latest classical style, which was both short around her head like a cap and long and feathery from the curls left dangling at her nape and her ears. She tied a green velvet ribbon that matched her dress around her head and touched a curl here and there, satisfied with her appearance.

Elizabeth lingered at her vanity a moment longer, studying the bluish shadows under her eyes, which hadn’t faded, even though she’d spent most of the day outdoors. The intensity of her worries showed. She pinched both cheeks to heighten their color, concluding that that would have to do.

Finished, Elizabeth tiptoed down to the second-floor landing, deliberately pausing to use sound to locate each member of the crowded household.

Keyes exited from the salon, bearing the used tea service on a silver tray. The butler let in and out the happy noise of the aunts, the dowager and Amalia over their rounds of piquet.

Across the foyer, the click of ivory balls accompanied a

scolding from Elizabeth's brother James, Lord Glenlyon, to their uncle, Thomas Graham. Tullie was spending the evening in bed, still recovering from the effects of his impromptu surgery the night before. God willing, every soul in the house would remain exactly where they were for the next hour, Elizabeth prayed.

She circled the newel post at the foot of the staircase and crept down the long, carpeted hall dotted with statuary and hothouse greenery until she came to the closed door of her father's study.

Taking a deep breath, Elizabeth dashed the perspiration from her upper lip. There was nothing to be gained from putting off what she had to do. Her soft tap on the closed door just barely qualified as a knock.

Elizabeth had the door open and her head and shoulders well inside the inner sanctum before her knock penetrated as far as the duke of Atholl's desk. "Are you free, Papa? Could I have a word with you?"

John Murray took the time to remove a pince-nez from his nose before lifting his baleful gaze to his daughter. "Ah, Elizabeth, I've been expecting you. Come in, my dear. Do shut that door. Those drafts up that hall are a misery."

Elizabeth stepped across the threshold, grateful that the first and worst hurdle was over — finding her father alone and with time to spare was nearly impossible. She closed the door and took a moment to quell the fluttering of her heart by looking around the study with feigned interest.

Elizabeth was not particularly fond of this study. Though it

was her father's room, she had always associated it with her mother. It was to this room that she and Amaha had trustingly come, hand in hand, to be told the sad news of their mother's death sixteen years before. So she had a natural repugnance for this room — though never for the man who occupied it.

Which might have seemed exceedingly odd, because where the rest of the town house might be chilly, the study somehow retained a cozy warmth. Likewise, where the aunts, the dowager and the eight-years-older Amalia might find fault with Elizabeth, her father rarely did.

She wound her way through the maze of sturdy, well-used furniture, chairs and tables that made no pretense to art or style. A cheery fire crackled in the hearth and cast eerie light up to the trophy heads and antler racks. It was a man's room in all ways, tainted by uisge beatha, port wine, and tobacco smoke, dark and somber in color, with heavy furnishings that befitted large-boned, heavysset men like her father.

Elizabeth settled in the corner of the wide couch before the fire. "Why is it always warmest in here, Papa?"

John Murray buffed the lenses of his glasses, then tucked them into a coat pocket. "Oh, I would account that to sharing the same chimney stack with the kitchens, I suppose. Didn't plan it that way. But I daresay my father quite enjoyed the added warmth in his later days. So shall I."

"Are you tottering into your dotage?" Elizabeth asked, with a dimpling smile.

“Are you being cheeky, puss?” the duke asked. He poured them both a glass of sherry and handed one to Elizabeth. “What shall we toast?”

Elizabeth took the flute in hand. The corners of her mouth twitched. Her higher principles advised her to hand the glass back and firmly refuse. But to do so would insult her father. Elizabeth could not make such a display. “Well...” she murmured, thinking of her own purposes. “We could ask for a quick and decisive Parliament. All the business of making Britain run smoothly, done in three weeks at the most. Do you think that would be appropriate?”

“Indubitably,” the Duke agreed. “Here’s to good business, wise leadership and common sense!” He touched the rim of his crystal to Elizabeth’s, and tasted the fine wine. The formalities done, he settled on the other end of the couch and gave the flickering flames in the hearth his attention. “You’ve something on your mind, Elizabeth.”

“Yes, Papa, I do.” Elizabeth set the full glass on the table at her side. She dropped her hands into her lap and entwined her fingers together to keep them still. “Let’s jump straight to the point, shall we? There’s no point in my being here in London for the little season. I want to go home, tomorrow at the very latest.”

