

ON DEVONSHIRE
SHORES • 3

*The Seaside
Homecoming*

A woman in a blue jacket and white dress stands in a field of wildflowers, looking out over a coastal town and sea. The scene is set during a golden hour, with a soft, warm light illuminating the landscape. The woman is wearing a blue jacket over a white dress and a white bonnet. She is holding a small blue bag. The background shows a coastal town with buildings and a sea, with hills in the distance. The sky is filled with soft, golden clouds.

JULIE
KLASSEN



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

The Sidmouth Guide quote from chapter 26 is adapted from *The Sidmouth Guide* (John Marsh: Sidmouth, 1824), 22.

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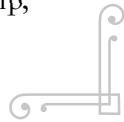
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To Sara Ring,
with gratitude for our decades of friendship,
shared travels, and shared memories.

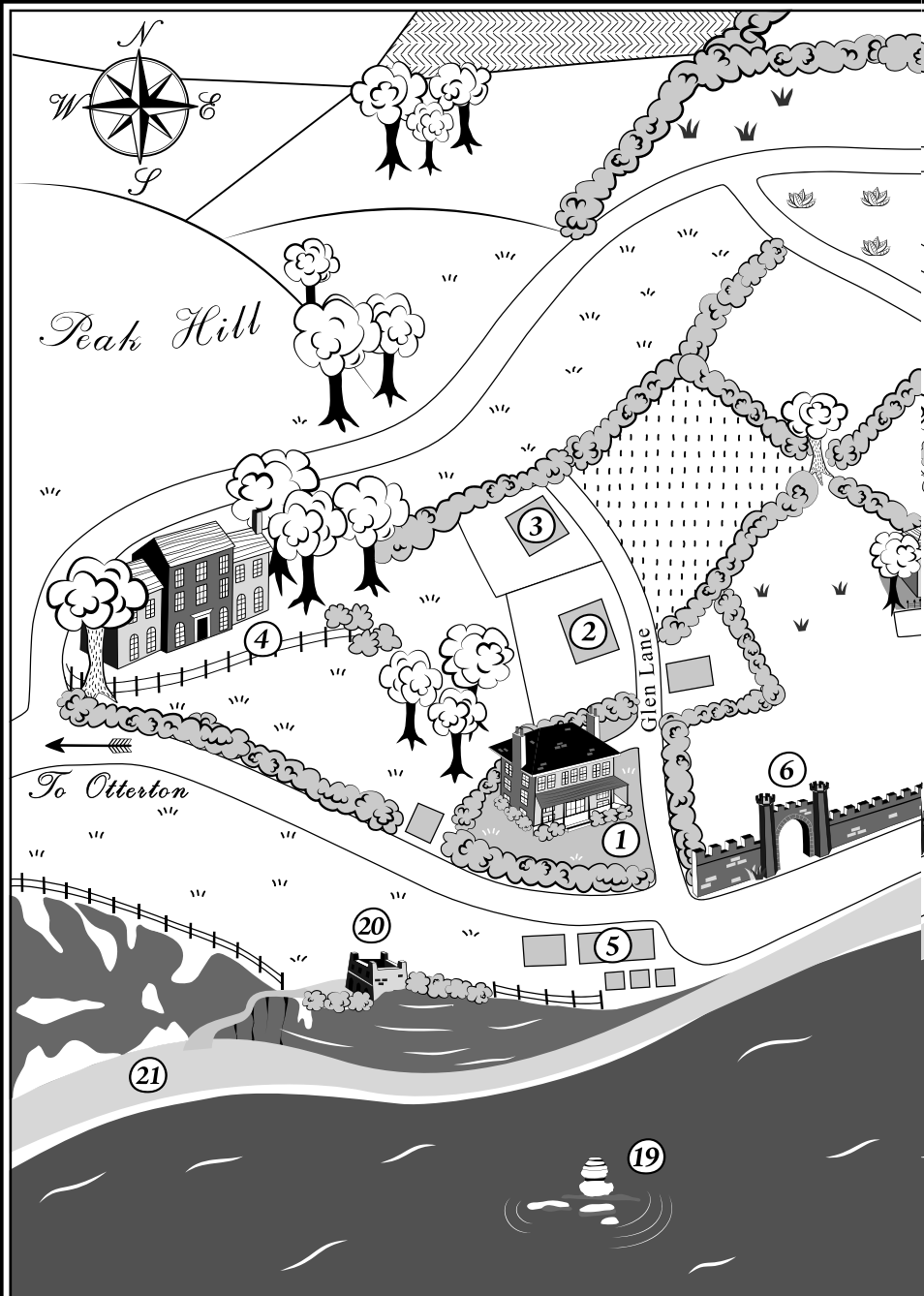




Peak Hill

Glen Lane

To Otterton



3

2

4

1

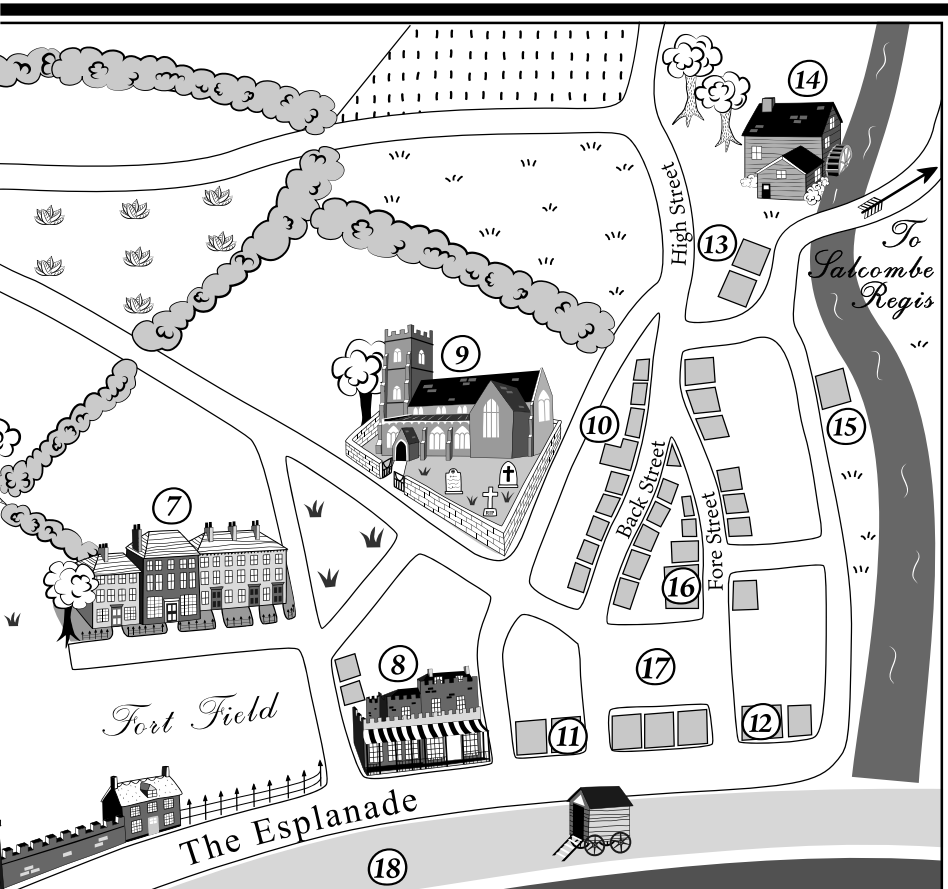
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20

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21

19



❧ Old Sidmouth ❧

- | | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1 - Sea View | 8 - Wallis's Library | 15 - Marsh Chapel |
| 2 - Westmount | 9 - Parish Church | 16 - London Inn |
| 3 - Woolbrook | 10 - Old Ship Inn | 17 - Marketplace |
| 4 - Peak House | 11 - Baths | 18 - Beach |
| 5 - Heffer's Row | 12 - York Hotel | 19 - Chit Rock |
| 6 - Old Fort | 13 - Poor House | 20 - Lime Kiln |
| 7 - Fortfield Terr. | 14 - Water Mill | 21 - Western Beach |

For the present we greatly prefer
the sea to all our relations.

