

# **VALLEY OF THE SHADOW**

by

**Elle Emriche**

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### **Credits**

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## WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *VALLEY OF THE SHADOW*

“The romance and courting . . . I found to be very touching. The book truly captured the essence of the time.”

Faith Jacobs

Rating: 4 Stars—Just Erotic Romance Review

“For those who enjoy love stories with a twist will delight in *Valley of the Shadow*. Author, Elle Emriche has skillfully woven just such a love story, set against the colorful background of North Carolina during seventeen hundred and eighty-three. Love, loyalty and a connection between spirits that crosses time, are just a few of the elements which make *Valley of the Shadow* a rare find. Ms. Emriche has penned a highly readable, highly enjoyable, and a highly recommendable read.”

Donna E. Bedrick

The Word Museum Review Staff

SENSUAL RATING: Smolders and Blazes

4 1/2 - Rare Find

*Valley of the Shadow* by Elle Emriche is one of the best erotic romances I have read. It has an awesome storyline. A young lady who does not fit in her own time travels back to the time period that was her destiny. Elle Emriche's erotic scenes are passionate, sexy and tastefully done. This is a novel worth reading.

-Dawn Myers



## **Dedication**

To Dan

## Chapter 1

October 30, 1780

At first, he wasn't sure if he was dead or alive. He could have been lying on the ground, experiencing Hell's first welcome as much as on the bloody, body strewn battlefield that straddled the boundary line of North and South Carolina. Pain bit into him from all over—his right leg, shoulder and back. It was a struggle to draw breath, and the effort caused a sound unlike any he had ever made. *The death rasp*, he thought dully. *Means...alive, still alive...*

"Wes!"

John Paul suddenly loomed in front of him, full of agonized concern, his shirtfront covered in drying blood. Nothing seemed entirely real to Wes except the struggle for breath. Even his pain was somehow muted in his attempt to understand what was happening. John Paul was speaking...explaining. He had to listen, to understand.

"—hear me? We won. It's a high cost, mind you. But never you mind that. All that matters is that we get you well." John Paul jerked his head up and called to someone. "Where's the damn doctor? Get him! Hurry! The major's regained consciousness."

John Paul's call seemed to echo, or perhaps several men were shouting the same order over and over again, Wes didn't know. His eyes lost focus as he tried to recall exactly what had happened, but all that came to him was a memory of thick, black smoke, the deafening noise of gun volley, and the sound of men screaming and yelling. It was a bad place to have held the battle because the enemy

had taken control of the massive hills to the south and east, but they'd had no choice. They couldn't allow this battalion to meet up with Cornwallis, who was said to be in Charlotte. The Continental Army had to either defeat the Redcoats here or die trying. And die they might, he'd realized, they were so outnumbered.

It was coming back to him—the redcoats advancing with bayonets drawn, the sharpened steel flashing in the late afternoon sun. Patriot sharpshooters had picked the Redcoats off one by one. So many had fallen, and yet they'd kept coming, live soldiers coming from behind the fallen ones, stepping over the dead and wounded without so much as a glance downward. He'd been painfully aware that they were running low on ammunition, and there seemed to be no end to the Redcoats coming through the pass between the hills. He'd felt certain at that point that all would be lost.

The sun was setting, which left the valley in deep shadow. *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, the phrase seemed to whisper itself in his brain. "I will fear no evil," he'd whispered back in response. *I will fear no evil!*

John Paul's eyes roamed his friend's face as he tried to discern what was going through Wesley's mind. "You were shot from your horse as you led the last charge. Do you remember?"

Wes was remembering—his brother's face. They had seen each other at the same moment from across the field of battle. Alexander had been there. "Alex—"

John Paul looked around them before lowering his head again and whispering, "He got away. I'm sure of it. I checked the dead and wounded—"

A loud cry drowned out his words, and Wes tried to look beyond his friend to the crowd gathered around a large tree some thirty yards distance away.

"Don't move, Wes," John Paul ordered. "You've lost enough blood!"

But Wes was mesmerized by the strange sight. At first, he couldn't comprehend what the large, colorful objects dangling from the limbs of the oak were, but then the realization hit with a

sickening force. The objects were men—most still in their scarlet-colored uniforms. The men, *his* men, were hanging the prisoners. And another had just been hoisted into the air to a loud cheer. The condemned man's body jerked violently, and Wes felt the struggle in his own as he fought for a breath. This was wrong. Wrong!

"S-stop—" was all he managed to get out. Black spots danced in front of his eyes and a sick lightness of being began overwhelming him. He was dying and he wouldn't be able to stop the abuse. "—them. Stop—"

"I tried, Wesley," John Paul said. "They've gone mad."

"You...have to—"

Wes didn't have to say more. "Stop the hanging!" John Paul bellowed at the top of his lungs. "The major says to halt the executions immediately! Cut that man down!"

It was the last thing Wesley heard before he lost consciousness.



## Chapter 2

*October 29, 1783*

“Why tomorrow?” John Paul demanded of Wes.

“Please don’t raise your voice,” John Paul’s wife, Maggie, pleaded.

Wes smiled at her, at them both. It was amusing. Their concern for him was evident, although it could not have taken a more different form. John Paul thought he could bellow some sense into him, and Maggie thought he should be handled delicately. The simple truth of the matter was there was no approach that would work with him. He was a lost cause, a hollow vessel filled with regret and memories so gory and painful, they leeched all the color and taste from life. He would never be normal. He would never have what John Paul and Maggie had. He loved them both but he also envied their happiness.

“Stay another month. Stay until Christmas,” John Paul asked. “I mean, where are you going to go? Home?”

The new maid, Eunice, came in with a pot of fresh tea and began filling cups. She was petite with dark hair and eyes, and her lips seemed to have a perpetual pout to them, Wes had noticed. She seemed to have the uncanny ability to find his eyes and convey sensual looking messages when no one else was looking. Maggie, he felt quite sure, would have dismissed the girl on the spot for such a look. Not that he was going to mention it.

The little imp did it again. She narrowed her eyes at Wes and a corner of her mouth crooked up as if they were sharing some lurid joke, and she did this the instant Maggie looked down at her

own tea cup. Perhaps he should stay longer after all and see just what Eunice the maid had in mind by those uncensored looks of hers. "Perhaps I will," he mused aloud.

"Oh, do, Wesley," Maggie urged. "We're going to have the most wonderful ball in December."

Wes almost spat back *And you know how I love a ball*, but Maggie, of all people, did not deserve sarcasm. Instead, he said, "You mentioned it."

"We haven't decided on a date." Maggie's soft brown eyes sought out her husband. "We should do that soon."

John Paul grunted noncommittally. He was looking out at the rainy afternoon and thinking about what Wes had in mind to do tomorrow. Every year on October thirtieth, it was the same thing—revisit the valley of the shadow of death, the day he'd very nearly died, and the ghosts of his past. It was one of Wesley's most unhealthy obsessions.

John Paul had racked his brain, and he'd be damned if he could think of a way of discouraging the practice. *Leave it behind, Wes. Please!* He'd said it a hundred times, begged it. *Move on with your life. Find a woman to share your life with.* But Wes had made up his mind that he was a lost cause.

"We're not all made that way, my friend," he'd stated in that matter-of-fact tone of his. "You mean well, I know, but I am not capable of loving a woman the way you speak of. I wish I were."

John Paul had argued until he was blue in the face, but to no avail.

"I have something to do tomorrow," Wes said, discreetly watching Eunice exit the room. "But I suppose I could return for another few weeks."

John Paul suddenly leaned forward in his chair. "Forego what you're planning to do tomorrow," he appealed in a quiet voice.

Wes rose. He was weary of the argument. "I can't," he replied. "And we've been through this before. Excuse me."

Maggie watched him leave the room. His limp always tugged at her heart. It was not that pronounced; it was more symbolic of the internal crippling from his war experiences. She had met both

John Paul and Wesley Hale before the war, and they had both been different then—young, wildly handsome, full of spirit and idealism. Well, John Paul had not been *wildly* handsome, perhaps, except to her. She had loved him from their very first meeting, despite the fact that he was so nervous, he spilled punch on both of them. She still loved him that much and more, but he frustrated her sometimes. “John Paul,” she admonished when Wes’s footsteps could no longer be heard.

John Paul shook his head and held up a hand and Maggie sighed audibly and decided to bite her tongue yet again.

\* \* \* \*

“What do you think he has to do tomorrow?” Verity whispered from behind the doors that connected one parlor to another.

“All I care about is that he’s staying a few more weeks,” Eunice whispered back with an excited gleam in her eye.

The girls turned and hurried back upstairs before they were caught eavesdropping. Verity lived in fear of being caught doing something wrong. If either the master or mistress caught her, she’d be sent packing, and if Mrs. Tidwell, the housekeeper, caught anyone misbehaving, there were punishments. She’d received only one punishment in her tenure at the Nordstrom home, a vicious spanking on her bare bottom and the backs of her legs with the back of a large wooden hairbrush, and she never wanted to receive another. That had been punishment for stealing a box of Christmas chocolates from a guest. The box had been only half full, too.

Eunice, who had only been with them for three months, had already been punished three or four times. It never seemed to faze her, though. Eunice was different, brave and daring and full of knowledge about things young ladies of good character were not supposed to know. Most the others thought she was a bad seed and avoided her. Martha, one of the upstairs maids, even called her vile and evil once. That was the night she heard Eunice telling some of the girls the five best places to tongue a man. Verity didn’t remember all five, but at least three of them were places she personally never would have considered touching with her tongue

or with anything else, for that matter. Mostly, in her opinion, Eunice said things for the fun of shocking others. Still, Verity liked her.

She did have a feeling in the pit of her belly that it was sinful to be touched and stroked the way Eunice did her in the late night when the others were asleep. She knew it was possible she'd burn in Hell for it, but it was so pleasurable. Mostly, the touching was all done in silence, if you didn't count the soft moaning, which her pillow mostly muffled, and the loud breathing, which she couldn't help. Sometimes, though, Eunice would curl up to her and whisper in her ear. "You want it, don't you?" Her hand would be rubbing and teasing outside of her knickers before deftly, slowly, maneuvering its way in, between the crack of her arse, which she would tease before moving the few inches forward to play in her wetness. "Ooohhh, I feel a hungry pussy," Eunice would breathe in her ear. "How many fingers would pussy like to eat tonight? One?" And in it would go. "Two?" Verity would be moaning into her pillow, but arching her back so Eunice could best position those magic fingers. "How about a nice, fat thumb? You like that?"

The words were hard to forget. Verity would try and go about her work the day after an encounter, but the words would keep repeating themselves over and over again in her mind, making her wet and needy all over again. Maybe she would languish in Hell but, at least, Eunice would be there, too.

### Chapter 3

Eunice Scoggins had always known she was meant for something better than the life she'd been born to, and the gorgeous Major Wesley Hale was going to be the one to provide it. Gorgeous really wasn't the right word. Women were gorgeous. She was gorgeous. He was stunningly handsome, a factor she had discovered that could work either for or against her. On the one hand, extremely handsome men could be so vain as to refuse to settle for less than their due, which not only meant beauty, which she had in abundance, but also title and dowry, which she did not possess, though that was hardly her fault.

Wes Hale, with his dark hair and deep blue eyes, was not especially vain, she didn't think. He seemed aloof and uninterested in the many young women she'd seen paraded before him. Oh, how she delighted in his polite rejections. He was a man who wanted and needed *more* than just a lovely little wife with a lovely little dowry. He needed danger and excitement, a taste of the forbidden to reawaken some of the passion that must have flowed through him at times of battle. She would give it to him, and he would take her away from this existence, back to his vast estate, Pinegrove. She'd heard the estate included a beautiful stone mansion surrounded by towering pine trees on a thousand acre lake. "I'm Mrs. Hale, mistress of Pinegrove," she practiced in the looking glass. Or would it be Lady Hale? "Yes, I'm Lady Hale, mistress of Pinegrove." That's how she would introduce herself to the new servants she would hire. They would never guess she'd been one of them. Her dark eyes glittered at the thought.

She had to make her move tonight. Tomorrow the major had his mysterious errand, and she needed to make sure he would return. She turned from side to side, surveying herself in the looking glass one last time. She'd stolen away into a guestroom on the third floor to get ready, to use the looking glass and to have access to the major's room without being seen. Tonight was definitely the night.

\* \* \* \*

Wes was lying on his bed with a book on his stomach. He stared out blankly, his mind on the events of three years ago. For days after the battle, he had slipped in and out of consciousness. Only bits of memory came back to him from those days. The surgeon shaking his head, "He's lost too much blood." John Paul, fretting and tending his wounds. "You can do it, Wesley. I know you can pull through this."

What had given him the strength to survive when so few others did? Luck? Will? Or perhaps the desperate desire for reassurance on one question that plagued him—had he served a purpose?

Alexander had accused him for the whole of his life of not *having* a purpose. Wes had tried to shrug it off as nothing more than an older brother's bullying, but it had had an effect on him. He'd been only fifteen when he'd learned about the Boston Tea Party and the quest for independence, but he'd felt immediate support and passion for the patriot cause.

Alexander had been full of disdain. "Don't be a fool, Wesley. I should say don't be a bigger fool than you usually are," he clarified. "The rebels have no chance, *no chance*, of winning, and the only reason you want to take up their cause is because you know damn well that I'm a loyalist."

Wes could still recall the surprising sting of the words. It was more than the words, really. It was Alexander's absolute conviction that he was incapable of any real purpose, belief or action.

"Alex is poison," John Paul had said a hundred times when they were boys. "You cannot take anything he says to heart."

It was true. Alexander had been a slow working poison, causing Wes to doubt his own mind and worth. Wes wondered what Alex would think if he knew that poison had backfired. After all, it was probably the need to know he had served a purpose that had kept him alive. He should have given in to the wounds that ravaged his body. Everyone expected him to die.

When he recovered, he learned that he'd led the last assault on the Redcoats and their loyalist allies, Alex among them, and it was that surprise counterattack that had reversed the battle. So the question that had so plagued him was answered. His life had served a purpose. He had aided his cause. So now the question became, why was that not enough? What was this lingering ache that tormented him all the time? Why could he not let go of his personal failures and regrets in light of the successes, both personal and overall? Why did he feel compelled to return to the valley of the shadow over and over again?

A light knock at his bedroom door roused him from his thoughts. He was not surprised to hear it, even though it was past eleven-thirty and the house had grown quiet. John Paul would have one more go at trying to talk him out of his sojourn tomorrow. He got up from bed, tossed his book aside, stalked to the door and flung it open. "I'm going and I—" Wes broke off in surprise.

Standing before him was the maid, the one with the suggestive eyes. She was out of her uniform and cap, very much out of uniform, in fact. She was in a plain dark skirt and a blouse that was halfway unbuttoned, leaving little about her breasts to the imagination. "I hope you're not going just now," she said.

"No, tomorrow," he replied when he'd recovered his wits. He opened the door wider. "Would you like to come in?"

"Very much. Thank you, sir."

She walked past him, sashaying like a seasoned whore, and he shut and locked the door. "I'm not locking you in," he said. "I just want to make sure my oldest friend in the world doesn't come bursting in to rescue me."

Eunice pulled her hair down in one smooth move and turned to him with a half smile playing on her lips. "From me?"

“From me,” he corrected. He walked back to the bed and sat down to better enjoy the show she seemed intent on putting on for him. Slowly, she was undoing the buttons on her shirt. “I have been wondering what you were trying to convey to me through those looks of yours,” he said.

“Have you?” He was undoubtedly the most beautiful man on the face of the earth. He had something wrong with one of his legs, of course, but, other than that, he was perfect. She opened her shirt, pulled it off, and dropped it on the floor to the side of her. His blue eyes were fully on her. “You like?”

“Oh, yes,” he said as his eyes raked over her bare breasts with their large, brown areolas. He hadn’t known nipples could be that large except in women who had borne several children. He wondered about the fair maid’s age. Keeping her dark eyes on his, she cupped and lifted her breasts as high as they could go, then she dropped her chin, stuck out her tongue and licked at her own nipples.

It didn’t get the overt reaction she usually got so she moved on, removing her skirt, letting it drop, and stepping out of it. She had nothing on underneath.

His eyes dropped to her dark curly triangle. “You never did say what you had in mind,” he reminded her. His cock was already hard but he also felt a twinge of trepidation. She was no innocent, and he’d seen the diseases that whores passed on. He had no desire to own one.

“I thought I’d show you instead,” she said. “Would you like to take off your clothes or should I do it for you, sir?”

Rather than reply, he stood and began removing his clothes without any preamble. She watched, licking her lips as if he was a tasty meal and she was starving. His jaw clenched, feeling a rogue pang of disgust. He’d barely gotten his britches down when she gave him a shove backwards onto the bed. It surprised him, and he remained motionless for a moment. She was crawling around him and, half to tease and half because it was instinct, he scooted backwards.



“Trying to get away?” she asked as she continued crawling over him.

“Oh, desperately trying,” he replied drolly.

She was straddling his legs when she suddenly dropped her head and took his penis fully into her mouth and began working it. Up and down she went, sucking with a consistent wet pressure. He gasped. Only one other woman, a whore in Charles Town, had done this, and not nearly as fervently. His cock enlarged to its full size and he was fascinated to see her continue to take most of it into her mouth. It was going to the back of her throat.

He hadn’t been aware of taking hold of her hair, but he had and he was thrusting himself deeper and further into her mouth as his body demanded. She kept it up until he was feverish with heat and getting ready to explode. “I’m c-coming,” he warned in a deep guttural voice that sounded little like his own. It was as if the animal was coming out in him, voice and all. Still, she didn’t withdraw and, as warned, he exploded in a series of spasms. She kept him covered with her mouth, swallowing, sucking and swallowing some more.

When she finally pulled back, she had a lazy smile on her face until she burst out laughing at his shocked expression. He didn’t laugh with her and she quickly sobered. She had to play him carefully. “Did you like it, Major?” she asked, her voice low and sultry.

“It was...very interesting.”

Eunice began toying with his now limp penis. “I’d like to do it every night,” she said, her dark eyes gleaming in the candlelight.

“Not every night, I think,” he hedged. Now that he’d come and she’d begun talking about it, he was feeling a strong desire to be done with her. “Unfortunately, I have something to do tomorrow and I need to get some rest.”

“I’ll go, then,” she said, getting up. *See how compliant I can be, Major?*

He got up, too, and stepped into his breeches, wondering if he was expected to pay her something. Whores generally quoted

prices before any intercourse took place. If he suggested paying her, it might be an insult. "Thank you for your hospitality," he said.

"My hospitality," she repeated. "Of course. Anytime, sir."