She waited until all the words were out before turning her head to gauge her father’s expression. His large head nodded, dipping as he brought his glass to his lips and sipped the sherry. The lamps behind them on his desk made a wealth of white



hair glimmer all around his head. The starched points of his collar crackled where they flared up against his smoothly shaved cheeks.

“What? You just arrived here a few days ago, and already you are bored with your friends?”

“My friends, no, Papa. You know very well what I find singularly unappealing. We’ve discussed this several times, and I can’t make my wishes any plainer. I am not in the market for a husband. I don’t need one. I won’t have one, and I certainly won’t look for one, nor display myself on the marriage market here in this filthy city.”

“Oh? Can’t say I’m surprised to hear that speech again. Elizabeth, you ought to think of something more original.”

“Papa!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “It isn’t fair to bait me. You know perfectly well what I mean. London is disgusting and dirty. I hate it here. I always have hated coming to London. You should allow me my independence. I do reach my majority in April.”

“Hmmm...I’m well aware of your age, Elizabeth,” Lord Atholl mused, concerned over his youngest daughter’s stated intention of avoiding marriage — no matter the cost. “Amalia hinted this afternoon that you’d have all your reasons to return to Dunkeld in place before you sought an audience with me. Planned a little fait accompli, have you? What you’ve offered doesn’t sound either urgent or convincing, though.”

“Amalia spoke to you?” Elizabeth asked, rattled by that admission. She waited with bated breath for her father’s answer.

What had Amalia said? Had she mentioned Evan?

“Yes. Amalia and I had a very long and thorough conference earlier this afternoon.” The duke sipped his sherry, then put his glass aside and turned to study Elizabeth as he continued. “She tells me that Evan MacGregor put in an appearance last night. What do you make of that?”

“What should I make of it?” Elizabeth ignored the quickening tempo of her pulse. She kept her face impassive, her hands still and her eyes firmly on her father. “He has nothing to do with me, Papa. Why, I haven’t seen or heard one word from him since his sister married, five years ago!”

“Is that so?” John Murray inclined his head a bit, to better study his daughter’s flawless face. He failed to see a single sign of the heightened interest that he was seeking. Surely his gut feelings weren’t wrong?

Of his three daughters, Elizabeth, who had never really known her mother, most favored his late wife. Elizabeth had inherited the wide, intelligent eyes and brows and flawless skin of the Cathcarts.

Unfortunately, her chin and her very full lips proclaimed her a Murray to the core. She had a way of sliding her eyes to the side to study one that reminded him very much of his long-lost Jane Cathcart. She was giving him that look now, just as her mother had been wont to do. Elizabeth was keeping secrets again. There was nothing new about that.

“You are both of a proper age, now,” the duke said blandly,

probing the still waters skillfully. “You liked each other well enough when you were children. Many a successful marriage has been built on less.”

“Marriage!” Elizabeth choked. “All that nonsense about Evan and I was over and done with when he went to Eton. You know that as well as I do, Papa.”

“Is that right, puss?” he asked absently, knowing better. They’d corresponded for years, three and four letters a week to one another, right up to the very day Evan’s sister married — May 28, 1802. He remembered the date precisely.

“Yes, it most assuredly is. I had every right to admire him years ago. Evan protected me. Mrs. Grasso was a right witch, you know, Papa.”

“She was a very good teacher,” John Murray said, nonplussed. His daughter flashed an insincere smile. The duke wasn’t the least bit fooled. She was throwing smoke and covering her tracks. A bloody ferret couldn’t dig the truth out of Elizabeth Murray.

God Almighty knew he’d done everything in his powder — everything short of beating a pregnant woman — to get her to tell him the truth at Port-a-shee, when it became glaringly evident that she’d bedded someone.

“And the other thing I’ve considered thoroughly is Robbie.” Elizabeth pounced on another quasi-valid reason. “This doctor you insisted on having examine him will be of no consequence. The only thing troubling Robbie is that he has no one to bond with now that Nanny Drummond has passed. He adored her. He’s

grieving, that's all. What is best for Robbie is to go back to Port-a-shee, and all that is familiar to him."

"I don't see the significance there. I've fostered the boy no differently than I've fostered any of a dozen other lads over my years."

"Really, Papa? Is that the same thing as having a recognized parent?"

"Don't throw words like those in my face, young lady. You made your choice years ago, and you will live with the consequences of that decision. Count yourself blessed to have the opportunity to know the lad under my patronage."

"I'm not complaining. I am content with things the way they are."