—Jane Austen



Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as
though God were pleading through us: we implore
you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

—2 Corinthians 5:20 NKJV

1



The rain depresses . . . My lady has been bored
to death. And in the clutch of Giant Despair.

—Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

MAY 1820

Bleak. The weather, her mood, her life. Miss Claire Summers pulled back the dusty velvet curtain and looked out onto another dreary Edinburgh day. Rain pelted the cobbled street two floors down, where a few merchant carts and hackney carriages passed with a clip-clop of hooves, their drivers' hats pulled low, and even the horses' heads bowed against the rain. The wet pavement was devoid of pedestrians, except for a butcher's lad who jogged past with a bundled delivery.

Then a coach stopped in front of the house. A man emerged, placing a beaver hat over fair hair as he alighted and strode quickly toward the door, disappearing beneath the protruding porch roof.

"Close the curtain!" her great-aunt demanded. "I've told you the light hurts my eyes."

What light? Claire thought. She bit her tongue, let the

curtain fall, and turned toward the shrunken figure in the canopied bed.

The door knocker sounded in the distance.

Head and shoulders bolstered by pillows, the old woman frowned. "Who is that? Dr. McClain has already been."

"I don't know." Callers were rare except for regular visits by the doctor and the apothecary's assistant.

"Humph. Probably that young man from the apothecary's again. Seems to deliver some useless new tincture every other day. Remind him to use the tradesmen's entrance and not the front door."

"It is not him. I did not recognize the man."

The old woman flicked a weak hand toward the side table. "Water."

Claire walked over to fill a glass, but a soft tap interrupted them.

Agnes Mercer turned her head toward the bedchamber door. "Come."

The ancient butler entered, calling card on a silver salver. Her aunt huffed. "What is it now?"

"A gentleman has come to call. A Mr. Callum Henshall."

"Henshall? I know no one by that name."

"He asks to see Miss Summers."

Surprise ran through Claire, followed by foreboding.

Sure enough, the old woman narrowed her eyes, a suspicious scowl carved into her brow. "What have you been up to, besides gawking at men from the window? Sneaking out to meet them as well?"

"Absolutely not. I know no one by that name either."

Claire knew very few people in all of Scotland, having lived in relative isolation for nearly two years now. The one exception had been regular attendance at church services, until her aunt's declining health had rendered her bedridden.

Another lift of gnarled knuckles. "Send him away, Campbell."

"Aye, ma'am."

Claire blurted, "Did he say what he wanted? May we not ask his business first?"

"No," Aunt Mercer snapped. "I said send him away."

The elderly retainer retreated. Claire helped the woman lift her head enough to sip water. Despite the care she took, liquid dribbled from the corner of her aunt's thin, wrinkled lips.

"Clumsy girl. I did not ask for a bath," she grumbled, although her tone lacked bite.

Claire quickly retrieved a linen napkin and wiped the water away.

The butler returned a few minutes later, a folded note now occupying the silver tray. "If Miss Summers will not receive him, he asks that she do him the honor of reading this."

Another scowl crossed her aunt's lined face. "Give that to me." Her hand flashed forward with surprising speed.

It was not the first time Aunt Mercer had insisted upon reading a letter addressed to Claire. In this case, Claire felt more curious than resentful, since she truly had no idea what message the stranger might wish to impart.

Aunt Mercer unfolded it and read silently, the line between her sparse brows deepening.

"What is it?" Claire asked. "What does he say?"

"Nothing to speak of. It seems this Scotsman met your sisters in Sidmouth and wished to pass along their greetings. As we have made it abundantly clear they are not to contact you . . ." She shook her head in disgust and began refolding the note.

A greeting from her sisters? Emily's doing, she guessed. Claire's stomach rumbled, hungry for news of her family. Loneliness gnawed at her, body and soul.

“Might I read it for myself?” Claire asked. “Or at least thank the man for taking the trouble of delivering it?”

“No, you may not.” Agnes Mercer extended the letter toward the hovering butler. “Dispose of this.”

He hesitated. “Shall I put it in the drawer with the others?”

Others? The word jangled in Claire’s mind. She knew of only one. Had there been more?

“This one’s not worth saving. Burn it.”