Something about the *sir* sounded sardonic but he was too addlebrained to care. Thank God she was putting her clothes back on quickly. She was fast. In every way. He walked to the door and fumbled a moment with the lock. "Goodnight," he said, as he pulled the door open.

She slipped through with a soft "Goodnight, sir," and disappeared into the darkness of the hallway. He shut the door and, after a moment of contemplation, locked it again and went to bed.

Close to dawn, he dreamt of a panther-like creature closing in on his naked, prone body. The creature eyed his exposed genitals hungrily before licking them with a huge, rough tongue. It hurt and yet he liked it. Or did he? He couldn't speak or move. He just had to endure it.

The dream changed. He was walking, fully clothed, through a wooded area. There was a dense fog that prevented him from knowing exactly where he was, although it was familiar. That was, until he saw the tree and the men still hanging from it. He was alarmed and confused. These couldn't be the same men, he tried to reason. He attempted to move closer to the tree but the distance wouldn't close. The fog had grown thicker and only the sound of dying men calling out to him kept him moving closer. If he could help, if he could just help one—

He finally stepped through a clearing in the fog and discovered that he'd been wrong. The hanging men weren't calling to him. They were calling out in either ecstasy or impatience. Their genitals were all hanging out, engorged in anticipation, while a dark haired wench stood in front of one of the men and sucked his very life out through his penis. Upon the very moment of orgasm, he hung lifeless and still, a sick grayish white color. The wench had killed him, and still the others called for her to come to them. The wench suddenly turned to him. It was Eunice. Her face and front were wet with semen and her expression was insane, so much that he jerked and woke.

He pulled himself up against the sideboard and tried to slow his breathing and clear the images from his head. “Dream,” he muttered. “Just a dream.”

## Chapter 4

*October 30, 2004*

*There's something wrong with this*, Liz thought. She was crammed in a pimpmobile with five other people, including her ex, drinking rum and Coke out of red plastic cups. Nearly twenty-four years old, graduated from college and then some, she was too old to be here, acting like this.

"What's wrong with you?" Ethan snarled at her.

"Nothing is wrong with me," she replied. "I just think we're all a little old for this high school routine."

"Weird being around me?" Ethan asked, nodding as if he'd answered his own question.

"Come on, E," Jeff chided. Slurred. Slurred and chided. "She's cool."

And yet Liz noticed Jeff looking at her out the corner of his eye. Oh, yeah, he was discreet. In fact, it felt like they were all looking at her—Hannah, Jeff, Ethan-ex-boyfriend-asshole-of-the-universe, even Jordan, looking at her and wondering if she'd make a scene. She wouldn't. She might up and get the hell out of Dodge, but she wouldn't make a scene. She hadn't known Ethan would be here and, in her opinion, it had been a low thing to do. Hannah was going to catch hell about it tomorrow. But she would deal with it calmly tonight. Her goal was to be so calm and cool, she'd be proud of herself tomorrow.

This was supposed to have been a fun Saturday night out with the girls—just herself, Hannah, Jordan, and Susan. But Susan no-showed and Liz had arrived at the Rawls Mansion to find Ethan and

Jeff with the others, waiting for her. She ought to have just left right then, but instead, she let herself be pressured into Jeff's light blue eighty-four Caddy, and the drinking had begun.

The infuriating thing was how her girlfriends had all insisted on her coming out tonight. She'd been depressed lately and had gotten used to staying in on weekends. It wasn't because of Ethan or because of any guy. Mostly, she stayed home because she hated the singles scene. A night spent barhopping always left her feeling even more empty and alone than she'd felt before the night out. It would have been nice having a guy she cared about in her life but, so far, they'd all proved to be self-absorbed, self-important, and utterly consumed with the pursuit of money.

Then there was work, which took up a majority of her life. She worked in the admissions office of a large, glossy retirement village, yet for all the gloss, the one factor that was constant and inescapable was that there were a lot of lonely, unwanted older people in the world. She felt sorry for them, and yet she couldn't help feeling that they had done a lot more living than she had. Not just in terms of years, but quality and passion.

Passion. That was what was missing from her life. Her theory, and she'd been working on it for a while now, was that there was no real danger to people's lives anymore, which meant no noble causes to get caught up in. Instead, people were caught up in a quest for wealth and possessions. God, but she wanted some passion in her life!

"This'll be fun," Jordan said, sending Liz a *sorry, I know this is screwed* look. "The haunted grounds are incredible."

Liz was determined to lighten up. Really, there was no reason for her to feel uptight. She'd broken up with Ethan after he was caught screwing around. It was crazy how he was playing the rejected boyfriend and she was being made to feel guilty. Of course, the guilt may have been in the pretense, since she'd wanted out of the relationship for a while before he was caught. She hadn't known how to go about it, but that had all changed the night she brought take-out over to his apartment unannounced and found him bodily engaged with two slightly overweight females she'd

never seen before in positions she'd never seen before. It had turned her stomach and she'd dropped the food, uttered a benign, "Oh, my God!" and ran out.

Among other things, it was a wasted twenty-eight dollars for takeout. She had since accepted his apology but that was as far as she'd go. There would be no getting back together again. Truthfully, her reaction that night had been over-dramatic and self-serving. She'd looked all hurt and devastated at the betrayal when he'd never had the power to do that to her. She'd never cared that much. Maybe she just couldn't care that much about anything or anyone anymore. Not after the rejections she'd faced in her life.

"I heard he spends a half million dollars on this," Hannah said.

She was referring to Mr. Leroy Rawls, the multi-millionaire who owned the mansion, and who allowed the use of his property for the Haunted Grounds every year.

"Even if he does, he makes it back," Jeff replied. "Eight bucks a head, like a thousand people come every night for at least a month."

"He doesn't make any money on it," Liz corrected him. She was feeling edgy and pinned in, especially as Jeff began smoking another cigarette. "The proceeds all go to charity. Are we about ready?"

Hannah was mixing rum and Cokes in plastic cups and making them much too strong. "One more," she said, holding out her hand for Liz's cup. "Pass me your cup."

"No thanks, I'm fine," Liz said.

"She wouldn't want to get out of control or anything," Ethan said. "Not with me around. Can't have that."

"It's not a control issue, Ethan," Liz retorted.

"Baby, your whole life is a control issue. You have to be in control. Why do you think—"

"So, are we going or what?" Jordan spoke up, interrupting the tirade. "The ghosts and goblins await us." She opened her door and got out, and Liz clamored out right behind her. "Did you know he was coming?" Jordan asked, when they'd put a little distance between themselves and the others.

“No, and I’m so pissed at Hannah,” Liz fumed, keeping her eyes on the walk in front of her. The grounds of the mansion were lush and well tended but there were many ancient trees with raised roots.

“He’s trying to get to you, Liz. Don’t let him.”

Liz took a couple of breaths. Jordan was right. *And what the hell had happened to calm and cool*, she silently chided herself. “Let’s just forget them and have fun,” Jordan said cheerfully. “This place is beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Even with the crowds and the tacky decorations,” Liz agreed. The mansion, built in 1818, boasted more than a hundred rooms, so she’d been told. It was a private residence, but they occasionally had tours. She’d never had the twenty-five dollars to blow on it but one of these days she was going to go.

“Hey, wait for us,” Hannah said, coming up behind them. “Have you been here before?” she asked Jordan.

“Yeah, last year. It’s cool. There’s a sound system set up and fog machines, ghosts, witches. There’s a kitschy quality about all of it—”

“A what?” Jeff asked.

“Phony but in a fun, made-up way. You know what I mean?”

They approached the ticket gates and got in line. “You think the rain will hold off?” a woman in the next line fretted.

“Who cares?” Ethan asked as he stepped in front of Liz. “We’re not sweet enough to melt, are we, Lizzy?”

Distant thunder rumbled and a light breeze blew. It was going to rain. It was probably going to pour.

“I can smell rain,” a man spoke up behind Liz.

Somehow she’d ended up in the back of her group. She turned around to face the man. “Me, too,” she said. “I always love that smell.”

“Me, too,” he replied. He was probably sixty but still attractive with neatly coifed steel-gray hair. He was holding the hand of a girl who looked to be about eight or nine. She looked tired and had leaned her head against him.

"Yes, I can always smell it," the man said pleasantly. "That and my elbow gets a twinge of arthritis."

It was past ten o'clock. "It's kind of late for you, isn't it?" Liz asked the girl.

She grinned shyly. "Everybody in my class has seen it," the girl replied.

"That's the reason we're here," the man said. "It sure wasn't my idea and her mother is likely to have a fit." The man and girl exchanged a look. "You're going to get Grandpa in trouble, you know."

The girl grinned even wider and Liz turned back around. The obvious love and affection between grandfather and granddaughter was both sweet and acutely painful to witness.

"At least the line's moving fast," the man said.

Liz blinked, realizing her group was not in front of her.

"Come on, Lizzy Borden," Ethan called, holding up tickets. "Got 'em for everybody."

Liz made a sound of disgust, hating the attention he'd drawn to her. It was also embarrassing that they'd cut in line in front of everyone else.

"Was he kidding about your name?" the man behind her asked.

"It's Gordon," Liz said. "Elizabeth Gordon. He thinks he's funny."

"That's a beautiful name," the man said, smiling at her.

"Thank you. You two have fun," Liz said as Hannah came back for her, grabbed hold of her arm, and pulled her away. It was irritating, and Liz had a strong desire to give Hannah a big ole shove. Instead, she merely shook off her hand. "Do you mind?"

"Don't be mad, Liz," Hannah said under her breath. "Okay? Please?"

Liz just shook her head. This was not the time to get into it.

The first hour was entertaining, worth the eight dollar admission price. But then the wind started in and so did Ethan. "So, you seeing anyone?" he asked.

"No, I'm not, and I really don't want to talk about it."



“You miss sex?” Ethan asked, his eyes narrowing. “I mean, not that you were ever all that into it.”

She glared at him and walked faster to put some space between them.

“There’s still ten different trails,” Jordan called out excitedly. She was so cute, the way she got excited about things. She was small with short blonde hair and enormous brown eyes that gave her an air of innocence that allowed her to get away with a lot. “Dead Man’s Trail, Execution Row, Bloody Mary’s Mile—”

“I don’t see the point in going down Dead Man’s Trail,” Ethan said loudly, looking very pointedly toward Liz. “I already know what that feels like.”

Everybody had to speak up to be heard over the wind. It was obvious they didn’t have long before it began pouring. The distant thunder wasn’t so distant, and there were occasional flashes of lightning from the storm that raged several miles away.

Jeff gave a loud whoop. “Let it rain, let it pour.” He then produced a flask from his pocket and drank from it.

A strange moaning sound from the ground took Liz by surprise, but not nearly so much as Jordan grabbing her arm and screaming due to the fact that a corpse had just touched her leg. “It grabbed me,” Jordan cried, doing a little jig.

Jeff and Ethan found it hilarious.

Thunder boomed, and seconds later, a flash of lightning splintered the night sky.

The corpse popped up behind them. “Thunder and lightning, folks,” he said. “That’s it.” Then he turned and broke into a jog.

“Not yet it’s not. I want to see the headless vixens,” Jeff complained.

Wind suddenly whipped Liz’s hair straight back. “I think we better go,” she called to the others. The hanging lanterns that lit the paths were swaying crazily. Some had already blown out.

“I think so, too,” Hannah agreed. “They’ll probably give out rain checks.”

“Oh, come on,” Ethan said. “Don’t be such skirts.” And he started off with Jeff. Hannah looked at the girls, who were

hesitating, and the guys, who had gone on, then ran after them yelping, "Wait, guys. Wait for me."

"Hey!" Jordan yelled after them, but they were out of sight. "Jerks!" she complained. "Want to turn back?" she asked Liz.

They heard the rain before they felt it. Thunder not only boomed but it rolled and echoed, and lightning lit the woods up in a blinding, incandescent way. Liz had been poised to answer affirmatively, but the onslaught of rain caught them both by surprise.

They took off at a flat out run, but then had to slow. It was not easy to retrace their steps in the rain and watch the path for obstructions. When they came to a fork, they stopped. The rain had slowed after the initial downpour and the wind had died down for the moment. "We go right, right?" Jordan called.

Liz frowned. "Or left." She suddenly laughed. It was so stupid fighting the wind and rain. They were drenched and probably lost. She'd have tangles that would take an hour to brush out, but so what? This would be one All Hallow's Eve they would never forget.

"Come on," Jordan urged and she broke into a jog again.

Liz glanced behind her to see if the others were coming, but something else caught her eye, something colorful, hanging, swaying to and fro beyond the path. She held a hand over her eyes and squinted. She couldn't make it out, but it was giving her a creepy feeling in the pit of her stomach. She turned and looked for Jordan, but she was already out of sight.

"Jordan," she called anyway. Her voice sounded small in the wind. There was no response. Liz looked back to the slightly swinging object. She had to see. It was probably just one of the haunted displays, but why was it off the path?

She swallowed and began picking her way through the dense thicket of trees. The good news was that the trees mostly deflected the rain, except where water had collected in leaves and came down in fat, cold drops. After several yards of black forest, she came to an opening, but there were no lanterns. It took a flash of lightning to reveal the oak tree with men hanging from it.

She screamed and turned to run back the way she had come, but her foot immediately caught on something, and she tripped and fell. Her knee encountered something sharp and she cried out again from pain and fury. How could anyone create a display so real and graphic and horrible? Great special effects were one thing, but that kind of reality was something else altogether. It was sick.

Lightning flashed above again and, like an idiot, she turned back to see if any of the hanging men were coming after her. To her surprise, they were gone. What had it been, a hologram or something? Only one man was there and he wasn't hanging. He was standing, looking at her, confused and frightened and flat-out gorgeous. Obviously, an actor. Had he gotten lost in the woods, or was he part of the hanging men display?

It wasn't raining anymore, she realized. No, it wasn't raining in the clearing. She could still hear the rain falling around her. But in the clearing, there was only moonlight, fog, and him. Strange. So strange. The fog was rising from the ground, obscuring everything. A fog machine? Part of the show? Her heart was hammering like crazy. The man would be gone in a moment and she would convince herself he'd just been a vision.

But he wasn't. His gaze was so intense she could feel it. She scrambled to her feet, keeping her eyes locked on the eyes of the stranger as best she could in the moonlight.

She crept forward a few inches until a barrier of freezing cold mist halted her. The fog was dense, gray and closing in. He'd be gone in a moment and forever.

Liz heard Jordan calling her name behind her, then thunder drowned out the sound of her voice. The stranger lifted his hand, as if beckoning her to him. His eyes never left hers. Bolts of brilliant lightning lit everything, even the particles of glistening silver mist in the air. In a split second of desperate impulsiveness she had never felt before, she rammed her body into the cold and felt a pulsing of electricity through her body. Instantly, she knew that she'd been hit by lightning. She was falling, cold, dead. Then there was nothing.

## Chapter 5

*October 30, 1783*

Wesley approached the woman slowly. Whatever had just occurred was by far the strangest thing he had experienced, and he had experienced a lot. One minute he'd been in a sound sleep, and the next he'd been torn from that sleep by a terrified scream. He'd sat up, his hand reaching for his musket, and blinked in confusion at a raging storm just beyond the trees. A storm that didn't touch him.

He'd seen the woman then, staring at him from the trees. The sight of her made his breath catch. Even wet and frightened, she was lovely, but that wasn't it. There was something different about her. In fact, there was something different about everything. The area, this area he knew so well, had been different. He could have sworn he'd caught a glimpse of a massive building on the hill above, but it was possible he had imagined that with his attention so riveted on the pretty stranger. Where had she come from, and what had so frightened her?

Now, he crouched beside her and touched her. She was cold, but she was breathing. "Miss?" He gave her a gentle shake, but she didn't rouse. Who was she and why had he reacted to her so strongly? Was it simply the strangeness of the moment? It had been otherworldly. They had stared at one another, transfixed, then a fog had risen between them. He hadn't wanted her to disappear and she'd stood up, as if she'd understood his wish. *Come to me*, he'd commanded silently. *Come!*

And she had, through a flash of light so intense, he'd been blinded for moments after.

She was thoroughly wet. No wonder she was cold. He rushed back for his blanket, knowing he had to get her warm. *How odd this is*, he thought as he returned to her. He hadn't planned to stay the night in this place, but the absolution he so desperately craved had not come and somehow, he hadn't been able to make himself leave. And now he had this woman and this mystery to contend with.

\* \* \* \*

Her arm ached and she tried to shift, realizing she'd been sleeping on it. The next realizations came flooding all at once. She was lying next to someone...a man...on the *ground*—outside—

Her eyes jerked open, and it was as if she'd been awoken from the most vivid and horrible of nightmares. Her heart was pounding and her senses were screaming that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

She disturbed the man sleeping next to her and his eyes opened. For a moment, he looked as confused as she felt, and he raised up on an elbow and studied her. She sat up and pulled back as much as possible, given the swaddling of blanket they were wrapped in.

"You're all right," the man said.

He was incredibly beautiful. *No man should be that beautiful*, she thought, especially first thing in the morning. The memories came like bullets—the haunted grounds, rum and Coke, Ethan and Jordan and the others, the storm. "Wha—W-where am I?"

The air was cold, and pain throbbed at the top of her head. "Oh, my head," she moaned. "What happened?"

The man got up, and cold air further assaulted her. She pulled the blanket back around her and watched as he walked toward a small mound of things on the ground near a large black horse. The beautiful man had a limp and bizarre clothing, a loose white shirt with large, almost puffy sleeves and tight brown breeches that ended just below the knee. He started back to her with a canteen, which he offered.

She accepted it, noting that his eyes were a deep sapphire blue. “Do you have any pain relievers?”

He cocked his head as if he didn’t understand her words.

“Tylenol, Motrin, aspirin?” she clarified. “Anything?”

“I don’t understand,” he replied in a measured tone that made her think he was trying to sum up if she was crazy or not.

Her heart began pounding again, harder than before. “If this is a joke—”

“A joke?”

“Are you an actor? Was this all some special effects that went awry?”

He could only shake his head. He didn’t understand what she was talking about. He watched as she threw off the blanket and got up, the fingers of one hand pressed to her temple. He had realized she was pretty, but not how pretty. Not only that, but there was a vibrancy about her that was uncommon and exhilarating. He’d noticed her strange clothing, of course, but it was rather startling to see the way she moved about in the long breeches.

“Where’s the mansion?” she asked. It was more to herself than to him at first, but then she turned back to him and thrust both hands on her hips.

“I don’t know what mansion you are referring to, Miss, but I can assure you that I did not take it.”