"You are? Then what's your point?"

Exasperated, Elizabeth exclaimed, "My point is, I want to go back to Dunkeld. What's so unreasonable about that? Will you grant me that boon?"

Murray patted his pockets till he found his pipe. He pulled it out and laid the bowl in his palm to scrape out the insides with a flattened pocket nail. It was a handy bit of business to fill the time with, while Elizabeth sat on tenterhooks, waiting. She wasn't going to appreciate his answer. Elizabeth didn't like being told no.

"Amalia thinks this season will be different."

"Ha!" Elizabeth choked back a bitter laugh. "Papa, let's not deceive ourselves, shall we? Not when we both know the truth."

“Oh? Right, then.” John tamped two pinches of tobacco into the bowl from his pouch, put the stern of the pipe firmly between his teeth and sat back.

At issue between them was the home truth that mere mortal bairns were not conceived by immaculate conception. Had he even a clue who Robbie’s father was, Elizabeth would not be a spinster, she’d be a widow.

The duke had used his powers to make certain no one alive knew what circumstances his youngest child had gotten herself into at a young and tender age. Abigail Drummond had delivered Elizabeth of her infant and raised the child. She’d taken to her grave the identity of Robbie’s mother. And no one but Elizabeth knew the identity of the boy’s father. And she wasn’t talking.

“All right.” He gave in, handing her the lead she wanted. “Tell me your version of the latest, up-to-the-very-moment truth.”

“War,” Elizabeth said succinctly, and stared at him with eyes so pale a blue, they could be valerian plucked off a deserted Greek isle.

Atholl frowned as he put a taper to the candle nearest him and brought that to the bowl of his pipe, puffing and sucking to ignite the tightly packed tobacco.

“War, you say? What’s war got to do with you going to Dunkeld? Did I miss the passing of the Cross Truach?”

“War doesn’t have anything to do with the passing of a fiery cross, Papa,” Elizabeth said exasperated. “It has to do with the fact that there aren’t any worthwhile men left in England to court

a duke's daughter! They've all gone off to battle here, there and everywhere. Those that haven't enlisted have quit the country seeking fortunes in tea from Ceylon, mahogany in India, cocoa in South America. Have I made my point clear?"

"Oh, aye. England's come a cropper. Can't deny that—what with rising after rising during the last century. But there's plenty of good men in Scotland worth your while, Elizabeth."

"Really?" she said challengingly. "Are you saying my being a duke's daughter there doesn't matter one iota? That one clansman's as good as any other?"

"No," he answered deliberately. "Is there one in particular who's caught your eye then, puss?"

"Papa, you're being deliberately obtuse. You know what I mean. May I go home tomorrow?"

"No, you canna go home tomorrow, or the day thereafter, either. Wouldn't think of sending you back this soon and giving anyone the notion we have something to hide. You'll just have to make do, Elizabeth. And that means you will see to your normal duties during the little season."

"Besides, Amalia vows she'll strangle me if I allow you to waste this season in London, puss. Don't think you should, since MacGregor's come to town."

"Amalia!" Elizabeth cried, her voice choked. "What's she got to do with this? She hates Evan!"

"Hmmm...good point. She definitely dislikes the rogue. I've always wanted to know why. Do you know the answer to that,

puss?"

"I believe she's always thought he'd turn out a rakehell, too handsome by half. Most likely she had a tendre for him, like every other soul in the whole wide world, and could never get him to bat an eye her way."

"Hmmm... Well, can't say I'm surprised by that. She's five years older than the scamp." Murray laughed and rocked the stern of his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other. As was his custom, he left it clenched between his teeth, dragging down the right corner of his mouth while he proceeded to talk around it. "My point is, Amalia would like to see you settled and married, Elizabeth. Frankly speaking, so would I. You're not getting any younger, you know."

Smoke wreathed his head while he sat thinking and gazing at the haze.

"You can't ask me to put up with another batty old maid in my house, can you, puss? Nicky and Charlotte are enough for one poor old Scot to manage, aren't they? No, you would be best-off married, Elizabeth. You're not the kind of woman who is cut out to be a spinster. You feel things too deeply, and react to sensations born spinsters are perfectly blind to. No, no. You need a strong, demanding husband, you do. You'll have to trust my judgment on that."

"Oh, no, I won't," Elizabeth declared, with a firmness he found alarming. "Father, I intend to follow in Aunt Nicky's footsteps and take her place as the patroness of Bell's Wynd,"

Elizabeth argued heatedly. "I can't do that if I'm married."