Aunt Mercer had allowed her to read and respond to one letter, and she’d dictated every word of Claire’s reply to discourage Emily from writing. Had her sister written again anyway?

With a regretful glance in Claire’s direction, the butler dutifully took the message from his mistress, crossed the room, and tossed it into the fireplace. The flames leapt up to consume it.

Claire sank into a nearby chair and watched the paper blacken and wither. Gone in a moment, like her former life and hope for the future.



Sarah Summers stepped onto Sea View’s veranda to shake out her broom, then paused to breathe in the fresh air of a beautiful Devonshire morning. She glanced toward the grey-blue sea to the south, and then to the west, where a sea of yellow daffodils was beginning to fade on the hillside, soon to be replaced by red poppies, orange lilies, and perhaps even purple-crowned thistles, which grew wild there.

Thistles were the symbol of Scotland, and Sarah could never think of them without remembering Callum Henshall. The handsome Scottish widower and his adolescent stepdaughter had been their first guests last spring. She still could hardly believe she had been bold enough to write to him. She had never done something so forward before.

It had been Emily's idea, of course. A fortnight ago the three of them—Emily, Viola, and a reluctant Sarah—had gathered for a private meeting while Georgiana was at the charity school visiting Cora, her favorite of the children there. The topic of the meeting? What to do about Claire. They had not included Georgiana because she had never been told the real reason their eldest sister had gone to Scotland. And they had not included Mamma, because she was still determined to obey her husband's edict. Papa had disowned Claire and forbidden Mamma from harboring her or even speaking her name. And she had chosen to honor that request even after his death.

"We must do something," Viola asserted.

"Why now," Sarah asked, "after all this time?"

"Because we have tried to contact her several times and have received no reply save the one I showed you last year. Remember?" Emily asked. "The brief reply to the first letter I sent, basically telling me to respect Papa's wishes and not to write again?"

Sarah did recall the only letter they'd received from Claire in the nearly two years she had been absent. When Sarah had read it for herself, she'd had to agree with Emily that it did not sound as though Claire had written the cold, impersonal letter. Yet Sarah had recognized her handwriting.

"And she signed it *Clarice*," Emily reminded them. "I used to call her that sometimes, sarcastically, when she ordered us around like a parent rather than a sister. 'Yes, Clarice. Right away, Clarice.'"

Viola said, "I remember that."

"I think it's a hidden message," Emily went on. "I think Aunt Mercer told her what to write and Claire was letting us know in a subtle way. Agnes Mercer is Papa's aunt, after all, and she is apparently determined to enforce his final edict, just like Mamma."

Sarah nodded thoughtfully as she considered that possibility.

“I wrote to her again anyway,” Emily added, “to invite her to my wedding. No reply.”

“I have written as well,” Viola said, “to let her know the major and I are planning to travel to Scotland and would like to visit her. I received no response either. Why would she not reply?”

Sarah sketched a shrug. “To honor our father’s wishes, as the letter said.”

“Or,” Emily theorized, “perhaps Aunt Mercer never let her read our letters. I might even be tempted to think Claire no longer lives there, if not for this one reply in her hand.”

Viola said, “Jack and I are determined to visit her during our trip—whether Aunt Mercer likes it or not. But we plan to stop at several places along the way to break up the long journey and see the sights. It is our wedding trip after all, overdue though it is. It will take us two or three weeks to reach Edinburgh.”

Emily tapped her chin and sent Sarah a knowing look. “In the meantime . . . If only we knew someone who lives near Edinburgh. Someone who could call on Claire on our behalf until Viola can?”

“Mr. Henshall, you mean.” Sarah’s mind began turning like a watermill, revolving through memories of their brief acquaintance during his stay at Sea View. Would it be presumptuous to write to him when she had turned down his overtures, even his request that he might write to her directly?

Sarah offered, “I suppose I could write and ask him to call *if* he is going into Edinburgh anyway. I would not feel comfortable asking him to make a special trip.”

“Oh, I am sure he won’t mind,” Emily said with a mischievous grin. “Not for you.”

So Sarah had set aside her misgivings and written to the man who was never far from her thoughts.