She took a step toward him, panic mounting. “Rawl’s Mansion. The *mansion*. Built in 1818 or whenever.”

“1818?” he said softly. Again, that tone, as if he was trying to decide if she was crazy. If *she* was crazy!

He had known something tremendously strange had occurred. He’d felt it. And he had caught a glimpse of a building in the distance. He swallowed, then raised his chin slowly, determined to stay calm. “Sit,” he said, gesturing to the blanket. “Let’s both sit and discuss the matter calmly. Shall we?”

Sitting seemed a good idea since her knees had turned to jelly, and she suddenly felt nauseous with fear. She walked back toward him, feeling dizzy. She must have looked unsteady as well, because

he stepped forward, took her elbow, and guided her back to the blanket.

“What’s your name?” he asked, gently.

“Elizabeth Gordon.”

“They call you Liz,” he said.

“How did you know that?”

“Someone called your name—”

They stared at one another for a long moment. These were no special effects. This was real. He was real. “What year is it?” she asked. It came out just above a whisper.

“1783.”

She paled so dramatically; he reached out for her. “Miss Gordon?”

She didn’t realize she’d grabbed hold of his arm but she had, and still the world spun.

“What time were you from?” he asked.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “2004.”

Had she been watching, she would have seen his color drain as well. There was no wondering if it was the truth, not for either of them. They’d lived through the moment, the transition. Not only that, but they’d each made a choice and willed it to happen.

She opened her eyes and looked at him again. “I can’t be here,” she said simply.

“You are here,” he stated calmly.

“Am I still in North Carolina?”

He shrugged. “Either north or south.”

She frowned. “How can you not know?”

“Well, it’s not like there are signposts. It’s wilderness.”

“Wilderness?” What was he talking about? The mansion was only a few miles from Charlotte. “Then why are you here?”

“I’m here because—” He hesitated. “It was a battlefield.”

“A battlefield?”

“Yes.”

The image of men hanging from the tree came flooding back and she gasped, not having recalled it before. “There were men

hanging—” she turned and pointed to the oak tree. “There, in that tree.”

“W-what?” he stammered. “What did you say?”

“I saw them and...I screamed. I started to run away, and that’s when I tripped and fell. I had this feeling,” she shivered remembering it, “I was being watched. That they were coming after me, like zombies or something. I turned back around, but they weren’t there anymore. That’s when I saw you.” She stopped speaking because of the shock etched upon his features. “What is it? Why do you look like that?”

“There were no men hung last night,” he said. His voice was raspy and strange.

“I swear I saw them. Most of them—”

“Were in uniform,” he supplied.

“Yes.” Red ones, military...Redcoats! British! God, he was talking about the Revolutionary War! She swallowed. This was unreal. This was either the greatest *Candid Camera* moment ever, she was in the twilight zone, or it was real. “Were they your friends?” she asked quietly.

He looked as horrified as if she’d grown two heads. “Friends? Of course not. They were the enemy!” He looked off and she saw a muscle working in his jaw. “But they’d surrendered,” he continued. “They shouldn’t have been hung.”

So he knew about it. He’d been there. “But your accent—” she tried to venture carefully.

“My what?”

She could tell she was angering him but she didn’t understand why. “Are you not British?”

He glared at her. “I am a patriot! I am Major James Wesley Hale of the Continental Army.”

“Okay. Hey, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to offend you,” she said quickly, sticking up a hand. “I was judging by your accent and, for your information, the British are no longer our enemy. They’re our ally.”

“Our ally?”



“Yes.” She drew a breath to explain but the gulf between them was too enormous. How could she begin to explain the events of well over two hundred years? “I’m sorry,” she repeated. “Okay? I swear, I did not mean to offend you.”

He nodded stiffly.

“James, is it?” she tried again.

“Wesley,” he said. Then, “Wes.”

“Well, Wesley, what the hell are we going to do? How am I going to get back?”

“Get back? To 2004?”

“Yes.”

“Miss Gordon—”

She sighed, already knowing what he was going to say. “It’s Liz. No one has ever called me Miss Gordon. Although there is a certain charm to it.”

“I don’t think there is any going back to where you came from,” he stated. “Think of the impossibility of it. Have you ever heard of anyone going either back or forward through time?”

“They make movies about it all the time,” she replied. As soon as she’d uttered the words, she realized how stupid a thing it was to say. She couldn’t talk to him. Not really. They had no common point of reference.

He shook his head. “And what are—”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, the panic returning full force. “It was a stupid thing to say.” She couldn’t stay here, not in 1783.

He watched her struggle, panic, and think. “I have friends nearby. We’ll return there. We’ll just have to—” he looked her over, “hide you until we can get some proper clothing.”

She looked down at her faded blue jeans. She wasn’t dressed right for 1783. In fact, she didn’t even know how to dress for 1783. And she had no money! New thoughts and fears began crowding her brain.

“It will be alright, Elizabeth,” he said.

“No, it won’t. I don’t know how to exist in 1783,” she admitted. Tears suddenly filled her eyes. “You cannot possibly understand how different my life is from life in this time. I don’t

know how to do anything women now know how to do. And I have no money, not that my money would have even been acceptable here. I mean, our money's all different now. Not that I know anything about your money."

She was talking very fast and she was obviously working herself into a state. "Elizabeth!" he said sharply.

She drew a breath and looked into the deepest blue eyes she'd ever seen. She would have sworn they were color contacts—had there been such a thing in the eighteenth century?

"It will be all right," he told her. "I promise you that."

"How?" she asked. "How can you promise that?"

For a moment, he was stumped at how to answer her. Then it came to him. "I have a home of my own. I never go there but if nothing else, if you wanted, I could offer you residence there. There's a staff. I can promise you'll be taken care of."

*Why would you do that?* she wondered, but she couldn't voice it. She needed the reassurance. She couldn't risk his withdrawing the offer.

"We should go," he said, standing. "I didn't come prepared to stay, and my friends will be beside themselves."

She had never felt so helpless in her life. She stood and watched as Wes picked up the blanket, shook and folded it—everything, matter-of-factly. He walked to his horse, put the blanket on its back, then began saddling it.

"What's your horse's name?" she asked as she followed after him. Her voice sounded childish and frightened, and she almost cringed to hear it.

"Halcyon."

"Oh." She found herself nodding like an idiot. She stopped herself, pressing a hand to the back of her neck. "It's a male horse?"

"A stallion, yes."

Slowly, she walked forward to stroke the horse, but withdrew when his head came at her.

"Are you afraid of horses?" he asked.

"Uh, not really afraid. I've just never really been around them."

He frowned in puzzlement. "Never been around them?"

"No."

"How is that possible?"

"It's not how we get around anymore. I've always wanted to learn to ride, though. I just never had the chance. It wasn't my life, if you know what I mean."

He raised his eyebrows but didn't reply. It was obvious he had no idea what she meant. Wes lifted the horse's head and spoke directly to him. "Halcyon, this is Miss Elizabeth Gordon."

Just as though he understood the words, Halcyon turned his head to her, then back to his master.

"You may call her Liz," Wesley continued. "She doesn't care to be called Miss Gordon, although it does have a certain charm to it."

Liz smiled at the unexpected moment of levity, and the sight of it gave Wes an unexpected lift.

She got her nerve up and stroked the stallion. He was so big, it was intimidating, especially when he sniffed her. "Hello, Halcyon," she said, trying to appear calm. "Don't listen to him. I think I like being called Miss Gordon after all. It's just going to take some getting used to."

"Am I still exempt?" Wes asked.

The look he gave her made her heart skip a beat. "Yes, of course. But—"

"What is it?" he asked, when she faltered.

"What will we tell people? How are we going to explain—"

Wes considered, then admitted, "I don't know, but we'll come up with something."

He mounted first then vacated a stirrup, extended his arm, linked it with hers, and pulled her up behind him. It was scary, and she wrapped her arms around him more tightly than she meant to.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She loosened her grip a little. "Sorry. Yeah, I'm fine."

He grinned and spurred the horse on faster than was necessary, and enjoyed the feel when she tightened her hold again.

He rode fast and hard and Liz did not find it enjoyable, although it did get less scary with each passing mile. When she saw the white Georgian-Palladian plantation, and he told her it was their destination, she was both relieved enough to cry and impressed enough to be frightened all over again. "It's beautiful," she said.

The feel of her warm breath on his ear gave Wes a thrill.

"It's like a southern plantation," she said, both charmed and awed.

"It is a plantation," he replied. "They grow sugar and cotton."

A sudden urge to giggle came over her and she worked hard to stifle it. It was just nerves—and the unreality of the situation. He went a long, back way around the plantation and stopped in a grove of trees, dismounted, and tied Halcyon's reins to a limb. "I'll come back for you shortly," he said to the horse.

She found the stirrup and dismounted, although not very gracefully. There was a skill to riding, mounting and dismounting, and she did not possess it. She felt his hand on her back as she touched ground, but then it was gone in an instant. Her back, legs, and rump were sore immediately, and she wasn't sure she could walk.

"Follow me," he said, oblivious to her plight, and started off, skirting through the trees. "This is the Nordstrom Home," he said as he hesitated at the clearing and looked around for sight of anyone. "My friends, John Paul and his wife, Maggie. You're close to Maggie's size, which is good. Come on," he urged as he started for the house.

For a man with a limp, he was capable of moving very quickly, and she had to jog to keep up with him. They went in a back entrance and immediately went up a small, dark staircase. After the bright daylight, Liz felt blind.

"Wait, please," she whispered, trying to keep her bearings and keep from toppling either up or down the narrow steps.

"Give me your hand," he said quietly. His voice in the darkened staircase gave her a thrill, and she felt her body react. She

reached out and touched his arm, and he took hold of her hand. His was warm and callused.

At the top of the staircase, he paused to make sure the hallway was clear. There was sufficient light to see but he still held onto her hand and she was glad of it. He opened the first door to the right and pulled her in, and only then did he let go of her.

He looked around the room and apparently found it to his satisfaction. "I have to go back and see to my horse and then I'll speak with my friends."

She nodded. Her throat felt too tight to speak. It was childish, but she didn't want him to go.

"Don't go anywhere," he told her. "Lock the door and don't let anyone in."

She suddenly realized she was nodding at everything he said and she stopped, placing a hand behind her neck.

He hesitated only a moment longer, then left. She followed him to the door and turned the small brass key in the lock. She took a couple of shaky breaths, then turned back to face the room. "Oh, my God," she whispered. "This is unreal."

## Chapter 6

“I was worried as hell!” John Paul blustered.

“Something’s happened,” Wes said.

John Paul opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again and looked his friend over. Something was different with him. “What? You found peace and absolution at long last?”

“Where’s Maggie?”

John Paul frowned. “Why?”

“Get her. Please. You both have to hear this.”

“Wes—”

“Please!”

John Paul drew breath to argue but changed his mind, shook his head, and stomped off to get his wife.

\* \* \* \*

The room was lovely and feminine in shades of light blue and white. Liz walked around it slowly, noting the ladies’ desk and its delicate accoutrements. She fingered the sheer white canopy that curtained the large bed and saw the full-length mirror.

She walked to it, startled by her appearance. She was a mess. She hand flew to her disheveled hair and she tried combing it with her fingers, which did little to improve it. She was mortified that the best looking, sexiest man she had ever encountered had been looking at her like *this*. He had to think she was hideous. And she was!

Her makeup had faded, except for her mascara, which had smudged badly beneath her eyes. She started to lick her finger, then it occurred to her how long it had been since she washed her hands, so instead she attempted to spit on the end of her finger.

Not having a talent for spitting any more than she had a talent for riding, the spit ended up half on her fingertip, half on the knuckles of her other three fingers, and a little on her chin. Frustrated and thoroughly disgusted with herself, she swiped at the smudges until she had to concede that the effort was futile. She was a mess.

A sudden exhaustion came over her and she sat on the floor in front of the mirror. The rug was surprisingly soft, and she was tempted to lie back and sleep. *I am sitting on the floor in a plantation house in 1783.* She closed her eyes. *And I know little or nothing at all about the American Revolution.* She laid back and extended her arms out from her body. “It’s because I was a shit student,” she muttered to herself. *I never tried, because no one cared if I tried. I only made it through college to spite the Gordons.*

What did Jordan and the others think had happened to her, she wondered. Had they called the police? Were they still looking? What *had* happened?

*The Impossible.*

But she was here, so it wasn’t impossible. She’d taken a step or two and crossed back over two hundred and twenty-one years. Impossible, but not—

\* \* \* \*

Maggie blinked, then looked from Wesley to John Paul and back to Wes again. Her hand was pressed to her throat; she always did that when she was overwhelmed. She was too astonished to speak.

John Paul looked grim. “You say she saw men hanging, then they weren’t there?”

Wes waited. He knew his friend well.

“It’s a trick,” John Paul said. “Others knew about those men, Wesley.”

“It’s not a trick,” Wes stated.

“And she claims to be from a future time?”

Wes sighed. He knew what was coming.

“From the future! No one comes from the future,” John Paul continued.

"I can't explain it but it did happen, just as I told you. And I'm starving," he changed the subject abruptly.

"I'll see to some food," Maggie said, relieved to have something to see to.

"Maggie," Wes said, stopping her before she sailed from the room. "Elizabeth needs something to wear."

"Really?" John Paul challenged. "What's wrong with what she's wearing?"

"Nothing, apparently, in the time she came from. I think you'd find it rather shocking."

"I'll see to it," Maggie assured Wes, and she hurried out.

"You know as well as I do how many women are after you," John Paul started in again. "This one has come up with a clever approach, I'll give her that."

Wes shook his head. "At least meet her before you condemn her. I think you'll change your opinion."

"Highly unlikely," John Paul retorted.

Wes shook his head and grinned. "Unlikely is nothing, my friend. I've just seen the impossible."

"Impossible my skinny white hind end," John Paul growled. "I need a drink," he said, glaring at Wes as if it were his fault.

"Well, have one."

"I will!" John Paul strode to the side bar and pulled the stopper off a carafe of port in a dramatic fashion. He then turned over two glasses and set each down with a bang on the polished marble sideboard and poured.

"I don't recall saying I wanted one," Wes teased.

John Paul snapped his head up at him. "Who said I was pouring you one?" He held up a glass in each hand. "That ridiculous story you told requires more than the usual libation."

Wes grinned as John Paul walked back toward him and handed him a glass. "Thank you."



Rather than reply, John Paul harrumphed and downed his drink.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie went to the kitchen first to order that the morning meal be served as quickly as possible, then went upstairs to find their guest. The tale Wes had told was mind-boggling and she preferred not to dwell on it for the moment. The simple fact of the matter was, he'd brought a guest here and that guest needed assistance. That was all she needed to know.

She reached the guestroom where he'd installed her and knocked. Within a few moments, she heard the key in the lock. Then a tentative sounding voice asked who it was.

"Maggie Nordstrom," she replied.

The door opened and a woman stood before Maggie in the strangest clothing she had ever seen, long breeches and a high-neck top. It was so strange that Maggie's jaw dropped momentarily. The clothing was fitted perfectly but in a style and fabrics she'd never seen before. In a moment's time, Maggie knew Wes's tale was true—too bizarre to ever reveal to another living soul, but true. The woman was very attractive with light brown hair and pale green eyes, though, at the moment, she looked thoroughly exhausted.

"Hello," Liz said.

Maggie realized she'd been staring. "Hello, Miss Gordon. May I come in?"

Liz stepped back. "Oh, of course. I'm sorry."

"You've nothing to apologize for," Maggie said, stepping in and closing the door behind her.

"It's Elizabeth," Liz said. She immediately wondered why she'd called herself that. She never identified herself as Elizabeth.

"I've ordered that breakfast be served as quickly as possible. I'll see to some clothing for you," Maggie said slowly, not knowing exactly how to broach the subject. "Wes said you were taller but you're not too much."

Liz shook her head and smiled. They were, in fact, very close to the same size. Maggie seemed as kind as could be. There was no judgment lurking in her big, brown eyes, just compassion.

"What else do you need?" Maggie asked.

"I really need to wash up."

"Would you like a bath?"

"Oh, yes," Liz said enthusiastically.

"I'll see to it. I'll be back in a short while with a dressing gown and some other things you'll need." She turned and started out.

"Thank you," Liz said.

Maggie turned back. Elizabeth looked at a complete loss. Of course, what she'd apparently been through was incomprehensible. "We're very happy to have you with us." She got a relieved smile in response and returned it. "I'll be back shortly."

\* \* \* \*

Maggie was as good as her word. She returned on her first trip with a beautiful, flowing ivory silk dressing gown, a brush and comb, tooth powder, and scented soaps. "Here," she said, pulling a folding screen out from a back corner of the room. "You can undress here. We have a bathing room and the tub is being filled. I'll take you there in a moment."

Liz quickly slipped behind the screen and began removing her clothes.

"I haven't told the servants you're here yet," Maggie said. "I thought we'd get you dressed and ready first."

"I guess I should hide my clothes?"

"I think that's wise," Maggie agreed. "May I see your shoes?"

Liz handed them around the screen. "Here you go."

Maggie compared the size to her own. "Wonderful. Mine should fit you. I'll be back."

Out in the hall, Maggie saw her husband and Wesley approaching. No doubt John Paul was anxious to meet Elizabeth and debunk her story. She held up a hand. "Indisposed, gentlemen. So sorry, but we'll see you in the breakfast room."

"Well, it's ready," John Paul rejoined. "That's what I came to tell you. And it's late."

“Then eat, dear,” she said, sweetly. “We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

John Paul cocked a brow. “Where is she?”

“Preparing for a bath. She’s quite worn out, I think.”

“I’m sure of it,” Wes agreed.

“And do women from the *future* look different?” John Paul asked, shaking his head comically.

Maggie’s smile vanished. She took a breath and squared her shoulders. “Please, watch what you say. I wouldn’t want the servants hearing that. And to answer your question...yes, they do. Their style is utterly different and they speak—” she broke off and looked at Wes. “We’ll have to work on that.”

Wes nodded. He didn’t have to spell out his gratitude. He exuded it, she felt it, and they both knew it.

Maggie walked on and John Paul watched her in disbelief. “Alright,” he conceded to Wes. “You’ve damn well got me curious.”

\* \* \* \*

On Maggie’s second and third trips, she brought clothes, undergarments and shoes. Liz was led to the bathing room, where she found a large wooden tub that sat in the middle of the room. It was filled with warm water, and she stepped in and submerged herself, sighing with pleasure.

She didn’t stay as long as she normally would have because her conscience kept nagging her. Everyone was waiting on her.

“Let’s put your hair up first,” Maggie suggested when she went back to the room, then went to the task, sweeping it up in a simple chignon. “Now, shall I help you with your corset, dear?”