By the way she switched from endearments to formal address, Lord John knew Elizabeth was beginning to clutch at straws. If their conversation dwindled to the point where she called him sir, it would mean Elizabeth's tender feelings were hurt. In that, she had always been easy to read. His older girls had called him Father for so many years he rarely thought of them as anything but adults now. But to Elizabeth he had been Papa a very, very long and dear time.

"Now, there you're wrong. You are not at all like Aunt Nicky, puss." He took his pipe from his mouth and leveled her a rock-steady gaze. "You need a man."

Bordering on genuine panic, Elizabeth argued. "Surely you're not serious, my lord!"

"You've completely misread the situation between us, Elizabeth. Just because I haven't pushed any of the men forward who have asked for your hand, that doesn't mean that I haven't entertained and declined offers from some of these young pups. There hasn't been a rogue whose character or means I fully approve of yet. I have high standards, you know. Not just any Sassenach will do."

"Sassenach!" Elizabeth gasped, shocked. That would never do at all. "What are you really saying? Any old Scot's as good as the next, is he?" Elizabeth was needling him deliberately now. "Papa, you said it was my choice and you would not force me."

"Ah, so I did, in principle. But that was then and this is now."



John Murray sighed. "That's why I haven't made any mention of offers before. However, in light of today's reflections, I believe it would do you good to remain in town for the little season. It's only a few weeks—as long as Parliament is in session. Young Robbie will keep safe and sound in the nursery until then...and...we'll see, hmm?"

No matter how nicely he coated the bitter pill, Elizabeth had difficulty swallowing it. "Papa, I want to go home."

"And so you shall, dear. All in good time."

"No, now."

"No, Elizabeth. Don't be tiresome. You're much too old to stage tantrums or resort to hysterical sulks."

"I can't believe you're siding with Amalia."

"I'm on the side of common sense, always, puss."

"Fine!"

Elizabeth stood. She looked down at her father, her mouth compressed, the stubbornness of her chin very telling of her Murray roots.

"Don't expect me to confide in you in the future. I may just go to Scotland without your permission, sir."

"Humph!" The duke grunted.

Elizabeth met his piercing gaze without wavering. He put his smoldering pipe on a porcelain dish on the table and laced his fingers together across his stomach. He was a fit man, in his early fifties. Only a rash fool would have misjudged his vitality and strength by the premature whiteness of his hair. Elizabeth was

not often a fool.

“May I remind you of the last time you decided you’d rather be in Scotland than in London with me for a session of Parliament? How far did you get on your little journey home alone during that rising, Elizabeth?”

“That’s hardly relevant today. I was an eight-year-old-child then. I wouldn’t make the same mistakes.”

“Except in your willful thinking, eh?”

John Murray refrained from standing while his youngest faced him with rebellion in her eyes. Long experience had taught him to avoid direct confrontations with Elizabeth. Once she got her blood up, she was the very devil to get to back down.

Should she warrant suppression, Atholl could certainly rise to the occasion and dominate her. But, of his three daughters, he preferred that this one remain on course with her basically easy-to-read and predictable come-ahead stance and attack.

Elizabeth could be very devious if provoked. God knew that was the most strikingly formidable Murray trait that could be inherited. That she had mastered it made Atholl wish his sons were more like their baby sister.

“Well, yes. I suppose I am being willful, sir.” She had the grace to blush with that admission.

“Good.” He gave her a look whose purpose should have quelled any further rebellious acts. “I want it understood, Elizabeth, that if you do such a foolish thing as to run off without permission anywhere, I can and will exert the full power of my

authority over you...whether that is to your liking or not. And if you've come to an age when you think to doubt my will, I suggest you think back to Port-a-shee, and then think again."

That reminder had the effect he sought.

"Papa," she pleaded, "I don't want to defy you, I want to go home. I'm not asking for a trip to Cairo. I see no valid reason why you shouldn't accommodate me. For once in my life, Amalia could make excuses about my absence from town. London won't die without me here to amuse it."

The duke sighed. He propped his elbow on the armrest of the sofa and splayed his fingers across the side of his face. He stared hard at Elizabeth, willing her to accept the decision she'd been given.

She remained as she was, her back to the fire, her hands pressed together in supplication, her face an angelic mixture of entreaty and sweetness. He felt like a cad.

Their discussion would only disintegrate from here. The duke stood, walked around the sofa to his desk and sat in his creaky old leather chair.