Dear Mr. Henshall,

I am writing on behalf of myself and my sisters Emily and Viola to request a favor. I hope it is not too presumptuous to ask after our relatively brief acquaintance.

You may remember my mentioning a great-aunt in Edinburgh. Our sister Claire has been living there as her companion. We have not heard news of her in some time, and recent letters to her have gone unanswered.

We are probably worrying for nothing, but it would greatly ease our minds if someone might call and make sure Claire is well and in good health. I remember you mentioning you sometimes visit Edinburgh, and if that is still the case, would it be possible for you to pay a call on our behalf? Of course, we do not expect you to make a special trip. In the event you are able to visit, I will close with our aunt's direction.

Either way, I hope all is well with you and Effie. We all send our warmest greetings to you both.

Sincerely,

Miss Sarah Summers

Sarah and her sisters were even now awaiting his reply.



The next day, Emily ran into the office, waving a letter in one hand and pulling Viola along behind her with the other. “It’s here! It’s here!” She thrust it toward Sarah. “For you. Postmarked Edinburgh.”

Sarah accepted it and for a moment stared down at her name in his handwriting. A slight tremor in her fingers matched the quiver in her stomach.

“What are you waiting for?”

“Yes, yes. Give me a moment.”

She sat down in one of the armchairs. Emily plopped beside her while Viola paced. Aloud, Sarah read,

“Dear Miss Summers,

I was surprised and pleased to receive your letter, although I am sorry for the concerns that prompted you to write. Thank you for entrusting me with the request. It is an honor and a privilege to be of service to you and your good family, of whom I have fond memories and the deepest regard.

Unfortunately, I am unable to provide a satisfactory report.

After receiving your letter, I traveled into Edinburgh as soon as I could and went to the address you provided—a house in the New Town. I introduced myself to a manservant, handed him my card, and asked to call on your sister. A few minutes later, I was turned away.

Having foreseen that possibility—I am a stranger to them, after all—I had taken the liberty of composing a brief note, introducing myself as someone who had met her family in Sidmouth and wished to pass along their greetings and ask after her well-being. The manservant accepted the note and promptly shut the door in my face. I hope he gave it to your sister but cannot guarantee it.

I am sorry I was not more successful and wish I could send you fulsome reassurances about your sister’s health and happiness. If she or your aunt contact me (I provided my direction), I will, of course, let you know.

In the meantime, if there is anything else I can do, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Sincerely,
Callum Henshall”

Emily threw up her hands. “Unsatisfactory report is right! Where does this leave us? We know no more than before.”

“At least we know Claire is probably still living there,” Sarah said. “Although I would feel better if he had seen her.”

“How rude not to receive him,” Viola said. “Surely that was Aunt Mercer’s doing and not Claire’s.”

“I agree,” Sarah said. “Unless, perhaps, her experience with . . . a certain gentleman . . . has left her wary of men in general.”

“I had not thought of that.” Emily looked at her twin. “I am so glad you and the major are traveling there soon, Vi. Surely they won’t refuse to see you.”

“Let’s hope not.”

“Are you all packed?”

“Yes. We leave bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Emily squeezed her hand. “Have a wonderful time.”

“Thank you. I shall write with news as soon as I can.”

2



USEFUL COMPANION.

A lady, in her 24th year, anxiously desires a SITUATION as above. She is a good reader, domesticated, and industrious. She would be most suitable for an elderly lady. Salary a secondary object.

—Advertisement, *The Times of London*

The next day, when the butler delivered the post, Claire eyed the missive hopefully, but it was only a letter for her aunt in a hand she did not recognize.

Claire helped her sit up in bed and then watched as the old woman peeled up the wax seal, read, and then sighed.

“Another charity requesting my support. So many poor, miserable people in this world. Write a reply for me, please.”

Claire rose in silent obedience, her aunt’s shrewd gaze studying her in disapproval.

“You’re even more aloof than usual today. And what a long-suffering expression you wear. I suppose you’re still upset about that note the gentleman left. I did not prevent your reading it because I am a mean old bat, but because your father insisted the rest of the family cut ties with you. I am merely enforcing his wishes. Be glad he did not forbid me to shelter you as well.”