She’d taken the liberty of looking closely at the clothes Liz had been wearing. They’d been fascinating, especially the short corset-type item with straps.

“It’s a bra,” Liz explained moments later. “It supports—” she waved a hand in front of her breasts. “It’s much more comfortable than a corset. I’ll wear that, at least for today, if you don’t mind.”

“No, of course. You do as you wish,” Maggie said.

Liz began dressing and Maggie took the opportunity to ask about the strange, futuristic looking object she'd discovered sticking out from the jacket pocket lying on the bed. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course. Anything."

"What is this?" Maggie picked the strange object up with two fingers, as if it might be dangerous.

Elizabeth stepped out from behind the screen after dressing in the simplest of Maggie's gowns, a pale yellow afternoon gown, and saw Maggie holding her cell phone. Her cell! She'd forgotten she had it with her. Of course, it would never work now. It couldn't possibly. She walked over to where Maggie sat perched on a chair. "May I see it for a moment?"

Maggie handed it over. "Of course."

Liz took the phone and flipped it open. To Maggie's wide-eyed fascination and to Liz's utter shock, it lit up, lime green. Liz hit the call button and held it to her ear. "Nothing," Liz said. Then she shook her head. "I knew there wouldn't be anything. I mean, how could there be?"

"What is it?" Maggie asked.

"It's a cell phone. A way of talking to people who are somewhere else."

Maggie blinked. "Somewhere else?"

"Right next door or another part of the city or even a different country. Well, mine's not an international cell—"

Maggie looked alarmed and Liz stopped speaking.

"What Wesley said, that you'd somehow crossed over from a different time, it's true, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Liz shook her head slowly. "I am the least scientific person on the face of the earth. I have no idea what happened or how it happened. None."

"Did you leave a family behind?"

"No. A few friends, that's all."

“I’m glad you didn’t leave a family,” Maggie said. “That would have been unbearable.”

“But I don’t have a clue as to how to act or dress or what to say,” Liz blurted. “I don’t know how to *be* in 1883.”

Maggie blanched. “It’s 1783, Elizabeth.”

Liz took a breath as if to say something and then changed her mind. “Sorry, yes, I knew that.”

“You must be careful, dear,” Maggie worried.

“It’s probably better for me not to speak,” Liz said quietly.

“You’ll learn what to say and do,” Maggie said gently. “It’s not that difficult. With what you already know—”

“What I know won’t be any use to me now. And what women of this age and time knew and took for granted, I never learned.”

“I’ll help you,” Maggie declared, and it was so genuine that it brought a painful lump to Liz’s throat. “And if we work hard,” Maggie continued. “—you’ll be the perfect lady by the time of the ball.”

“The ball?”

“Yes,” Maggie said, clapping her hands together and rising. “That will be our goal. Now, let’s go downstairs. You must be half starved.”

Liz followed Maggie from the room as she continued making a plan.

“We can tell people that you’re my cousin,” Maggie decided in a clandestine whisper. “Or perhaps you’ll be John Paul’s cousin. He’s from Carolina.”

## Chapter 7

Maggie stepped into the room first, then looked behind her and waited for Elizabeth. The men stood, as a matter of routine, although this didn't feel routine. John Paul narrowed his eyes and set his jaw, and Wes felt a jolt of surprise and irritation as a young woman followed Maggie into the room—until he realized it was Elizabeth.

For a second, he thought Maggie had produced yet another of her women friends to hopefully interest him in. Elizabeth looked so different. She looked lit up and fresh and beautiful. She was *beautiful*. How had he not realized how beautiful she was?

"John Paul," Maggie said, sending Wes a look of recrimination for not doing the introductions, "this is Elizabeth Gordon, your third cousin from... Charles Town, I think."

John Paul looked from Maggie to Wes, who looked dumbstruck, and back to his wife. "My cousin?"

"Of course," Maggie said, calmly, sending him a look. "Surely you remember her, although she's undoubtedly changed a great deal since you last saw her."

John Paul started forward to greet their guest. "Well, don't I feel foolish? But, of course, you're Uncle William's eldest," he said, taking her hand in his.

"Yes," Liz said, barely controlling her relieved grin. "It's so good to see you, John Paul."

"Let's see... Uncle William. Is he still a drinker?"

Liz looked shocked. "Oh, he only drinks alone." She blinked innocently. "Which, I suppose, could be the reason he never comes out of his study."

John Paul grinned. This beauty may have pulled the wool over his friend's and his wife's eyes, but at least she had style and humor about it. And he would find out about her soon enough. "And he married Aunt Virginia, if I recall correctly."

"And had eight daughters," Liz added. "I'm the only one they haven't been able to marry off, so here I am. Mother heard you were planning a ball and—*voila*."

"Enough fun," Maggie said, taking Elizabeth's arm but looking directly at her husband. "We'd like to dine, if you don't mind."

"We already did, as you suggested," John Paul said as he watched his wife lead Elizabeth to the sideboard. He walked over to Wes and said, "I notice you're not saying anything," under his breath.

Wes shook his head and continued staring at Elizabeth. John Paul frowned. What had this woman done to him? He had never seen Wes affected by any woman, no matter how beautiful and desirable she was.

The side doors opened and shut and the maids were circulating with fresh coffee, more fruit, and fresh scones.

Eunice's temperature rose as she saw the way the major was watching the strange woman. She walked right up to him. "Coffee, sir?" she brazenly asked.

"Just set it on the sideboard, Eunice," Maggie told her. She was frowning in consternation. The girl had gotten entirely too close to Wesley and now she lingered, staring up at him in a most inappropriate manner.

It took Wes a moment to come to his senses and realize the stickiness of the spot. "No, thank you," he said, glancing down at Eunice, who had not moved at Maggie's behest.

Eunice turned abruptly, walked to the sideboard, and set the coffee down a bit too roughly to Maggie's way of thinking. Maggie decided she would have to speak to Mrs. Tidwell about it, but then she noticed the housekeeper standing in the back doorway, glaring at her young charge. As if they had silent communication, Mrs. Tidwell looked over at the mistress and gave a terse nod as if to say, *I'll take care of that*. And she would, too. Mrs. Tidwell ran the

house in an excellent and efficient manner. Rudeness or insubordination rarely occurred twice from the same source.

The ladies sat down to eat. Liz paced herself with Maggie, although it took restraint. She had developed an appetite and the food was delicious. What she really wanted to do was to dig in with both hands.

Wes wanted to say something to Elizabeth, but was feeling strangely dumb. He finally found his tongue. "I'll show you around the plantation later, if you're up to it."

"I'd like that," Liz said enthusiastically. Then she wondered how she should have phrased it. Maggie spoke so perfectly and her British accent seemed to add to the impression of perfection.

"December first is a Saturday," Maggie said, looking at John Paul. She'd noticed him looking at Wes oddly and she wanted to draw his attention back to her before Elizabeth noticed it.

"Yes. And?" he asked.

"I'm thinking of a date for the ball, dearest. What do you think?"

"It's fine."

"Mother will have just arrived, so—"

That did it. She had her husband's full attention now. He looked at her and groaned.

"I'm thinking she won't yet be in her full element," Maggie continued. "Do you see the brilliance of my plan? We could have everything arranged. In fact, I may have even mentioned a different date to her." Maggie turned to Elizabeth. "My mother can be quite overbearing, I'm afraid, and she insists on everything being done just so."

"Just as she thinks it should be," John Paul supplied. "When will she arrive?"

"November twenty-eighth," Maggie said. Then she smiled sweetly.

This time, she got a grateful smile in return. "December first should be perfect," her husband agreed.



“Lady Eldridge,” Wesley said. “I thought she said she was never coming back. ‘If King George isn’t good enough for the likes of you filthy colonists, then who am I?’” he quoted.

John Paul made a disgusted sound. “Oh, she’ll always come once a year to torture me.”

Maggie grinned and looked at Elizabeth. “I’m afraid I came with a hefty price attached.”

“I’d face ten Lady Eldridges for you,” John Paul told her fondly. “Perhaps even a dozen.”

“Praise, indeed,” Maggie laughed.

## Chapter 8

Wes led Elizabeth around the grounds slowly because she was unaccustomed to walking in a long gown and the strange shoes. "I'll never get used to this," she told him.

There was a sense of shared intimacy between them he'd never experienced before, and he'd just met her. It was oddly thrilling but utterly foreign to him. "You will."

"Do you think I could slip off these shoes for awhile?"

Everything she said took him aback somewhat, but he tried not to react. He glanced around them. They were between the house and several impressive looking outbuildings and no one was about. "I think we can risk it."

She slipped the shoes off and held them up for inspection, then nodded in confirmation of what she'd been suspecting for an hour. There was absolutely no difference between the right and left shoes. They were exactly alike, perfectly straight. No wonder they pinched.

"What is it?" Wes asked.

"Shoes have improved in the last few hundred years," she replied. He looked off and she felt a moment of regret. She'd done it again. She'd said something wrong.

"I'm sure many things have," he finally conceded.

"Some things haven't," she said quickly. He looked back at her and she hoped she could explain herself. "I think some things aren't as good as they were." She shook her head, realizing she wasn't being clear. "I have to stop doing that, don't I?"

"What?" he asked. "Comparing this with...where you came from?"

She nodded. She studied him as he looked off toward the stables. A muscle was working in his jaw again. Had she made him mad or unhappy?

"Would you like to see the carriage house and stables?" he asked.

"I would."

They began walking again. It was much easier in bare feet. "I will try," she said, "to stop comparing."

"How?" he asked quietly. "I've been trying to imagine stepping back two hundred years in time." He shook his head.

*Oh, Wes, you can't imagine the changes of the nineteenth and twentieth century. How could I ever even begin to explain them?* "Should I call you Mr. Hale? Or Major Hale? In front of others, I mean."

A grin pulled at one side of his mouth. "John Paul and I grew up together. He lived in the village." He turned to look at her and the smile broke all the way through, even touching his dancing blue eyes. "I've probably known you all my life. So given names are perfectly acceptable to use."

His smile had a strange effect on her; it made it difficult to breathe. They walked in silence for several paces until she broke it again. "So, is Lady Eldridge really as bad as John Paul made out?"

Wes considered, frowned comically, then nodded firmly. He was gratified to get a smile in return. "All this was the property of Lord and Lady Eldridge," he told her. "Then Lord Eldridge died, quite suddenly, and Lady Eldridge announced that she'd always hated the God forbidden colonies and that they would return to England immediately. Of course, at that point, she had a small mutiny on her hands because Maggie and her brother, Wilbur, refused to leave. After six or eight years here, this was their home. Wilbur was eighteen at the time, I believe, and Maggie was, oh, twelve or thirteen."

"What happened?"

Wes shrugged. "Lady Eldridge left and the younger Eldridges stayed."

Liz's face flushed from a private pain. "I can't imagine leaving your kids like that. Children, I mean. I can't imagine leaving your children like that."

"I can't either," Wes agreed, quietly.

\* \* \* \*

"Look at him," John Paul said. He was staring out the library window, watching Wes and Elizabeth on the grounds.

"Come away from there," Maggie chided. "What is the matter with you?"

"I've never seen him act like this, that's what. It's not normal. It's not like him at all. It's as if he's bewitched."

"I've never seen him like this either, but—"

"I've known him longer," he interrupted.

"You should be happy for him," she accused.

"I don't trust her," John Paul blurted. "All right? No one comes from the future, Maggie. You know that. Now she's lovely and charming and—"

Out of patience, she went to him, took his hand, and began pulling. "Come with me," she insisted.

"Where?"

"Come!"

\* \* \* \*

The carriage house housed fifteen carriages and sleighs. *Splendid* was the word that came to Elizabeth's mind, which baffled her. When had she ever used the word *splendid* before in her life? "There's so many," she remarked.

"They're John Paul's passion. Most of these are his creations."

"Really?" she said, impressed. "They're so pretty. Could we look at one?"

"Have you never seen one?"

"Not up close. I've seen them in the moo—" she cut herself off. When would she learn when not to speak?

"This is his most recent addition," Wes said, going to a small silver carriage.

Liz followed and peeked inside. The interior had black leather seats and a lush, burgundy velvet. "It's so pretty," she murmured.

Wes was watching her from the opposite side. Women from the future not only spoke with candor and honesty, they moved that way as well. There was no primping and positioning for effect. It was vastly appealing. It was sensual.

“And what’s your passion?” Liz asked. When he didn’t immediately reply, she looked back at him and blushed. She could tell he’d been taken aback by the question. She’d been too blunt.

“I was in the Army, as I told you,” he spoke before she could find her voice and apologize. Did she need to apologize?

“It was just disbanded, you know,” he said.

“Disbanded?” she repeated, confused at the notion.

He nodded. “There’s no need for a Federal Army anymore. A small force will be kept on at West Point and a few other places to guard military supplies and so forth, but I have no interest in being part of that.”

“Oh. What did you do before the war?”

“Do? Nothing. I was seventeen.”

She blinked. Seventeen!

“The rebellion went on for more than nine years. Surely, you know that. It’s your history too, isn’t it?”

She turned to stare back into the carriage, embarrassed that she didn’t know more. “It’s different up close and personal, though,” she hedged. “To think of you at only seventeen years old—”

“I left the day my father died. That very day.” He swallowed, embarrassed by how strained his voice sounded.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“Would you like to see the gardens?”

“Yes, please.”

She walked beside him, utterly self-conscious. These people were all so proper and restrained, and she felt like a blundering fool, big-mouthed, uncoordinated and ignorant. The phrase *love at first sight* kept tormenting her brain for some reason. It was an outdated and absurd notion, no matter how gorgeous and kind and strong Wes Hale was. Twenty-first century women did not believe in love at first sight. There was chemistry, logic and physical

attraction behind 'love,' but there was no such thing as magic. There were no knights on white horses that burst onto the scene to rescue the damsel in distress. *A handsome major on a dark horse had come to her rescue—*

"Is something wrong?" Wes asked. "I mean, other than the obvious?"

"Is there an obvious?" she teased.

"You'll be fine," he assured her.

"Oh, that's right. You promised." She meant it as a teasing remark, but it was no sooner out of her mouth, than she felt a powerful regret. The promise was important and it came with a certain weight and pressure. Damn it, why couldn't she learn to keep her big mouth shut?

Wes wasn't saying anything and she was blushing too much to look at him. She couldn't say anything else now; it would just make matters worse.

"Try not to be so hard on yourself," Wes finally said. "You are among friends."

She crossed her arms and kept walking, keeping slightly ahead of him so that he couldn't see her face, which was and always had been much too easily readable. What was wrong with her? Why had his use of the word 'friends' make her feel an almost painful twinge of pain? The answer, of course, was as obvious as the four words that kept nagging at her, *love at first sight*, but in no way was she ready to accept that. After all, she was a twenty-first century woman.

\* \* \* \*

"Wes has had too much pain and betrayal in his life," John Paul was saying.

"Do you think I don't know this?" Maggie rejoined. She opened the door to Elizabeth's room and shoved him in, closing the door behind them.

"What are you doing?" he asked, uncomfortable at the intrusion. Not only was it inappropriate to go into a guest's room without her consent, it was utterly unlike Maggie. His wife was the

perfect hostess, proper to her core. But she was ignoring him. She walked to the wardrobe, opened it and squatted down.

"Maggie! What are you doing?" He walked closer to pull her up, if necessary. She was removing the floorboard, which revealed the small secret compartment where they'd stored Elizabeth's things. Now, he was fascinated, if still somewhat uncomfortable and nervous about being caught.

Maggie stood with a pile of clothing and handed him one item at a time to inspect.

"What does this prove?" he challenged. "It's unusual clothing. And, I have to tell you, my dear, if I was going to come up with a cock and bull story like the one she came up with, I'd come up with a few bizarre items of clothing or paraphernalia, as well."

Suddenly a bundle of shiny objects was thrust in his face. They were keys of some kind. Oddly shaped keys.

"Car keys," Maggie repeated what Elizabeth had told her. "A car, properly referred to as an autobill, is a means of conveyance that everyone uses where she comes from. It has wheels and travels all by itself."

The keys were unusual looking, still; it proved nothing. He handed them back, clearly unimpressed. "All by itself? Nonsense."

"And this is her cellfo," Maggie said, handing him the small flip phone. He took it in hand, studied it for a moment, then pulled it open. Maggie was gratified to witness his shock at the color that flashed at him. Now, she was getting somewhere. "Through that, which is a common item where she comes from, one can speak with anyone, anywhere."

"Anywhere?" John Paul blustered.

"Yes. You push in a number and—" She shook her head. "I'm not sure how it works, but you can speak with anyone, anywhere. In another home or town. I could have pushed in a certain number or perhaps a sequence of numbers, and spoken to my mother in London, provided she had one like this."

"Then I'm glad they haven't been invented yet," John Paul replied tartly, handing the objects back to his wife.

"John Paul Nordstrom!" she snapped, exasperated with him.

“Oh, all right,” he gave in. He sighed. “I won’t say another word.”

“I suppose I’ll believe that when I *don’t* hear it.”

She refolded the clothing and stowed everything away again. “We’ve hoped Wesley would find someone to care about and we’ve introduced him to everyone we know.”

“And everyone *they* know,” John Paul added.

“Perhaps she’s the right woman for him,” she continued in a softer tone. “He looks at her differently.”

“Yes, I’ve seen.”

“He already feels a responsibility toward her.”

“But do you want him committing himself to someone merely because he stumbled upon her and feels her helplessness?”

Maggie looked up at her husband with a pained expression. “Wesley?”

He started to say something, then changed his mind. Granted, that line of reasoning was absurd. There were too many ways to see her taken care of without getting personally involved. With most any other person, that’s what he would have done.

Maggie stood. “What are you really afraid of?” she asked quietly. “That you’ll lose your friend? That he won’t be here as much if he finds someone to love?”

John Paul frowned. “Don’t be foolish, Maggie.”

Maggie, however, could tell she had him thinking.



## Chapter 9

That night, Liz found a fire burning in the fireplace and candles burning on her bedside table and dressing table. Her bed, too, was turned back. She clutched her arms about herself. It was so strange being waited on, especially by a staff of servants who went about their lives and their work mostly out of sight.

At mealtime, food was there and served. Afterwards, it was cleared away. Sometime during the day, her room was cleaned. If she wanted a bath, the large tub in the bathing room was filled with warm water. There was no running water that she knew of, which meant carrying in water, heating it up, then carrying it up the long flight of stairs. It was strange how it was all done silently, almost as if by magic. But it wasn't by magic. It was by the hard work of servants. And she would have likely been one of them if she had lived in the eighteenth century.