Where his youngest daughter was concerned, saying no was easy compared to the monumental effort it took to stand on that decision. It was fair knowledge to one and all that he favored and indulged his youngest more than he had any of his other children.

He silently willed her to leave his study as he returned his attention to the briefs on his desk. She didn't. She stood there by his fire, a living, breathing Christmas angel, praying. Whether

her supplications were for him or for herself, he didn't care to ask.

It was some minutes before he spoke, and when he did it was without looking up from the papers he was reading. "Elizabeth, Reverend Baird is kept on retainer for the specific purpose of being available day or night to hear whatever confession you have to offer. Leave my study. Go find someone else to torment. I must read all of these dispatches and proposals before I retire."

"What about Tullie? You haven't said one word about John. He's not going to be available to escort me to all these routs and balls that Amalia says we must attend. I mean, it's a pointless exercise, Papa."

The duke said, "There's nothing wrong with James. He's a good man."

"Papa, he's worse than Tullie!" Elizabeth cried out, from sheer frustration. "James can't be relied upon to get me as far as the door of whatever house I'm going to before he dumps me for the Cyprians across town."

"Now, that's enough slander, Elizabeth! Glenlyon wouldn't dare be so careless with your reputation!"

Last, in final desperation, she threw out her lone remaining trump. "Father, Robbie's not going to get any better just because you've heard of a specialist in London. He's lost the only person that was ever important to him. No Sassenach doctor can change that."

John Murray picked up his pen and dipped it in the inkwell,

affixing his signature to a document his secretary had marked as urgent. He dismissed Elizabeth with a stern warning. "Don't start a rising in that direction, miss. Wee Robbie is my ward. I will do what's best for him, as I will do what is best for you. Now, good night, Elizabeth. Let the door hit you where the good Lord split you."

Elizabeth couldn't find words enough to express her disappointment to her father. She stood for quite some time without moving, hating this room, but unable to hate the man who dominated it so thoroughly. She prayed fervently that he would soften and change his mind, because he didn't know what he was doing in forcing her to remain here in London while Evan MacGregor was in town.

It filled her with terrible dread to consider her alternatives. She couldn't imagine what fury her father might give vent to if the worst should happen, and Evan MacGregor came forward and told the duke that he and Elizabeth had run away to Gretna Green and got married when they were fifteen and seventeen years old.

But she knew her father would surely kill Evan.

Elizabeth swallowed what felt like her own heart lodged in her throat. She took a deep breath and tasted defeat. Abruptly she quit the study.

Upstairs, she collapsed on a stool before the fire in her room, watching red-and-blue flames lick their way out from underneath several wedges of split oak. The sight consumed her. She felt like the wood, smoking and burning, aching, ready to burst into

flames.

“I’m a coward,” she said out loud. “The first and only Murray ever born who was an outright coward, down to the bone. Grandfather George must be spinning in his grave. I’ve shamed every Murray that fought at Culloden.”

It wouldn’t do any good to argue with herself that it wasn’t true. Elizabeth Murray was a coward. All she wanted to do was run away...just as she had from the beginning.

The slightest thought of pain and suffering made her tremble and quake. Thinking back to Tullie’s bravado of the night before only made her stomach turn vilely. How had he done it? But that was a man for you!

Woman weren’t of that ilk, and little girls were even more vulnerable. Why, her father had only to remind her of one telling incident from her childhood—the one time she’d struck out on her own — and she knuckled under, even today.

She was nearly twenty-one, would be in April—a woman grown, by all rights. But she had no backbone. She didn’t have what it took to stand up to anyone. Oh, she could act as if she did. Like that time her father had referred to. But how far had she actually got? Charing Cross, that was how far.

She wasn’t a child now. More importantly, she had a child of her own, whose best interests were not being served by her father’s insistence that everyone in his household keep up appearances.

Elizabeth had to do something.

She couldn't go to any member of her family for aid in any plan that went against her father's will. Elizabeth had enough common sense to know which of her friends would help her with no questions asked. Only one had the means to go against a duke, Elizabeth's long-standing friend, the writer Monk Lewis. Her only other friend with the gumption to assist her was George, Lord Byron.

Both Monk and Byron adhered to styles that played fast and loose with society's rigid expectations of correct behavior, though neither had gone beyond the unredeemable pale. And of the two, Elizabeth was more inclined to put her faith in Monk Lewis. Monk was twenty years her senior, a confirmed bachelor, and a true gentleman where ladies were concerned. He'd never failed to give her good advice in the past.