“Yes, Aunt.”

Agnes Mercer narrowed her eyes. “I know you find your life here an odious one, but there are many in your situation who would happily trade places with you. Fallen women often find themselves facing far worse fates. You might have ended up in the Magdalen Asylum, one of the charities I support, or even the workhouse, if not for me.”

“Yes, Aunt.” She forced herself to add, “And I am grateful.”

The old woman harrumphed, clearly not convinced, and handed her the key to her desk.

Claire accepted it and turned. A brass quill and ink holder sat on the desk’s surface, along with a wax jack, but paper itself was kept in the drawer. She unlocked it and slid it open. Her gaze strayed to a few letters in the far-right corner, the top one face down with its seal still intact. Might one of them be for her? Aware of her aunt’s hawklike eyes, Claire withdrew only paper and closed the drawer.

She spread the blank page before her and dipped the quill, saying, “Ready.”

Agnes Mercer began her reply, her voice growing increasingly thin and reedy as she continued. She thanked the charity’s governors for their request and gave her stipulations for agreeing to make a donation. Claire could have written it without the woman’s prompting, as she had written similar responses on her aunt’s behalf many times before.

Claire finished the last line in silence and stood to take it to the bed for her aunt’s scrawly signature. But the woman had fallen asleep.

How unusual. She always made sure the desk drawer was locked and the key returned to her before dismissing Claire or allowing herself to nap. It was so unexpected that Claire watched the woman’s thin, flat chest to make sure it rose and fell, which it did, with weak regularity.

Claire would surely be caught if she unsealed the letter

to read, but perhaps she might write a brief one of her own. Dare she?

Claire sat back down at the desk, gingerly slid the drawer open just enough, and pulled forth another sheet of paper. Glancing over her shoulder to assure herself her aunt still slept, Claire dipped her pen in the ink and began another letter.

Dear . . .

Dear who?

She longed to write *Dear Mamma*. Oh, how she missed her. Thoughts of her kind, gentle mother brought with them a potpourri of memories—encouraging talks and affectionate embraces—along with dry, brittle husks of regret.

As far as Claire knew, the only one of her family who had ever written to her in Scotland was Emily. Then again, Emily had been gone from home when it had all happened and probably didn't know what Claire had done. How foolish and stupid she had been.

Even if Claire wrote to Emily with the hope of a future reconciliation, she knew Emily was not the one she needed to persuade. Mamma was. And Mamma had never gone against Papa's wishes in her life.

Claire thought again of the stern reply to Emily's letter Aunt Mercer had dictated, telling her not to write again. If Emily had ignored the edict and written again anyway, Claire did not know it. The butler or sometimes the footman swept up the post and delivered it to the mistress of the house without delay.

But yesterday Campbell had said there were *others*.

Claire again peered at the small stack of letters on the right, behind extra ink bottles and quills. If they *were* letters from her family, it might be worth the risk. She tentatively slipped her hand inside and, not quite able to grasp them, used her other hand to slide open the drawer an inch farther.

Whiiine.

“Hm?” Aunt Mercer snorted awake. “What are you—?”

“All finished. Ready for you to sign.” Claire surreptitiously slipped the extra piece of paper back inside. No use in wasting it for one word. Aunt Mercer detested waste. As Claire rose, she nudged the drawer closed with her hip.

“Lock it and return the key.” Aunt Mercer held out her hand, and as always, Claire complied.

After that, Claire left the woman to resume her nap, taking the charity letter down to the hall for the butler or footman to post later. Hearing a small squeak of protest nearby, Claire stepped back and looked down the corridor.

There stood the footman, Fergus, standing close to Mary. The young housemaid backed away until the wall stopped her. He propped a hand on the wall over her shoulder, hemming her in on one side. He leaned down as though to kiss her, but Mary turned her face, ducked, and slipped from his grasp.

Neatly done, Claire thought.

“Come on, Mary,” he wheedled. “Ye don’t want me to tell the missus I saw that ginger-haired assistant kissin’ ye.”

Mary hastened away toward the servants’ stairs. The footman turned to follow, but Claire called, “That’s far enough, Fergus.”