*You do live in the eighteenth century.* "Seventeen eighty-three," she whispered. How? How was it possible?

Maybe the better question was, why hadn't she grieved? She'd lost her former life, all her friends, all the conveniences of the twenty-first century. That was a terrible loss, wasn't it? Why didn't she feel the loss?

She undressed, blew out all the candles, and slipped in between the crisp sheets. She'd been given a nightgown but she was used to sleeping naked. The dancing flames of the fire gave out more light than she was used to, but it was nice, too.

She turned on her side and wondered again what Jordan and the others had thought when she was nowhere to be found. "A mysterious disappearance on Halloween," she whispered. It

probably made the news. They would have flashed her picture on the screen and asked, "Have you seen this woman?" She wondered what photograph they'd used of her. "Disappeared without a trace." That's what they'd say. There were always people disappearing without a trace. Had any of them stepped over into another reality, another time? How was it possible?

She wondered if anyone had informed the Gordons yet. Not that they'd care. Of course, they'd make a pretense of caring. Would they go so far as to have a memorial service for her? Would they cry? The thought left her cold.

She'd been adopted when she was four. Jeremy and Carol Gordon had been the only mother and father she'd ever known. She had good memories of the early years, a general feeling of being happy, but that had all changed when Carol became pregnant when Liz was almost seven. She'd been told she couldn't conceive, so it was quite the shock for all. The addition of Morgan, the *real* Gordon daughter, and of Matthew, three years after that, changed Lizzy's value and relationship to the Gordons. Suddenly, she was an unnecessary burden.

When she was almost eleven, she'd decided she couldn't live with it any longer. They didn't want her so she didn't want them. She schemed an elaborate plan to run away, and one fall evening when the moon was full, she put it into action. She climbed out her second story window and began clambering down the ivy-covered latticework against the house. Big mistake. It gave, she fell and landed on her side, smack dab on a heavy duty iron rake that had blown over.

Liz squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to remember the pain and the blood and her screams that had pierced the night that long ago evening and, unwittingly, her hand traveled to the scar on her side. She'd broken four ribs, and it had taken thirty-six stitches to sew her up.

The weird thing was how things got better for a while after the incident. Everyone seemed to try harder to be nice to her. Even after it wore off, the neglect she received was more polite. Which

was why it was such a shock when, at age fourteen, the Gordons decided that boarding school was the best option for her.

Her ex-boyfriend, Ethan, had once accused her of having an attachment disorder. She'd scoffed it off, telling him he only thought that because it was the paper he had to write for Psych 101, but she'd secretly wondered. Something definitely made her less lovable, maybe even less likable, than most people.

Tears suddenly filled her eyes and spilt over, traveling across the bridge of her nose and soaking into the pillow beneath her head. "Stupid," she chided herself. "Stupid girl."

\* \* \* \*

Eunice knocked one time then walked in without waiting for an answer. Inside, she closed it again and lifted her chin defiantly. "I'm here. Shall I strip naked and bend over your chair?"

Rachel Tidwell was seated at her dressing table, brushing out her long blonde hair. It was graying but it was hard to tell except in a certain light, which, naturally, she tried her best to avoid. Her hair had always been a point of pride for her and, at thirty-eight years of age, it still was. "Would you like to explain to me, first, just exactly what you are up to?" she asked without even bothering to turn from her own image.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Eunice replied coldly.

"Yes, you do, which means you're lying and that's another offense you'll have to be punished for."

"Well, since you live to punish, that should make your night," Eunice retorted. *Go ahead, spank my pretty ass, you old witch. I'll be out of this house sooner than you know.*

Rachel turned to face the recalcitrant young woman. Very pointedly, she looked her up and down and smiled a slow, self-satisfied smile. "I know exactly what you're up to, my girl. I would like to hear you say it, though."

"Say what, exactly?"

Rachel stood. "The answer is yes and hurry up about it."

"What?" Eunice asked, not understanding.

“You asked if you should take off your clothes and bend over the chair and my answer is yes. Or would you rather take care of that lying offense first?”

Eunice swallowed. Suddenly, she wasn’t feeling as defiant as she had been only a moment ago.

Rachel was coming toward her, moving slowly, sensually. “It’s your choice. There is going to be punishment for your insubordination, for lying and for sneaking off to the major—”

Eunice gasped and her jaw dropped. Quickly, she shut her mouth but it was too late. It had only been a guess on Rachel’s part after seeing the way the young woman had behaved in the dining room, but now it was confirmed. She felt a delicious flutter of excitement realizing how the punishment was going to be compounded. “Did you fuck him?” she asked, her eyes narrowing.

Eunice shook her head. “No.”

“I will find out the truth,” Rachel threatened. “And for every time you lie to me, there will be a new and separate punishment.”

“I’m not lying,” Eunice said. She was thoroughly nervous now. “I performed oral pleasure on him.”

“At his request?”

Eunice paused too long, thinking about what the best answer would be, and Rachel continued on. “So, I think we both agree you have three separate offenses to be punished for. Do we agree to that?”

Eunice felt a tremor of fear. Rachel liked her punishments a little too much. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We’ll get to your punishment for lying, first, I think,” Rachel said. “But go on and take off your clothes.”

“All of them?” Eunice asked, her eyes wide. She’d been facetious earlier.

“All of them.”

Rachel walked to a chair, sat, and watched Eunice undress. The girl really was quite spectacular looking. And for all her

outspoken manner and rebelliousness, she'd begun to shake now. Good. Fear always added an element of enjoyment for her.

When Eunice was naked, Rachel rose and gestured for Eunice to follow. She walked to the basin and rolled up her sleeves. "For that very active, lying tongue of yours—soap," she said, holding up a bar of soap. "Open your mouth."

Eunice cringed but obeyed.

"No, wait, I have an idea," Rachel said. "Pretend this is the major's cock and give it, what did you call it? Oral pleasure." She handed the soap to Eunice. "And I want a show of it. Moan. Take it deep in your mouth. Lick it all the way around."

Eunice tried to do as told, but the soap was vile tasting and she was making a terrible face in reaction.

"I really don't imagine it looked anything like that at all," Rachel said after a few minutes when the show began to bore her. "Rinse."

It took several minutes and almost all the water in the pitcher, and even then Eunice tasted soap where it had caked in her teeth. "I'm going to be sick," she complained.

"You should feel sick with that lying tongue in your head. Now, punishment two, for the insubordination. Assume the position, Miss Scroggins."

"I can't. I'm sick."

"Quickly," Rachel warned.

Eunice knew what this meant. She walked to one of the armchairs in the middle of the room and bent over the back of it, grabbing onto the arms as she'd been instructed to do for past offenses.

Rachel stood a moment, enjoying the view, and then went for the instrument she'd decided on earlier, a riding crop.

Eunice obeyed. "Are you using the hairbrush?" she asked.

"Don't speak unless I've asked you a question," Rachel warned as she walked closer. She let the crop fly. It landed across both buttocks and Eunice cried out, surprised at the sudden, stinging heat. "Tell me this, did you want the major to fuck you? And be very careful about lying. We can always do this again tomorrow."

"Yes," Eunice replied.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, Mrs. Tidwell," Rachel said. "Thank you for telling the truth." She raised her arm and brought down the crop again. It made a satisfying swish and smack, and the resultant cry from Eunice was even more satisfying. She struck again and again. She varied the landing places, mostly concentrating on the buttocks but also treating the back of the legs. After a dozen lashes, she stopped and surveyed the red marks she had inflicted. "I think that will do."

Eunice was jerky as she stood back up and turned around to face her tormentor, as required.

"Did it hurt?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"But you deserved it, didn't you?"

Eunice had learned how to answer this. "Yes, Mrs. Tidwell."

"Do you deserve more?"

Eunice squeezed her eyes shut. She hated this question. She hated Rachel Tidwell. "Yes."

"I agree. So, we'll do some more tomorrow when you come back for your other punishment."

Eunice's eyes flew back open. "But—"

Tidwell's expression hardened and the complaint stayed unvoiced. "You're lucky I'm not dismissing you."

Dismissal! That could not happen. She'd have no other way of getting to the major. "Yes, ma'am."

"Tomorrow, when you come back, you must ask me for another whipping. Do you understand?"

Eunice nodded. She understood. It was part of Rachel's sick game.

"If I resist your request, perhaps say you don't really deserve another, then you will insist. Beg if necessary. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mrs. Tidwell."

"Alright then. Kiss me goodnight and you may go."

Eunice wiped her face and stepped up to Tidwell and kissed her on the lips.

It was a closed mouth kiss, which would not do, so Rachel grabbed hold of her face and opened it up. Still, Eunice was resisting. "Give me your tongue," Rachel hissed.

Eunice relinquished and gave into the kiss. Rachel liked it wet and deep, so that's what she gave. She also liked to stroke the ass she'd made hot and sore. One hand went to that task and the other to squeezing Eunice's nipples.

"Do you want to stay?" Rachel asked in her husky voice a few minutes later.

Eunice considered. It might lessen her punishment tomorrow but her ass really was on fire. "The whipping hurt," she complained. "It really hurt."

Rachel smiled. "It will hurt tomorrow, too."

Eunice frowned. "I'm going."

"You've been wanting to be fucked," Rachel reminded her.

"Didn't you hear me? My ass hurts!"

Rachel raised her chin and stepped back. Petulance left her cold. "Then, go."

Eunice turned and went after her clothes. She winced as fabric touched inflamed skin, then turned around in time to see Rachel enjoying the sight. She straightened back up, deciding to carry her shoes. "Goodnight," she said, coldly.

"Sweet dreams," Rachel said. "I know I'll have them. I always do when I have something to look forward to."

## Chapter 10

Liz slept so soundly that she woke the next morning in a fog as to where she was and what had happened. She sat up, tugging the covers around her and breathing deeply, as it all came rushing back.

Her full bladder propelled her out of bed and she squatted over the chamber pot and added to the deposit she'd made the night before. "I miss plumbing," she muttered to herself.

Lessons began immediately after breakfast in the withdrawing room. Deportment and proper language were the first orders of business. "From now on, speak as we speak," Maggie said gently. "—as best you can."

"I shall do my very best," Liz said.

Maggie gave her a warm smile. "Wonderful."

For the next few weeks, the pattern became set; breakfast at half past eight, lessons immediately after lasting until luncheon, which was served at one o'clock, then afternoons were spent on other pursuits. For Maggie, afternoons were spent planning for the ball and making or receiving social calls. Elizabeth spent most afternoons with Wes. She was learning to ride and, together, the two of them explored the rural Carolina countryside.

She was also learning to play chess, although she didn't think she was getting any better at it at all. She'd always been competitive but, sitting across a chessboard from him, whether he was frowning with concentration or smiling in amusement at a move she'd made, was as or more rewarding than any other win she'd ever experienced.

Just to see Wes every day made her heart beat faster. It was childish, she knew. It was a crush, an infatuation. If there had been



such a thing as love at first sight, granted, this would have been it. It was a good thing she didn't believe in the notion, she told herself. Truthfully, Wes was such a gentleman, it drove her crazy. She was used to guys making moves when they wanted something, but Wes didn't attempt any. He didn't touch her in suggestive ways. He didn't even allow his eyes to roam over her body, no matter how low cut her gown or how good she looked in it. Sometimes, when they were preparing to ride or they were walking together, she'd maneuver close to him and hope he'd close the distance. She couldn't go farther than that. Ladies of 1783 did not make advances in any way, shape or form, and she didn't want to risk alienating him.

It was possible he didn't want to get intimate with her—that he was not attracted to her, but that was too awful to contemplate. She knew he liked her, that was obvious, but maybe he only liked her as a friend. What had he said that first day they'd walked the grounds? *You're among friends*. The thought of only being friends caused her to ache. She didn't want to just be friends. Why did he have to be such a damned gentleman?

\* \* \* \*

Maggie was thrilled with Elizabeth's progress and it was high time, she announced one evening over a card game called whist, that they begin introductions. After all, it had been days and days since there had been the least little *faux pas* in her manner or language. Still, Liz jerked her head up at the suggestion, alarmed, her pale green eyes wide with fear.

"Don't worry," Maggie told her. "We'll start by having a small dinner party on Saturday. We'll ease you into it. It will be fine. "You cannot stay hidden forever, dear," she added, glancing up at Wes.

"I don't feel hidden," Liz replied slowly. She considered adding that she'd never felt quite so happy or so at home, but she hesitated too long and the opportunity passed.

"If you feel hidden here," Wes said lightly, "just wait until I take you to Pinegrove."

He said it to get her reaction and he got one. She dropped her eyes and gave a half-hearted smile. He felt crushed with disappointment. Although he'd avoided going home since the war had ended, he'd thought of little else over the last few weeks. Taking Elizabeth home to Pinegrove had become this wonderful dream he'd fantasized and refined. It had been foolish of him to assume she'd want to marry him, bear his children, and live happily ever after, but he'd sometimes thought she might feel as he did. After that reaction, it was obvious he'd been wrong. She'd most likely developed a taste for living close to town.

"You're not thinking of going home soon?" Maggie asked Wes.

John Paul had put his cards on the table and looked up to his friend for his answer.

Wes hesitated. His face and neck had heated from Elizabeth's rejection. "I feel the need to move on," he spoke quietly, keeping his eyes down.

Elizabeth felt tears prick the back of her eyes. *Oh, my God! I'm going to lose it.* "Will you excuse me for a moment?" she asked quickly. She got up and left the room without ever looking up at Wes or anyone else.

Wes felt a flush of anger. Rejection was a bitter pill. Of course, he'd dished it out often enough, perhaps he deserved to get some back in return. He got up and went to refill his glass of brandy. Strange vibrations filled the room and John Paul and Maggie both felt it. They looked at each other helplessly.

\* \* \* \*

Upstairs, Liz paced from one side of her room to the other. Then she tore down her hair. Then she cried. He wanted to be rid of her. He wanted to take her to Pinegrove and leave her. Install her there with the servants, who would tend to her needs. What had he said? *If you feel hidden here, just wait until I take you there.* Then he'd said it was time he moved on.

She dropped on her bed and grabbed all the pillows she could reach and squeezed them with all her might as a deluge of tears streamed down her face. She'd fallen in love with a heartless son of a bitch who couldn't wait to get rid of her.

After her cry left her feeling emotionally and physically spent, she stretched out on the bed and started thinking more rationally. She'd survived rejection before. Hell, she'd been born and bred on it. And the fact of the matter was she wasn't his property to dispose of. She was a strong woman, an independent woman, and she would damn well survive without him.

\* \* \* \*

Over the next several days, Elizabeth was as good a student as ever, but she was uncharacteristically quiet and withdrawn. Wes was acting similarly, Maggie had noticed. She assumed they'd had cross words and would snap out of it soon enough, and so she pushed ahead with her lessons. She was giving instruction in dance now and she'd engaged John Paul to help. They began with the waltz.

"So they don't waltz in the future?" John Paul wondered aloud.

"John Paul," his wife admonished. Then she turned to Elizabeth. "It's a simple one, two, three—" Maggie demonstrated. "Now, you try. One-two-three, one-two-three—"

After an hour's time, Liz looked like she'd been born to waltz, and it was then that Wes returned from town. Watching John Paul and Elizabeth sweep around the room in a fast-paced waltz to Maggie's count, he felt resentment so flood his system, it rocked him, and he turned and left without a word. Only Maggie had seen his brief appearance and she had never stopped counting.

That's what she wanted, Wes fumed—dancing, parties, town life. No wonder she was ignoring him. He couldn't provide those things, and he certainly couldn't dance. Blindly, he went back outside. He passed Eunice without even seeing her, remounted Halcyon, and rode back out, although he had no idea as to where he was going.

## Chapter 11

Eunice was biding her time. She was happily aware of the strain between the major and Miss Gordon, and nothing had made her so happy in a long time. She needed to find just the right moment to revisit Wesley Hale and, when she did, she'd make sure he bedded her. Once that happened, it could either keep happening or, if he resisted her afterwards, she would begin fucking Tom Potter, the gardener's boy. Although he was far younger than she, he was already six foot tall and fine looking. Any child conceived with him could easily be passed for Major Hale's. She'd never really wanted children, but they were the easiest ticket to Pinegrove.

Rachel Tidwell was an obstacle, of course, but she could play the old crow. She'd act all proper and even chagrined for the present, and wait for her opportunity. She certainly didn't need to get caught again. The marks Rachel left lasted days and could be a setback in seducing the major.

Eunice thought of that last session with Rachel and felt herself grow wet and breathless. She glanced around to make sure she was alone in the hall, then ducked into the morning room she was supposed to be cleaning and found a private corner. She lifted her skirt and reached a hand into her knickers, finding the right spot to stroke. Although that last session had left her too sore to engage in any kind of sex for a week, the thought of it was wildly arousing now.

"Since you so wanted to be fucked," Rachel had told her on night two of her punishment, "you will be." She was made to strip naked and was blindfolded, ordered to climb onto the bed, and remain on her hands and knees.

"Spread your legs, little slut," Rachel had crooned.

It was titillating and Eunice soaked herself quickly from anticipation. She was sure, at first, Rachel was going to be either

fingering her or using an instrument of some kind. It was then that she'd become aware of another person in the room.

"Go on," Rachel ordered.

Eunice knew that Rachel wasn't talking to her. She heard heavy sounding footsteps coming toward her. She heard his breathing. Her own breath was held. Where had he been loitering? Behind the screen, she supposed.

"She's ready," Rachel said impatiently.

She felt him behind her at her open pussy. He was pushing inside her and the pressure was great. "Ahhhhhhh," she sang out. She couldn't think straight. Was this a penis inside her? It was huge. He finally shoved all the way in and began withdrawing slowly. Then entering again. "Ohhhhh—"

"How is it?" Rachel asked. "I measured it. It's eleven inches long and a full seven inches around. I never saw one so big. How does it feel? Is it enough for you?"

But Eunice wasn't capable of conversation. The only other time she'd been filled this much was when she took on two men at once. She hadn't realized until then that being taken up the ass took up much of the space usually taken up by the cock inside her pussy. But neither of those men had been that large.

"Faster," Rachel ordered the man. "Harder."

The man began pounding in a regular rhythm now, slamming inside Eunice violently. She was rocked back and forth and it went on and on. Her arms gave out and she tried to collapse onto the bed but the monster man held her hips in place and continued to slam her.

"I love that sound," Rachel cooed. "Your cry, his grunt, that slap of skin, and then the sucking sound as he withdraws."

Eunice had no idea how long the session continued. Even now, she couldn't have guessed. Time ceased to matter. Eventually, Rachel ordered the man to stop. He didn't come in her. "Go, quickly," Rachel told him and he did.