However, she was closest to Byron. They were of the same age, and had practically grown up together, so to speak, being thrown into one another's company at the same social functions since they'd turned sixteen.

Elizabeth made up her mind to write to Monk. She saw no good coming of putting off the inevitable.

Chapter Five

Almack's

January 20, 1808

"Well, well, well, here we are again, the lost, the lame and the duckling. Whatever shall we do to entertain the haut ton, hmm? See no evil, taste no evil, hear no evil...have no fun?"

“Oh, stop being so nasty, Byron. Just because I can’t risk being seen doesn’t mean you have to hide behind the potted palms, too.” Elizabeth slapped the young baronet’s arm smartly with her fan. “Go take your terrible temper out on someone more deserving than Monk and me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of deserting either of you. Imagine the consequences of MacGregor’s temper, should he discover how assiduously you avoid him. Suppose he decided to wreak his vengeance upon skinny little Monk here? He’d make a bloody mess of the poor half-witted sot.”

Monk peered through his quizzing glass at Elizabeth. His prominent Adam’s apple bobbed between drooping points. “Why would MacGregor want to do that?”

“Never mind, Monk, of course he won’t do any such thing!” Elizabeth countered. She bit down on her jaw, hard, glaring at Byron. “I should have never told you a blessed thing. Damn you, Byron, don’t make me regret befriending you.”

The youth splayed his fingers across the breast of his coat, above his heart, his eyes widening with sincere hurt. He and Elizabeth were the same age, and had known each other forever. True friendship had evolved when each felt the awkwardness inherent in being thrust onto the social scene to sink, swim or flounder. Good or bad, they’d been ardent supporters of one another ever since.

“You misjudge me, Elizabeth. We are both wounded by life’s cruelest blow — ill-fated love. I could no more betray your



secrets than you would mine,” he added apologetically.

Not certain she was mollified, Elizabeth arched a questioning brow. “Then I take it your grumbling originates from some other source. Perhaps you’re out of sorts because no one has remarked upon your upcoming birthday? Shall I hire a carousel and hobbyhorses? If you behave yourself tonight, you may just find that you have what you most desire by the end of this evening.”

“My dearest Lady Elizabeth, an angel of your stature could not possibly grant me the intercourse I most desire.” Byron waggled his thick brown brows suggestively. “Not an angel of the first water, such as you.”

Beneath those brows, the most outrageous eyes in all of London simmered with mock heat. Elizabeth pursed her lips and drew back her fan. He blinked, and those clear blue orbs widened in genuine alarm when he perceived her intent to strike him again. “Behave, you pesky little brat,” Elizabeth balked. “Don’t use those eyes on me. I’m immune.”

“Are you? Really?” Byron lifted a brow in a wicked arch, and when Elizabeth’s scowl deepened, he laughed with genuine amusement. “You’re supposed to melt at my feet and simper, damn it.”

“Ladies don’t melt,” Elizabeth said confidently, but she couldn’t keep up the ruse. The corners of her mouth spread in an impish smile. “And gentlemen don’t swear.”

“I vow, Elizabeth, you sound as pedantic as Lady Jersey. You

really should write a poem titled ‘Ladies Don’t.’”

“It’s been done — and overdone, and satirized, as well.” Elizabeth sighed. She leaned her chin on her hand, her elbow on the table, to look over Monk Lewis’ bent shoulder, watching his pen fly across his sketchpad.

“What would be of greater interest is what ladies do.” Byron resumed his previous sulk. “I don’t want any fuss on my birthday, and well you know it, Elizabeth. Gads! Imagine how hostile I’d feel if people actually jumped at me from all directions, yelling, ‘Surprise,’ giving me apoplexy and propelling me to an early grave? I’d probably shoot someone, and then have to repent and regret it.”

Abruptly he made a fist and slammed it forcefully on the table. “Confound it, Elizabeth! There’s not a blessed thing to celebrate about being twenty. All twenty marks is another three hundred and sixty-five days of groveling, begging and explaining myself. I fear I’ll never become my own free man...ever. Damn me, do you realize how much I envy MacGregor his age, his luck and his damned bloody daring? He managed to throw off all the traces and escape this bloody coil.”

Elizabeth empathized with Byron’s straits, but thought better of telling him so. He needed prodding out of his sulks, not comfort that pushed him deeper into his private mire. They were very much alike in that respect. “Byron, you’ve done it again. I don’t want to talk about Evan!”

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