Claire said it with all the authority she could muster. In truth, she had little authority in this house, but as lady’s companion and a relative of Agnes Mercer’s, she theoretically ranked a notch above this impertinent footman.

“Ah, Miss Summers.” His eyes glinted to find a new mouse in his tomcat sights. “Jealous, are we? Don’t be a shrew. If yer very sweet to me, I might give ye a look at this letter just come.”

Another letter?

He stepped closer, a sly smile tilting his lips. “I can see yer interested. So perhaps I’ll have two letters’ worth.”

When Claire remained silent he came closer yet, his smile widening. "Thinking about it, are ye?"

Claire inwardly bristled. She may have fallen for a lord, but she was not about to be seduced by a lecherous, spotty-faced footman.

She held her tongue and managed a small smile of her own. His eyes darkened and he stepped close. The man thus distracted, Claire swiped the letter from his grasp and spun away, much as Mary had.

He swore.

A quick glance told her it was only a note from Aunt Mercer's lawyers. Devious pig.

She handed it back. "You were right; I *was* thinking about something. About whether I should have you dismissed now or wait until after my aunt wakes from her nap."

The sly smile vanished. "Ye don't have that kind of power."

"It's not my power or lack of it that would hand you the sack. A mere mention to my pious aunt of your lascivious behavior would do it."

He blinked. Looked sincerely stricken. "Don't, miss. Please. Just a little jest. Won't happen again."

"Perhaps I will keep quiet if you agree to leave Mary alone. What has she ever done to deserve such behavior?"

For a moment that snakelike gleam returned to his eyes. "Oh, ye'd be surprised."

"And sickened, no doubt."

"Now, now. Not my fault. She's no better than she should be."

Was there any truth to his claim? If so, Claire was in no position to judge another woman's indiscretions.

She lifted her chin. "Either way, she is far better than you are. Watch your step, for I shall be watching you."



A few days later, another caller came to the front door. Claire was in her room reading when the knocker sounded below. She stood and looked out the window, glimpsing a man's black hat and billowing greatcoat, but that was all. She wondered if this one would be sent away too.

Claire returned to her reading.

Aunt Mercer had said she would not need Claire that afternoon, so Claire was enjoying the rare luxury of reading a book of her own choosing. Aunt Mercer did not possess—or allow—many novels, but rereading *The Pilgrim's Progress* was proving more pleasant than being forced to read aloud yet again from Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*.

Some time later the housemaid tapped and came in with fresh towels. "Here you are, miss."

"Thank you, Mary. My aunt has a caller?"

"Aye. Some gent's been with her for nearly an hour now."

"One of her doctors?"

"Don't know. Dinna hear his name."

The housemaid turned to go, but Claire asked, "Mary, has Fergus been bothering you?"

The girl tilted her mobcapped head as she considered. "Now ye mention it, he's left me alone for a few days, God be praised."

"I'm glad to hear it."

The maid departed to continue her duties.

A short while later, another knock rattled her door.

Expecting Mary again, she called, "Come."

Instead, when the door opened, Campbell stood there looking awkward.

"A gentleman to see you, miss, in the drawing room."

A *gentleman*? She instantly thought of the fair-haired Scotsman who had been turned away. Had he come back? Brought news of her family? Why would her aunt allow her to receive a male caller now, when she had refused before?

Claire rose. "Give me a few minutes, please."

The butler nodded and retreated.

Claire tidied her hair and arranged a white linen tucker at her neck, adding needed adornment to the plain grey day dress.

Then she went down to the drawing room, nerves thrumming through her.

She crossed the threshold and drew up short, heart banging against her ribs at the sight of the handsome, elegantly dressed man awaiting her.

Lord Bertram. Here? Now?

"What on earth are you doing here?" she blurted with no attempt at politeness.

"Miss Summers." He bowed. "I have just met with your aunt, as you are probably aware. Surely she mentioned she had written to me."

"She did not. I am astonished to see you. I had no idea she contacted you nor have I any idea why she would."

"No? I must say that surprises me."

"Then that makes two of us. Why did she want to see you?"

He hesitated. "If she did not tell you, perhaps I had better leave it to her to explain. Still a bit of a mystery to me anyway."