Seconds passed before Rachel allowed Eunice to take off her blindfold and get up. To her surprise, she could hardly move. Her insides felt rearranged and her legs sore from holding the doggie

position for so long. She'd had many men, starting at the age of fourteen when she had begun experimenting on the four boys who lived next door. That's when she'd first felt her power.

"I suppose you can go," Rachel said.

It was part of the game, of course. Eunice knew what she had to do. If she didn't ask for another whipping, punishment would begin afresh tomorrow since she'd disobeyed a direct command.

"No, I can't just yet," she said, pouting prettily.

"Why not?" Rachel asked, playing her part.

"I've been very bad," Eunice said.

"Yes you have. That's why I had to punish you," Rachel said.

"I think I need some more."

"Do you?"

Eunice nodded, hoping this would be enough.

But no, Rachel was shaking her head. "I took that riding crop and gave you stroke after stroke. You deserved it, I know, but I think you had enough."

"I didn't. I need more. Please, give me a few more licks."

"Licks," Rachel said slowly. "Licks with the crop. I like the sound of that. Ask me again."

"Please give me a few more licks with the crop."

"Go get it for me and I'll consider it."

Eunice went for the crop on Rachel's desk, then walked back and handed it to her. Rachel waited. "You know I deserve it," Eunice said. "You know exactly what I deserve. Please."

"All right. Get in the position you were in earlier. I liked you in that position."

Eunice did as told. She even spread her legs again without having to be told. Rachel liked to strike between her legs, no matter what instrument she used.

"Good," Rachel cooed. She finally got up and walked to the side of the bed, where, with a quick flick of the crop, she delivered a stinging blow. She hesitated, then delivered another and another and another. In all, she delivered eight.

"One last thing before we're finished here," she said as she dropped the crop and scooted back onto the bed. She lay back and

splayed her legs wide open directly in front of Eunice. “I got all wet watching you get fucked and you’re supposed to be good with that mouth. Show me. And don’t stop until I tell you.”

## Chapter 12

Saturday evening, the night of the dinner party, arrived. Liz began dressing in the late afternoon, partially because she needed plenty of time to prepare, but also because the depression she'd worked herself into over Wes weighed on her and slowed her down. Everything was more of an effort and, in a way, everything felt pointless now that she knew he didn't care about her the way she wanted him to care. Still, she needed to look and be at her best. She owed the Nordstroms and she didn't want to embarrass them in any way.

She'd become fairly proficient with putting up her hair but, for tonight, she'd accepted the help of a servant, a rather shy, red-haired girl named Verity, to help her. She was glad of it. Verity had swept it up in a loose bun at the back of her head but left out and curled some strands that hung in just the right places. "That's wonderful, Verity. So much better than I can do."

"I don't know about that but I'm happy to help you anytime, Miss Gordon."

"Thank you."

"Shall we get you dressed?"

"I can do that, but thank you."

"Your corset and all?" Verity fretted, frowning doubtfully.

A thought occurred to Liz that she hadn't considered earlier. Her gown had about a hundred small buttons all up the back. She had good flexibility but she wouldn't be able to handle that many little pearl buttons. "You're right," Liz admitted. "I do need help."



Verity's help meant wearing a corset, but Liz tried to make the best of it. Women wore them every day, after all, and they had for many, many decades. She could endure it now and again.

She stood up and felt Verity's cool fingers at the nape of her neck. The girl was assisting her in removing the silk dressing robe. *Act calm*, Liz silently coached herself. She tried not to blush but the experience of being dressed from scratch was totally weird.

Verity quickly and efficiently went about dressing her charge. She noticed Liz's scar, of course, but said nothing. It was a funny thing, Miss Gordon seemed shy. She hadn't struck Verity as shy before. "Are you cold, miss?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine," Liz assured her.

"Because you're shaking a little."

"I'm a bit nervous about tonight, I guess."

*That made sense*, Verity thought. She'd be terrified to have to make intelligent conversation in front of all those fancy, rich people. "You'll be fine," Verity assured her as Liz stepped into the pantalets Verity held for her.

Next came the stockings, and Liz bit her bottom lip to keep from giggling. She was ticklish and not used to the soft, intimate touches that Verity didn't even think of as intimate. Verity reached for the corset. "You want to hang onto the bedpost, miss?" she asked pleasantly.

With a sense of dread, Liz followed the suggestion, and Verity slipped it around her. Instinctively, Liz adjusted it and held it in place. The damn thing served a purpose, after all, to provide the optimum female shape by hoisting up the breasts and squeezing in the waist. Unlike the late twentieth and the twenty-first century, when thin was in, the hourglass shape had for so long been thought the perfect female figure.

The very first pulls stole Liz's breath and it only got worse, the further down the corset Verity got. Oh, Sweet Jesus and Mary, Mother of God, it was so tight! Not only did it suck the air from her but it prevented her from getting anymore. This was going to be a problem because she tended to feel out of breath when she was nervous anyway.

*Relax, she ordered herself. You just have to get used to it.*

"We'd been wondering how'd you'd been dressing," Verity told her as she finished with the ties of the corset.

Liz couldn't respond. She had no air.

"This gown is so beautiful," Verity said. She was already carrying it back to Liz, who had not moved a muscle. The gown, Maggie's, of course, was a deep shade of scarlet with a drop waist and a plunging neckline. "I think it's the prettiest I ever saw."

"Thank you," Liz managed.

Somehow, they got the gown on and buttoned, although Liz felt close to passing out from lack of oxygen the entire time. Verity helped slip on the matching scarlet slippers and stood back to admire the overall effect. "You look so lovely," she said, meaning it.

"Thank you for your help, Verity. I don't know what I would have done without you."

Verity smiled, blushed, curtsied and left. No one had ever thanked her so kindly or so sincerely before.

\* \* \* \*

Liz had no idea of the impact she had on the young woman. She was too focused on learning how to breathe, walk and sit in the eighteenth century restraints she wore.

Maggie had explained the guest list yesterday morning when they were taking a walk in the winter garden, and Liz ran through it as she practiced walking the room, sitting gracefully and rising again.

"The Reverend and Mrs. Edwin Marsh." Maggie had told her they were kind and elderly and still pillars of the community, even though the Reverend didn't deliver many sermons anymore.

"Mr. and Mrs. Robert Burroughs." What had Maggie said about them? Oh, yes. She'd said the Burroughs were social leaders of the community but dull as whitewash. Liz grinned and shook her head. She stopped and peered at the mirror. It was amazing. The image reflected back at her seemed like someone else—like an eighteenth century lady. She'd pull this off.

She resumed her practicing. There were six more guests. Miss Daphne May and her fiancée, Byron McMasters, Mr. George Lloyd, Mrs. Sarah Beth Acker, Mrs. Olive Washington and her daughter, Susan. All of them from Charlotte and all of them were worth knowing, Maggie had declared. "It's a good mix, I think," she'd said. "The only two people I have any concern over are Miss May and Mr. Lloyd."

"The couple to be married?" Liz had asked, trying to keep track of all the names.

"No, oh, no. Miss May is to be married to Mr. McMasters. But, for the last few years, she had a rather desperate case of infatuation with Wesley. Your Wesley."

Liz had blushed at the specification. As if he were hers. "I see," she'd muttered, turning her face away.

"He didn't return it," Maggie had quickly added.

*He doesn't return mine either.* "What does she look like?" Liz asked out of curiosity.

"She has light hair, a rather angular face, she's quite thin. Mr. McMasters looks almost opposite. He has dark hair and a long, handlebar mustache. He has swarthy features. To me, she looks delicate and he's such a substantial man. But they fit well together. He's very considerate of her. I think he's very much in love with her. And," she said, emphasizing the word, "—he is very involved with affairs of government in Charlotte."

"And Mr. Lloyd? You said you have concerns about him?"

"Yes, more than anyone. He's young, successful, wealthy," Maggie had said, frowning. "A businessman."

Liz didn't understand her consternation.

Maggie glanced around before dropping her voice to explain. "He did not take part, that is to say, he didn't fight in the rebellion," she explained in a hushed tone. "He declared himself a patriot and he supplied munitions. That's what his business is, munitions, but—"

"But what?" Liz prodded when Maggie faltered.

“Wes and John Paul dislike him, although John Paul hides his disdain better than Wesley. I’m always reminding them that it’s not wise to make enemies of the powerful men around you.”

“They dislike him because he didn’t fight?” Liz asked.

“There is a rumor,” Maggie said, slowly, “only a rumor, mind you,” she repeated, her brown eyes wide and earnest, “that the man supplied munitions to both sides. It was never proven and mostly now it’s gone away. But Wesley believes it to be true.”

Liz nodded. “I see.”

“Wesley...he’s very passionate about loyalty and the cause of freedom. And he lost a good many men under his command.”

“I understand,” Liz murmured softly.

“Let’s see,” Maggie said, walking on and trying to lighten her tone. “Who else haven’t I described? Sarah Beth Acker is a war widow and as interesting as the Burroughs are not—”

Liz laughed.

“And lastly, Mrs. Washington and Susan. John Paul couldn’t understand why I invited them and I’m not sure I can say myself, except that I like Susan and she has an infatuation with Mr. Lloyd. She has no dowry to speak of but, then again, he doesn’t need one.”

Liz grinned. “You’re a matchmaker.”

“Don’t be silly,” Maggie said, her eyes twinkling mischievously. “I’m throwing a small dinner party for my husband’s cousin. Nothing more.”

\* \* \* \*

Maggie had described everyone well. Even before Liz was introduced, she could have named everyone. The only person that surprised her was Mr. George Lloyd, and that was because Maggie had failed to describe his appearance. He was exceedingly nice looking with thick blondish-brown hair and grayish-blue eyes. With his trim build and wide shoulders, he had an athletic look about him. He was also disarmingly charming and intelligent.

Wes stood back from the crowd, observing everyone. Mostly he watched how taken Lloyd was with Elizabeth. Not only that, but she seemed to be enjoying his company as well. How could Maggie

have invited him, he fumed inwardly. John Paul shouldn't have allowed it.

\* \* \* \*

There were enough talkers in the crowd that Liz was able to remain mostly quiet, which she was thankful for. She was terrified of making one of her infamous blunders. By the time dinner was announced, she hadn't made any. It was how she was going to rate success that evening—not passing out from a lack of oxygen and not saying or doing anything tremendously stupid.

For dinner, she was seated in the middle of the table between Wesley and Miss Susan Washington and directly across from George Lloyd. Wes was furious with Maggie for seating him next to Elizabeth. She knew they'd ignored one another for days. And, to make matters worse, he had to watch Lloyd eyeing her from across the table.

"How is your business?" Miss Washington asked Mr. Lloyd over the main course.

"Excellent, thank you," he replied. "There's always a need for munitions."

"Mr. Lloyd's family runs a munitions company," Susan explained to Liz. Susan was a petite young woman with curly, almost fuzzy brownish-red hair. She was attractive but plain.

Liz already knew this but she gave Susan a friendly smile and nod, anyway. "I see."

"How do you like our part of the world, Miss Gordon?" Mr. Lloyd asked, his eyes gleaming brightly. They looked slate gray in the candlelight.

"I do," she said. "Very much."

"Have you spent much time in Charlotte?"

*Not in 1783 Charlotte*, she thought. "No, not much," she replied.

"There are some worthwhile things to see and do there," he continued.

\* \* \* \*

Wes felt heat inching up his torso. The slimy bastard was moving in on Elizabeth. His Elizabeth! Who wouldn't have even been here except for him.

"Do you like music?" Mr. Lloyd asked. "We have a symphony in Charlotte and—"

Wes felt an uncomfortable tightening in his gut, knowing what was coming.

"Have you heard them, Mr. Lloyd?" Susan Washington asked.

Wes could have kissed Miss Susan Washington.

"Yes," Wes spoke up, determined to take some control of the conversation. "Are they any good?"

"They're not bad," Mr. Lloyd said to Miss Washington. "If you enjoy culture," he said directly to Wes. Liz noticed his look harden when his eyes met Wes's. The hostility between them was palpable.

"You know, Miss Gordon," Mr. Lloyd spoke again, "For several years now, no one has worn that color you have on tonight." His eyes widened and he leaned forward slightly. "Color of the enemy and all."

Liz felt her mouth go dry. Had she made a mistake? Maggie had given her the dress, after all. Surely she would have mentioned if it were inappropriate to wear.

"I commend you for it," George Lloyd continued. He smiled but the warmth of it didn't seem to reach his eyes. "After all, it's high time we all move on and put the past behind us."

Liz had no idea how to respond but she couldn't have anyway. Her breath felt nonexistent, so she simply sat there feeling her cheeks glow.

"It's a lovely gown," Susan said next to her. "I was admiring it earlier."

Liz glanced at her and realized the young woman had just made an attempt to stand up for her—against the man she was in love with. At least, that's how it felt. No wonder Maggie liked her so. She was compassionate and courageous. "Thank you," she said softly, hoping some of the sincere gratitude she felt was conveyed.

“Oh, it is,” Mr. Lloyd agreed. “And you are spectacular in it. My question is,” he continued, turning his cold gray eyes to Wes, “does it bother you?”

Liz’s heart beat dangerously fast and she felt a little dizzy.

“Elizabeth doesn’t look anything like the enemy to me,” Wes answered calmly.

Liz felt a surge of relief. It was the first time she’d heard him say her name in a week and it made her heart do a strange flip-flop. “I am glad to hear that,” she said, keeping her voice light and a pleasant smile on her lips, but hoping he would get the barb he’d earned over the last several days.

“What of that savage uprising, Lloyd?” Mr. Burroughs asked from the end of the table. “What do you hear of that?”

Liz was glad the conversation had gone on and more aware than ever of Wes at her side, although he’d now gone back to ignoring her.

\* \* \* \*

Fascinating. *Miss Elizabeth Gordon is utterly fascinating*, George Lloyd thought. And best of all, for some reason, Major Wesley Hale had strong objections to the two of them hitting it off. George smiled, sipped at his sherry and watched his prey.

She was something. She moved with grace and spoke with decorum, and yet there was something unconventional about her. It was as if she didn’t give a damn about landing a husband. Of course, it was an act. They all cared. It was all they cared about. It’s what made them such easy pickings. Still, she gave the impression of not caring. Or was it that she fancied Hale? She wasn’t from around here, so perhaps she wasn’t aware of what a waste of time and emotion that would prove to be.

Her skin looked like silk. His eyes dropped to the bulge of her breasts, and he looked over at Hale and found the great major glaring at him. He smiled slowly. *Yes, I was thinking of sucking on those luscious tits. I think I’ll do it, too. Just before I sink my cock into her over and over again.*

Wes looked away and, reluctantly, George looked away, too, just in time to see that old bat Mrs. Washington coming at him

with a smile painted on her lips. *No, dear, I have no interest in bedding your mousy little daughter.*

However, it was time to find a wife. Wives helped images, and image was necessary in politics, and politics were his future. And if he could land a suitable wife that was beautiful, exciting, and would stick it to the major—that was almost too good a package to pass up.

\* \* \* \*

By the time the last of the guests left, Liz felt completely drained and glad to return to her room. Wes had disappeared again and she felt empty, deserted and depressed as hell.

The first thing she did was pee. She'd had to all evening. The second thing was to pull her hair down and gently massage her sore scalp. She had a mass of thick, midlength chestnut brown hair and the weight of it being pinned up caused a headache.

Of course, James Wesley Hale, Major of the Continental Army, was also partly responsible for the headache. It was so frustrating. He'd said *Elizabeth doesn't look like the enemy to me*, yet that's exactly how he treated her.

She suddenly realized she needed help to get undressed and she threw up her hands. Frustrated and tired, she tried to reach around back and work the buttons. She was able to unfasten six, but that didn't help much.

"Damn it!" She collapsed back on the bed, feeling immeasurably helpless and stupid. She pressed in at the bridge of her nose, trying to stop the tears. They fell anyway and she angrily wiped them away. *Just admit it, Lizzy, you're in love with him but he does not love you. Admit it and then get over it. Life goes on.*

She stood. It was true. It was time to move on. If she was stuck here, and she was, then she had to come up with a plan for her life, a plan that did not include Wesley Hale or being kept hidden away at Pinegrove. Sniffing and drying her eyes, she went to find Verity or another maid who could help her, but she had no more opened the door than she was face to face with Wes.

For a second, a delicious second, she was close enough to feel his body heat. Then they both pulled back from one another and



started speaking at once, although neither of them got out more than an unintelligible “I, ah—” before clamping up again.

Wes was embarrassed at being caught there. He felt certain he’d been quite the picture of despair; standing at her door with one arm against the doorjamb, head cast down and eyes closed. He’d only stopped for a moment, wishing he could talk to her, but too proud to actually do anything about it.

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” he said stiffly, “but I wanted to tell you that you did well tonight.”

She bit the inside of her lip and struggled against the tears that threatened again. She would have thanked him but there was a painful tightening of her throat that prevented speaking. He was so cold. What she really wanted to do was to grab his shirtfront and yell ‘Bastard! You hateful bastard! I hate you, hate you, hate you!’ even if the very opposite was heart wrenchingly true.

He was looking at her oddly. She had to say something. She swallowed and finally found her voice. “How kind of you to say,” she said in a voice so thick it didn’t sound like her own at all, at least not to her ears.

He was frowning with confusion one second, then almost lightheaded with hope the very next. Why was she so emotional? “What’s the matter, Elizabeth?” he asked, his voice gentle and full of concern. “You’ve been crying.”

She hated him for that. She’d braced herself for his cold manner and his emotional distance but she was totally unprepared for tenderness. She loved him so much, it physically hurt. It didn’t matter if it was chemistry, logic or physical attraction, it was true and all she could do was to shake her head. Speaking was impossible.

“Tell me,” he said in a hoarse whisper. When she held up a hand and made a move to shut the door between them, he stepped in and took hold of her shoulders. “Tell me what’s wrong,” he insisted.

She finally found her voice. “You! All right? You!” She yanked away from him and this time, he let her go. She took two steps and realized, with a tinge of humor, that the guy couldn’t win. She

hadn't wanted him holding onto her and forcing the truth from her, and now she didn't want him to let her go.

She heard the door close and she heard him walk toward her and she closed her eyes, giddy with relief that he was still there. God, she loved him.

"What are you talking about?" he asked quietly. He was directly behind her. "Here," he said, reaching around to hand her a handkerchief. His arm touched her side and she felt her nipples stiffen.

She took the handkerchief and wiped her face and nose. Okay, he wanted calm and rational, she'd be calm and rational. She turned to face him, but kept her eyes on the cloth in her hands for the moment, just until she could get started. "You know and I know, I don't have many friends here," she began, "so even if that's all you want to be to me, you've kind of been AWOL lately." She shook her head and rushed on before he could ask what *AWOL* was. "AWOL means absent without leave. It's a military term, so I thought you could appreciate that." She risked looking up at him but all she got in return was caution and slight confusion in his eyes.

"I thought that's what you wanted," he stated.

"What I wanted? Bullshit!" she snapped. She blushed fiercely.

The fact that she was this angry filled him with a joy he couldn't fully comprehend.

"And, yes, I know that's not proper eighteenth-century language," Liz continued. Now that she'd started, she was going to have out with all of it, everything she'd kept bottled up inside. "But it's hard to learn to do everything all over again. It's a hell of a lot harder than you might think, Major Hale."

He lifted his eyebrows at her. "Major Hale?"

"Why not?" she snapped. "You want to be distant from me. You want to be all proper."

"Who said I wanted to be distant from you? And, for that matter, who said I wanted you to be all proper?"

Her eyes widened and she crossed her arms very deliberately. “You’re going to stand there and say to my face that you haven’t been completely cold and distant this last week?”

He was stymied by the accusation and hesitated in responding a moment too long.

“Uh-huh,” Liz muttered, as if she had proved her point.

That pushed him too far. “If there’s anyone who acted as though they wanted distance, it is you, Miss Gordon!” For the first time in the conversation, anger and hurt edged into his voice.

Liz felt her throat tighten. “What are you talking about?”

“Since meeting you, I’ve been thinking of returning home. That’s why I mentioned it that afternoon when we were playing cards. To get your reaction.” He was watching her carefully for her reaction, for a flash of guilt or remorse, but her green eyes were wide and fully on his, waiting for him to go on. “I realize, of course, Pinegrove is removed from town and that perhaps you want more of a social existence than I could offer—”

“Than you could offer?” she interrupted. She was getting an inkling of where he was coming from, though she could hardly believe it. “What offer? You only talked of depositing me at your home. ‘The staff can take care of you’.”

He cocked his head sharply, trying to determine why those words sounded familiar? Had he ever said that? “That’s absurd.”

She tried to get a breath but it seemed impossible. Her corset was too tight and she was feeling the lack of breathing space. “Are you telling me—”

“Elizabeth?”

She had taken a step back without meaning to. The room had begun to spin. “Fucking corset,” she wheezed, pressing a hand to her middle.

“Well, go and take the damn thing off,” he snapped, waving to the screen in the corner.

She tried to get a breath. This was all his fault. He’d upset her and now she couldn’t breathe. “I can’t, idiot!”

“Turn around!” But he didn’t wait for her to do it. He took hold of her and turned her. He pushed her soft, fragrant hair to one side and went to work on the buttons. She had begun undoing them but hadn’t gotten far.

“That’s where I was going—” she bit out.

“Be quiet,” he ordered. “You can barely breathe.”

His nearness, the feeling of his hands at her back, his breath on her neck, was only making the situation worse. She closed her eyes, concentrating on not passing out, and felt a bit of relief as the dress was finally unbuttoned.

“Damnation,” he murmured, looking at the complex ties of the corset. No wonder she couldn’t breathe. He found the loose ends and began taking them through their elaborate crisscross path. She moaned softly. “I’m almost there, darling,” he uttered.

Her eyes shot open at the word and her heart began pounding even harder than before.

He, too, felt a shock reverberate through him. He hadn’t meant to say it. It had just slipped out. His hands kept moving until the corset was fully unlaced.

She took deep breaths, thinking of nothing but the sweet relief, but it didn’t come. Instead, she was overwhelmed by dizziness. Black dots danced in front of her even though her eyes were closed and she felt herself crumple.

### Chapter 13

She awoke as if from a deep sleep. She was lying in bed, covered, and Wes was lying beside her. He was on top of the covers, fully dressed, lying on his side, toying with her hair. “I think you have to take it off slowly,” he said, with a trace of a smile on his lips. “The corset.”

“It’s a torture device,” she muttered.

“It’s boned. It doesn’t give. It’s no wonder you couldn’t breathe.”

She blinked and took an unencumbered breath. “I’m sorry I called you an idiot.”

“It’s all right. I am.”

“You’re right. You are,” she said quietly.

He studied her pale green eyes. They were the most unique color, the color of a deep lake on a cloudy day before a storm brews.

“Did you think I didn’t want to go home with you?” she asked, needing to be sure of their previous conversation. “*With you?*” she repeated.

“Yes, that is what I thought.”

She frowned and shook her head slowly. “It’s not true.”

“We don’t live in this kind of opulence at Pinegrove. And we’re removed from town and from society. Here, you’re but an hour from Charlotte. The stores, the symphony,” he pronounced the last word very carefully.

“I don’t care about that.”

He pulled himself up against the backboard. “When I saw you dancing—”

She didn't understand what he was getting at. She sat up, too, and turned toward him. "I'm just learning. I wanted to make you proud. To fit in."

His eyes roamed her face. She was saying what he wanted to hear, exactly what he wanted to hear. Did she mean it? "I can't dance. I'm quite sure that's obvious."

"Are you blind, as well?"

"What?"

"Are you so blind you can't see that I'm in love with you?" Suddenly, it didn't even matter if he didn't feel the same about her. It was the truth, and it felt wonderful to admit it, to free herself of it.

Her blunt admission was a shock, and he had to look away and fight against the emotion that rose up and threatened to expose him.

Both disappointment and compassion rose within her because of the distraught way he looked. "You can't help it if you don't feel the same about me and I don't blame you—"

He looked back at her, puzzled at her words. "Don't feel the same?" he muttered. Then his eyes blazed at her and he reached out to take her face in his hands. "I love you," he said, his voice rough and thick. "How can you not know that? How can you not feel it?"

She wanted so badly to hold him and to have him hold her. Could she tell him that? "You know, I'm not an eighteenth-century woman," she uttered slowly. She still had her camisole on and began pulling it off. He moved his hands and watched her in silent awe. She felt herself trembling. "I'm trying to become one. I want to be your eighteenth-century woman. It's all I've wanted since I first saw you."

He stared at her beautiful, exposed breasts. His mouth was suddenly dry. "Then you are." He reached out and laid a hand on her throat, he felt her soft skin and the pulse in her neck, and his hand slid down to her breast. The nipple was pink and lovely, jutting out toward him as if begging for his touch. He ran his thumb over it and felt it harden even more. "You are my woman."

He moved closer and cupped both of her breasts and lifted, his eyes going from one to the other, as if memorizing their weight and shape. "I'm going to make love to you," he announced, his voice gruff and intense.

"It's about time," she whispered.

His heart was thudding heavily, pumping blood throughout his body and directly into his stiffened cock, which was aching from constraint. He had already removed his coat and shoes. Now he got up and removed the rest of his clothes. Elizabeth was watching him while she kicked back the covers fully and began slipping off her pantalets. She was so beautiful and sensuous. She wasn't whorish and aggressive, making his jaw set with distaste, but open and honest, not only willing, but full of love and desire for him. She had declared herself his and so she would be.

Her breath caught when she saw the scar on his shoulder and again when he removed his breeches, first by the scars on his hip, then the size of him. His penis was swollen with desire and somehow, she was shocked by how large it was. Wes was not that large in stature. He was probably six feet tall and lean. She couldn't think why now, or even when she'd thought about it, but somehow she hadn't expected him to be so large. She felt the clutch of uneasiness. He was going to be too large for her.

She watched as he walked to the end of the bed and looked her over, head to toes and back again. He looked possessive of her and it sent a deep, primal thrill pulsing through her. He crouched and began climbing up over her, his face hovering inches above her body. Heat mingling, taking his time, he bent to press sweet kisses as he traveled up her, reveling in what he was now to possess.

He caught a glimpse of her scar and turned her over to better examine it. She cringed and bit the side of her lip. She hated the scar, hated anyone seeing it. It was raised and ugly and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

"What happened?" he asked, tracing the scar gently with his finger.

“It happened a long time ago,” she said. “I fell on something.” The feeling of his lips on her scar made her jump. “Don’t,” she begged. “I hate my scar.”

With a forceful hand, he rolled her back over onto her back. His face was at hers. “Think of it as beautiful,” he said. “Scars are proof of what we’ve survived.” He lowered his mouth to hers and the kisses began as sweet and tentative. “Elizabeth,” he murmured between kisses.

He was driving her crazy. He was so close and she’d wanted him for so long. She reached up for the back of his head and pulled him closer, insisting on a deeper exploration.

He responded. No longer would he hold back what he wanted to do. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. He shifted his weight to the side of her and, cupping the back of her head in his hand, explored her mouth the way he wanted to, tasting and plumbing its depth, silently claiming ownership. Her breathing and soft moaning, her participation and desire was escalating him to a place he’d never experienced. His hand traveled down to her breasts and his mouth quickly followed.

“So beautiful,” he said. “So beautiful.” *And so mine.* He was torn, wanting to sate his appetite and wanting to savor this unfathomable delicacy. This woman he had so wanted and believed to have rebuffed him, loved him, wanted him. Gently, he squeezed each breast, enjoying the sight of the raised pink nipple. He licked and teased, a new experience for him, before taking it into his mouth and suckling. It was wonderful. It was life.

That was it—she’d been sent to give him life and he was taking it. He sucked harder and she made a low sound in her throat and writhed against him. The feeling of power and control surged through his body, making him feel more whole than before he’d been wounded.

Life. She’d been sent to give him back his life. And he would recreate it in her. His tongue trailed down her stomach, her beautiful stomach, toward the soft brown tuft of hair that held the secrets he most wanted to know.



“Wes,” she gasped. Her hands were on his shoulders, her face utterly flushed, her lips moist and very pink. He’d taken control of her body in a way no other man ever had. It’s as if he knew what she wanted and how she wanted it.

She’d had sex, of course, although she had started much later than most. She’d been nineteen, nearly twenty, when she’d willingly given up her virginity. *Let me in the club*, she’d thought. *Let’s see just how fantastic it is.*

Only it hadn’t been. It had hurt like hell that first time. *Funny how movies and novels don’t convey that.* No, it was always like two seconds of pain, then this fantastic white light of pure bliss. Bullshit on both counts. Of course, in time, the pain had lessened and eventually gone away but, until now, her sexual experiences had always left her feeling flattened with disappointment.

Wes kissed on top of her mound. He laid his cheek on her pubic hair, as if memorizing the feel of it. She couldn’t help watching him, wondering what he was going to do. As if he heard her thoughts, he looked up at her. His blue eyes were darker in this light and he looked different somehow. Still absolutely beautiful, but all the sadness about him had lifted, leaving only strength, resolve and desire. “I’m going to get you pregnant,” he said.

He’d never uttered those words before and it sent an almost painful thrill through him. He watched her lips part slightly in surprise. “Perhaps not tonight, but soon. You’ll marry me as soon as I can get it arranged.”

It was more a declaration than a question, but she nodded anyway. “Y-yes.”

Propped up on pillows, he’d never seen anything more exotic looking or beautiful. With a sweep of his eyes, he took in her glowing eyes, her erect nipples, and without warning, he bent and parted her legs and looked at her. He wanted to know all of her, really know her. He breathed in her scent, gently pulled her vaginal lips apart and studying her. “I’ve heard it compared to a rose,” he murmured, “but it’s not. It’s—” *So much deeper, so much more primal. Life.* An adequate description eluded him and so he moved in to taste her.

She gasped from the sensation. He went at it as if he really wanted to taste her. Men had gone down on her before, but only as a means of getting her wet enough for sex. This was different, so different. He'd begun flicking his tongue at her clit, causing a very deep flutter inside. She'd never had an orgasm. Was this what it was? She couldn't get adjusted to one sensation before he'd moved on to something else. Already, he'd pulled her legs apart even further, as far as they'd go and had his tongue inside her.

"Aaaahhhhhh—" she cried out. Over and over again, he forced his tongue inside her, and over and over again, she cried out. She didn't mean to, she couldn't help it.

She felt so tight. He took a finger and reached inside her. Very tight. He pulled her lips apart and tasted her again, then explored with his finger. Back and forth until he felt caught up in a rhythm of exploration.

He was making sounds, growling sounds deep in his throat. Man was an animal and she had made him both tonight simply by being wet from the desire that he'd created in her. This was his woman. She would be his wife and her body would be his to command. The power surging through his body was intoxicating. His cock was throbbing, demanding attention, but he wasn't ready to stop making love with his mouth yet.

She'd long since closed her eyes, lost in the swirling myriad of sensations pulsing through her body. She felt him pull away and inch back up her body, kissing or nibbling every few inches and her excitement mounted. His penis felt rock hard as it brushed against the inside of her leg, then against her wet and ready cunt. *Ready. I'm ready. Fuck me! Please, fuck me!* She felt him kiss her neck. "I willed you here, you know," he said.

She opened her eyes to find him looking into her face. The words and his solemn expression made her breath catch.

"I saw you and I've never wanted anyone like I want you, Elizabeth. And I wanted you from that first moment I saw you."

"I took that step because I wanted you," she said. "Maybe you willed it, but I willed it, too. I knew you were about to disappear in the fog and I couldn't stand it."

His eyes roamed her face, then penetrated her gaze again. "Tell me you love me."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh, God, I love you. I love you with my whole heart, with everything I am."

"And nothing can come between us anymore," he said. "Tell me—"

"I don't want anything between us," she said.

He dropped his head to the side of hers, his face at her neck, and reached down to position himself to enter her.

She held her breath as she felt the steady pressure at her vaginal opening. The thick head of his penis was pushing in. The pressure increased and she drew in a breath.

"You've done this before?" he wondered aloud.

Before she could respond, he shoved fully in and she cried out involuntarily. He was bigger than any man she had been with, and she clutched the covers around her with her fingers and tensed.

She was tight, so tight, like a virgin. He closed his eyes, thankful, joyful, and moved inside her, trying to keep the movement slow and not too painful for her. It was difficult because he wanted to ram himself in her, scream, declare his victory, and ram some more. Her hands were on his chest, pushing. Resisting him. She was so tight. "Elizabeth," he said, halting his movement. Her eyes were closed. She was in pain. "Elizabeth," he said more firmly.

She opened her eyes. It took a moment for her eyes to fully focus on his.

"Relax," he said.

Her eyes widened for a moment. Relax? How the hell could she do that? He was like a battering ram inside her. She took a shaky breath.

"Good," he said. "You've tensed all your muscles. You're making it harder. Relax your muscles, my love," he repeated.

She tried. She was shaking all over. Her legs were trembling violently. "You're...too big for me," she said apologetically. To her surprise, he smiled.

"It won't stay that way." He began moving again and she closed her eyes. "Open your eyes," he commanded. "Look at me."

She opened her eyes. He continued his rhythm of filling her and withdrawing and filling her again and she whimpered. Her shoulders were shaking. "It hurts now because your body's being forced to accommodate my size."

She drew a breath to speak but no words came. She couldn't think about anything except him inside her. Could he really make himself fit? Her vaginal muscles were so tight around him. Resisting him or trying to hold him still, she wasn't sure.

"You're so hot and wet and tight," he said. He reached down and took a nipple in his mouth and sucked, all the while continuing to move in and out of her.

"Oh, Wes," she moaned. She loved him but she had to stop him. It was too much. "S-stop, please."

"Relax," he whispered. Then he took the other nipple in his mouth and sucked harder.

The sensations were overwhelming, pain and pressure combined with a need and a secret pleasure so deep, she didn't know where it originated.

"You'll fit me," he said. He thrust again.

She cried out.

He thrust harder. "It won't always hurt like this." He thrust again. She cringed and turned her head, but she wasn't resisting as much. "You are my woman."

"Yes," she breathed.

"You will do as I command."

"Y-yes."

She was so beautiful and he was all-powerful. He closed his eyes and gave in to his joyful celebration, shoving himself into her hard and fast, filling her up, making her fit him. She was crying out, and he loved it. He wanted to scream how much he loved making her his woman. He felt the beginning of the end and tried to resist. He wanted it to go on forever, but the urge for release was too strong. He slammed into her body one last time and cried out as he came.

Breathing deep and dizzy from the exertion, he collapsed to her side. She was breathing just as deeply, one hand on her chest and one on her stomach. They were both covered in a sheen of perspiration, and neither of them spoke for the time it took to collect their breath and cool off some. He was usually spent after sex and went directly to sleep, but now he felt like a god, full of energy and purpose and tenderness.

When he felt recovered enough to move, he got up and walked to the washstand and poured some water in the basin. It was cold. Good. He dipped her washcloth in it, wrung it out, and walked back to her. She was watching him, subdued and wary. He sat at her legs and gently raised and bent them.

She started to protest but he shushed her and placed the cool cloth to her red and swollen vagina. She closed her eyes. The relief was sweet. She was very sore.

“Do you trust me, Elizabeth?”

She opened her eyes, surprised at the question. “Yes,” she replied without hesitation.

“It will hurt for awhile. And then it won’t,” he explained gently.

She started to say she wasn’t a virgin, that she knew all this, but his expression stopped her. She closed her mouth again, obeying her instincts and watched as he turned the cloth over and gently pressed it to her again. Something was different about him. He was sure of himself, in charge of both his emotions and of her.

“Tomorrow, you’ll be sore—”

She started to laugh at the understatement, but he was moving the cloth again and she winced instead.

“—when we make love again,” he finished.

He looked up to see alarm in her eyes. It filled him with great satisfaction, and he got up and went to dip the cloth again.

“Wes,” she said. Then she went blank. What did you say to such a thing? *Look, babe, you’re going to have to pace yourself.* He was walking back to her with the freshly dipped cloth.

Again, he inspected her vagina and placed the cloth on her before looking up into her face. "I won't stay here tonight. I won't allow anyone to think of you as compromised."

She could only stare. It was as if she was watching him develop into a king. Or a major. She'd never seen such complete confidence. *I'm so in love with him* was all she could think.

He lifted the cloth and surveyed her vagina. "It's mine," he said.

"It's sore," she reminded him.

He finally got up. "I'll see the reverend tomorrow," he said. "I want to marry as soon as possible."

The words filled her with joy and she glowed with it.

He tossed the cloth aside and sat beside her. "Making love to you tonight was the best thing I ever felt. You'll feel that way too, in time. Please trust me on that."

She nodded. "I know. I do."

He leaned over and kissed her. "I should go."

She put a hand on his arm, not wanting him to, and he smiled, understanding. "Do you know what a brand is?" he asked, his voice low and gruff.

She frowned for a second, thinking of a manufacturer's label and wondering what he could mean.