Did he assume Claire had wanted to see him? She hurried to correct that humiliating misapprehension. "If you think I asked her to contact you, to interfere in some way, you are greatly mistaken. I had not thought to ever see you again."

He held up his hand, pinkie ring flashing with the movement. "I have no wish to start a quarrel. In fact, I am glad to see you looking well and living in such a . . . respectable house. Is the old woman kind to you?"

A denial was on the tip of her tongue, but she bit it back. She would not seek this man's pity.

She squared her shoulders. "You said you came to meet with my aunt. Why did you ask to speak to me?"

“I merely wanted to assure myself you were well. I confess I have thought of you often. I regret what happened between us, and I also regret it is not in my power to make amends. I hope you will allow me to at least apologize.”

She was so flabbergasted by his overdue apology that she could barely fashion a reply. Finally, she managed, “Say what you like. It changes nothing.”

When Lord Bertram left, Claire marched directly to her aunt’s bedchamber. She found the woman propped up by pillows atop her made bed. She was dressed—with help from the lady’s maid—in a favorite Sunday frock with her ruby cross pendant at her neck and a lap rug over her legs.

She looked at Claire with interest. “You saw him, then?”

“I did and was astonished to find him here at all, let alone at your invitation. I did not realize you were acquainted with the man.”

“I was not. Never met him till today.”

Claire frowned in confusion. “To my recollection, I have never mentioned his name. So how . . . ?”

“Your father named the man in one of his letters.”

“Why did you wish to see him?”

“Several reasons. To satisfy my curiosity, first of all. He is handsome, I grant you. Well-spoken. Titled. I can see why he turned your head. Yet he is also in a great deal of debt.”

“How do you know that? I doubt he would offer such information.”

“He did not, nor did he deny it. I looked into the man’s situation. Not bad for an old woman confined to her bed, ey?”

Claire was too befuddled to be impressed. “Why go to the trouble? What were the other reasons you mentioned?”

“I am . . . not prepared to say as yet.”

At the vague answer, irritation flared, as it often did in her aunt’s presence, and for once, Claire failed to hold her tongue.

“What, did you invite him here to remind me of my stupidity? My humiliation at his hand? I assure you no reminder was needed. I repent of it daily.”

Agnes Mercer’s eyes glinted. “Ah. So the mouse has a voice after all. Not the insipid milk-and-water miss I’ve known these last two years. I am glad to see some spark in you.”

“Are you? When you have chastised and suppressed my every expression except docile compliance?”

“Careful, my girl. I don’t like that sharp tongue aimed at me, but you will need that spirit and courage when I’m gone.”

The thought brought unease and even fear. Claire admitted, “I don’t know where I’ll go after you die.”

“What about after *you* die? I know where I hope to go.”

“Are you not certain? With all your churchgoing and donations and piety?”

“Pff. That gets me nowhere. The only reason I can hope for heaven is this.” She lifted the cross on its gold chain.

“Your necklace?”

“Don’t be daft. What it symbolizes. The cross alone renders sinners acceptable to God.”

“Do you include yourself in that number, or only me?”

“I am in the same boat, my girl. But you are still at sea.” She waved her veined hand. “Now, enough of that. Have you given any thought to where you might go?” Her lips quirked. “While alive, I mean.”

Worry pinched Claire. “I have thought about it but have made no decision as yet.”

“Your mother won’t have you, you know. Your father made his wishes clear.”

“As you’ve often reminded me. Speaking of the future, I hate to ask, but I will need some money. Most companions are given an annual allowance.”

“An allowance? Ha. You have had a roof over your head, a warm bed, and meals prepared for you. You’ve been given

proper clothing. Not to mention spiritual instruction from my minister. Far more than most in your situation would expect. I'd say you've already received more than adequate compensation."

All the old shame washed over Claire, paired with heavy defeat. She hung her head. "I am sorry. I do appreciate having a home here." *But for how long?*

Another wave of her hand. "Enough idle chatter. Off with you, now."

Claire swallowed. "Do you not wish me to read to you?"

"Not today." She tapped her whiskery chin. "I have a great deal to think about."