"It's a mark of ownership—"

"Oh," she exclaimed. "Yes, of course." *Like on horses or cattle in the old west*. Then she smiled, realizing the 'old west' was still a hundred years in the future.

"I'm branding you on the inside," he said quietly. "Making you my own. Making you fit me and no other. Do you understand?"

The thought was supremely erotic.

"Will that make it easier to bear?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes."

"Good." *I'll be working on that brand some more tomorrow*. "I love you, Miss Gordon."

"I love you, Major Hale."

He grinned. "Goodnight, my love."



## Chapter 14

Liz woke the next morning feeling gloriously happy, and it took a few moments of consciousness before the reason caught up with her. It also explained the soreness between her legs. She'd have to soak in a hot bath.

She grabbed hold of a pillow and squeezed it against herself, smiling. Wes! He'd been magnificent last night—so strong, so gorgeous, and so in love with her. “Wes,” she whispered. In love with her!

She felt giddy. She suddenly understood why Scarlett O'Hara had looked the way she did the morning after Rhett Butler had finally had his way with her. Poor, stupid Scarlett. She'd been in love with Rhett and hadn't realized it until it was too late. Not her. Not Elizabeth Gordon. She knew she loved Major James Wesley Hale. She would be Mrs. James Wesley Hale. “Mrs. James Wesley Hale,” she whispered.

The remarkable gift she'd been given suddenly sobered her. She'd been handed a miracle—a new life, complete with all the love she could ever want or need—and never once had she thanked all of Heaven above for it.

She squeezed her eyes shut and a scalding tear was forced out. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you, thank you. I'll take care of him. I'll take such good care of him, I swear it. Thank you.”

What had she complained about in her other life? That men were self-absorbed and money driven and totally lacking in nobility and passion. That other life seemed far away and unimportant now. It seemed pale by comparison. She belonged here. She belonged



with Wes. “Thank you,” she said again. She’d never be able to thank God enough.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, Liz practically floated downstairs on her way to the morning room. She passed Eunice in the hall and flashed a warm smile at the pretty, dark-haired maid. “Morning.”

The look of cold contempt she received just before the young woman dipped her head in a mock gesture of deference sent an unpleasant shock through Liz, but she didn’t stop to dwell on it. She assumed the young woman was having a difficult morning for some reason. She also felt a great appreciation for how hard the staff worked and how hard that life was.

\* \* \* \*

Eunice was not feeling as charitable. She loathed Elizabeth Gordon. She hated everything about her—the way she moved and spoke and pretended to be so nice to everyone. She’d twisted Wesley Hale around her little finger for the moment, but Lizzybeth Gordon wasn’t as clever as she thought, because she didn’t have any idea who she was really up against. She posed another challenge, that was all, and Eunice loved overcoming a challenge, especially when there was a great victory at stake.

She ducked into the dining room, which was empty for the time being, and mentally focused on her goal. Pinegrove.

Yes—she could picture the stone mansion, the sweeping porches that surrounded it and looked out on the lake. She could see herself on the front veranda, looking out as Wes rode off to tend to some important business. He’d turn around to take one last look at her, blow her a kiss, then ride out.

A maid, who looked a great deal like Elizabeth Gordon, would ask her if she needed anything. “A cup of tea, I think,” she’d say.

“Right away, Mrs. Hale.”

Or would it be Lady Hale?

Eunice took in a deep breath and blew it out, feeling calmer and more focused. There were so many ways to take care of Miss Gordon. All she had to do was to decide on the best.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie looked up from the letter she was writing as Elizabeth appeared in the doorway. Elizabeth looked refreshed and wonderful. She looked...well, glowing. Maggie blinked in surprise. Although Elizabeth had done well, exceedingly well, at last night's dinner party, she'd seemed subdued afterwards. Melancholy, even. Wes had seemed strained, as well, and Maggie had assumed their tiff had not yet fully blown over.

Now, she felt a tug of anxiety. Had someone else caught Elizabeth's eye? Someone like George Lloyd? Oh, no—*please not that*, Maggie begged the Almighty. It would crush Wesley and she'd never be forgiven for having invited Mr. Lloyd in the first place.

"Am I interrupting?" Liz asked.

"Of course not. Please come in. And forgive me for staring. You look so—"

Maggie was clearly at a loss and Elizabeth could only smile in response. "Happy?" she supplied.

"Yes," Maggie said with a worried frown. She felt positively short of breath, fearing the reason she was undoubtedly about to hear.

"I am." She walked in and sat, anxious to share her happiness, and Maggie got up to join her. For some reason, Maggie looked stressed and Liz wondered at the cause. Did she doubt the success of the party last night? "Everything went beautifully last night," Liz voiced.

Maggie was filled with dread. She nodded stiffly. "It did." *Please, not George Lloyd. Please!*

Liz's inner glow dimmed, certain now that something was wrong. "What is it?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

"You first," Maggie said almost breathlessly. "Tell me why you look so happy this morning." If necessary, if it was George Lloyd, she'd appeal to Elizabeth to ignore the romantic inclination. At least for the present—until she could figure out how to disengage Wesley from the obvious attachment he had toward her. Oh, it

would be terrible! Wesley would be shattered and John Paul would be furious with her, and she'd never forgive herself. Never!

Liz blinked in confusion. Maggie was downright distraught over something. She took hold of Maggie's hand. "Tell me what's troubling you," she begged. "I'll do anything to help you."

Maggie was barely holding the tears at bay. "I may hold you to that," she said, just above a whisper. "Now, please, tell me."

Liz nodded. "Wes and I—"

Maggie felt herself jerk a little. "Yes?"

"Well, we'd been...not exactly in an argument—"

"I noticed that there was a strain between the two of you," Maggie said.

"It was a misunderstanding. A silly misunderstanding."

Maggie's heart began hammering with hope. "A misunderstanding?"

"And last night after the party, we talked." Liz felt her face heat a bit in remembrance of what else they'd done.

Maggie's flew to her throat. "You made up?"

Liz nodded.

"You made up?" Maggie repeated. "You and Wesley? And that's why you look so wonderful?"

Liz beamed a great smile. "I love him, Maggie."

Maggie felt lightheaded with relief and joy.

"And he loves me," Liz finished. She just barely got it out before Maggie pulled her into an embrace. Liz noticed she was trembling.

"Of course he does," Maggie said. "I'm so happy for you both!"

When she pulled back, Liz stared into the warm brown eyes. "Thank you. But what—"

Smiling and blinking back tears, Maggie brought her hand to her mouth and shook her head.

"What is it?" Liz prodded gently.

"It's nothing," Maggie replied. "I thought...I feared you might have felt an attachment for Mr. Lloyd. That's all. And I knew it would have crushed Wesley."

Liz's eyes grew round, and she let out her breath in a great rush. "Mr. Lloyd? No! I've been in love with Wes since I first saw him."

"I thought so, but—" Maggie broke off and shook her head. "What the human mind is capable of conceiving. I'm sorry."

"No, there's no need to apologize. You were just concerned for Wes."

"Terrified is more like it. And for me, too. John Paul would have never let me live down that I'd invited the man."

"I thought Mr. Lloyd was exceptionally handsome and charming and...he didn't do a thing for me."

Maggie grinned and shook her head. "That does not sound, how are you always putting it, very eighteenth century," she admonished teasingly.

"My apologies," Liz replied with a flourish. "I'll endeavor not to repeat it again."

"I am so happy for you," Maggie said again in earnest.

"Thank you, Maggie." Then, with a mischievous twinkle in her green eyes, she added. "Me, too."

\* \* \* \*

Wes was nowhere to be found. John Paul mentioned he'd gone into town on business. It was a huge letdown for Liz, and she wondered why he hadn't mentioned it.

*Stay busy*, she told herself, and she tried to, but the doubts and fears found a way to creep into her psyche anyway. Was Wesley having second thoughts? Regrets? *Don't be stupid. You're being pathetic.*

She was too in love with the man. It was dangerous to be as in love as she was. It felt like her whole heart was wrapped around him.

The day dragged and, as afternoon gave way to evening, Liz dressed carefully for dinner. He'd be at dinner, and she wanted to look so good that he wouldn't be able to keep his eyes off her. And she'd be cool, calm, charming and controlled. She'd missed him so much, it hurt today, but he didn't need to know that.

But he wasn't at dinner. He was avoiding her. No, he was just occupied with something. The argument raged silently in her mind, causing acute anxiety that acted as a dull blade scraping at her raw heart. How would she survive it if he changed his mind or had regrets?

\* \* \* \*

Liz couldn't settle down. It was late and she was pacing the floor. He'd been gone all day. What possible reason could he have for being gone all day?

There was a brief knock at the door, and even before she could fill with hope, it opened and he was there, striding toward her, clutching her in his arms and kissing her possessively.

"I've been thinking of you all day," Liz admitted when he pulled back to look at her. "Where have you been?"

"I went into town, to see Reverend Marsh among other things, but he wasn't there. His brother died."

To see the reverend? Of course—just like he said he would! "Oh, I'm sorry," she said, although her heart was pounding with joy and relief.

"He's gone to Hillsboro but I left a message for him. I'm sure he'll get to us as soon as he can."

Nothing had changed. She'd put herself through hell for nothing. What had Maggie said? *What the mind can conceive*. She was so caught up in thinking about that for a few seconds, she didn't notice Wes's expression cloud over. "Is there something else?" she asked when she did notice.

He hesitated only a moment. "I've decided to return home for a few days." He saw alarm flash in her eyes and he rushed on to explain. "I haven't been there in years and I want to make sure everything is perfect for you." She breathed a sigh of relief at the explanation and warmth flooded through him. He kissed her again, his tongue plunging deeply into her mouth, just as he'd thought about doing all day. She was nearly all he'd thought of, and he couldn't wait to resume the activity they'd begun last night. She was in her dressing gown and he pulled it open and took both her breasts in his hands and caressed them.

“Wes,” she said, as the caress became more fervent.

“Yes, love?”

He made her breathless—and she wanted him, but she knew she couldn’t take any more sex this soon. She was still sore from last night. “I can’t tonight,” she said quietly.

Wes leaned close, his head at her right ear. “I’ve found the woman of my dreams,” he said huskily. “The woman who will be the mother of my children. I want a son and a daughter. At least.”

His voice and his touch were turning her to jelly, but she was still too sore. “So do I,” she breathed. “But I swear to you, I can’t—”

He shushed her, and for some reason she obeyed.

“To love, honor and obey.” He was speaking softly, right in her ear. “Say it.”

God, she was putty in his hands. “To love, honor and obey.” She pulled back and looked directly into his sapphire eyes.

Wes was more pleased than he could say. He’d willed her to repeat it and she had. He controlled her. He loved her, wanted her, needed her, and controlled her.

“But we don’t have to be in a hurry,” she added.

His hands on her shoulders, he guided her backwards to the bed. “Lay down.”

She sat and swallowed hard. James Wesley Hale had changed in the last twenty-four hours. Where he had been proper and restrained, now he was passionate and demanding. She scooted back.

“Spread your legs, my darling,” he said.

She drew in a sharp breath and he saw the flash of worry cross her face. But, slowly, her legs shaking, she did as he’d instructed. “Yes,” he breathed. “Wider,” he coaxed.

She obeyed and watched his eyes travel down the length of her body. Her heart was beating fast. “Wes,” she whispered.

He was taking his clothes off, his eyes still on her waiting vagina. He didn’t doubt it was still sore. But it would be sorer still. It was his. She was his. He saw moisture glistening at her opening. She may have been sore, but her body was still preparing for him.

She saw that his cock was stiff and ready, and as large as she remembered it. He was planning to take her no matter how sore she was. She raised up onto her elbows. "There are other things we can do," she said.

He moved next to her and, for a minute, he didn't do anything except stroke her face and hair. "What would you like to do, my love? Or to have done? Name it and it will be done."

She blushed. She'd never felt so shy. It was because he was so direct and so unapologetic. "I want to give you pleasure," she said.

"You give me more pleasure than I've ever known. More pleasure than I knew was possible." He studied her worried frown. "You want us to take it slow," he guessed.

"I am so sore," she pleaded.

Rather than reply, he reached over and kissed her. He then sucked on each of her nipples. "So beautiful," he murmured. "My children will suckle sweet milk from these and so will I. You'll never deny me what I crave, will you?"

"No," she breathed. Her body was traitorous. Her breath was catching, she was getting wet and her hips moved toward him.

"Let me just look at you, then," he said, sliding down the bed. "I love to look at you."

She'd never experienced this openness with another man, and yet it felt more right and natural than anything she'd known. True to his word, he positioned himself between her legs and stared at her vagina. "It's getting moist for me," he said. "Moist and slick—"

She jumped as his finger touched her clitoris and gently circled it. She moaned. Muscles tightened in his belly. He would have her, very soon. Sore or not, she would beg for it.

"Wes," she panted.

"So wet," he celebrated. "Your body knows who its master is." He maneuvered back up next to her. His palm was on her mound. He gripped it possessively. "Mine," he said, looking into her eyes.

Her mouth parted slightly. Her breathing was ragged.

He bent to her breasts and sucked one into his mouth, taking as much as he could. His thumb entered her and, immediately, he felt her vaginal muscles close in around it.

“Oh, my God,” Elizabeth moaned. “Wes—”

He pulled back. “Say ‘more’. Say ‘more, Wesley’.”

She couldn’t believe this. He was making her want it, despite herself. “More,” she whispered.

He grinned and moved his thumb to explore inside her. She cried out. “I don’t think I heard you, my sweet love. Did you say something?”

“I’m going to torture you one of these days, just like you’re torturing me,” she warned.

“I do hope so,” he said. He moved his thumb to apply pressure deep and low and was gratified when she cried out.

“I can’t believe you,” she panted.

“And why is that?”

“Ohhhh,” she cried out. “Stop! I can’t think.”

“What can’t you believe?”

“Oh, God, I want it. You’re making me want it. Please, Wes—”

He’d been ready since he first saw her. Quickly, he moved atop her and put himself inside her. Her body clenched down around him and she cried out. He moaned as well. Not only because she was tight and hot and he was sensitive from last night’s lovemaking, too, but also he loved making her his own. Pain was part of that process, and he was making her accept it, making her want it.

“W-Wes! Ahhhh-ahhhh—” A spasm erupted deep in her, making her gasp and claw his back.

He felt her orgasm and it sent him over the edge. He came in the next few violent thrusts, crying out without restraint.

He collapsed beside her and held her for several minutes before he realized she was crying. “Lizzy,” he breathed. “What is it?”

She shook her head. Her entire body was shaking.

“Elizabeth?”

“I...d-don’t...na-know,” she blubbered. And it was the truth. It was as if he’d struck some chord of emotion within her, releasing everything. “I...I love you,” she sobbed.



He smiled and smoothed back the hair from her hot face. “I love you. I’m going to love you every day of my life.”

“Promise me,” she begged.

“I promise.”

He rolled onto his back, pulled her to him and held her until the raging emotion quieted in her. And, finally, like a calming blanket of knowledge settling over him, he knew his purpose. Her breath became soft and regular. It was a wonderful sound and he wanted to fall asleep to the sound of it every night for the rest of his life.

“Will you be back in time for the ball?” Liz asked. She sounded sleepy.

He continued to stroke her hair. “I’ll try,” he replied, kissing the top of her head. “You know how I love to dance.”

## Chapter 15

Wes reined in Halcyon as the stone façade of Pinegrove came into distant view. The towering pines still surrounded and partially hid the home from view, and flashes of silver from the lake still sparkled through the deep green pines as they swayed in the wind. Nothing had changed, at least, not from a distance. The scent of pine still filled the air. Even the wind off the lake felt familiar to his skin.

Nostalgia grabbed hold and squeezed the breath from him. Home. He was home. He took a moment to collect himself and continued onward. There were many questions to be answered. There were betrayals to deal with, a reckoning to be had.

\* \* \* \*

“Good God, Almighty!” the older woman cried out when she saw him walking up the back path to the house. She ran to meet him, slamming the back door against the house with a loud bang. “Good God, Almighty!”

Wes’s throat was too tight to speak so he just hugged the plump, gray-haired woman who’d helped to raise him. “Hello, Inez,” he finally murmured.

“Good God, Almighty! James Wesley, when I finish having a conniption fit, I’m going to take you over my knee for not coming home sooner!”

Her reaction was a balm to the pain deep inside him. “Are you sure you’re big enough now? You’ve gotten smaller since I’ve gotten older.”

“Oh, now, don’t you be smart.” She pulled back to look at him closely and let go of a long extended sigh. “You’ve gotten older. It’s a fact. Are you well?”

He nodded.

Her pleasant look dissipated into one of grief. “And what of your brother?”

Wes blinked. This surprised him. “I thought you’d know,” he admitted.

“Know what?” the woman asked, her voice full of dread.

“No,” Wes shook his head. “I don’t know anything. I thought you’d have heard something about him. I thought he might even be here.”

She drew back. “No, Wesley, not after that day. No.”

“So it’s true—” boomed a deep voice.

Wes looked up at the sound of the deep, creaky voice that had spoken. He felt almost weak with relief that the old man was still alive. “Hello, Arthur,” Wes said.

Arthur Rose shuffled forward. He’d aged considerably these last years. “I knew you’d come back,” the old man said. “Not that it ever stopped us from worrying.”

Wes accepted the handshake and felt himself dragged into a bear hug. “You’re home,” Arthur said.

Inez lifted both hands to her mouth, temporarily overwhelmed with emotion. “Oh, Lord, Wesley. You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

Arthur clapped him on the shoulder. “You are that.”

“Is this my home?” Wes asked abruptly. He couldn’t take the suspense any longer. He couldn’t be here if the answer was no.

Inez and Arthur looked at him strangely, then exchanged a look between themselves then looked back to him before either of them spoke.

“Of course it is,” Inez said in a breathy voice.

“He doesn’t know,” Arthur said to her. “I told you he wouldn’t know. He left, remember?”

Inez was pushing on his shoulder. “Let’s go in.”

Wes let himself be led inside. He'd come for answers and it was time to get them. He looked around as he followed Inez into the kitchen, noting that nothing seemed to have changed.

"Sit," Inez said, as she, herself, took a chair.

"I'll stand," Wes said.

Arthur sat. He could see the toll the past had taken on Wesley, and it made his heart feel heavy.

Wes grabbed a ladder-back chair and pulled it back against him. "You cared for my father," he said, staring down at his hands.

"Of course we did," Inez replied.

"I meant Arthur," Wes said, looking up into the watery gray eyes of the old man. "You took care of him in the end."

"I hope I always took care of him," Arthur said. "And you."

"Was he my father?" Wes asked, point blank.

Arthur's eyes widened and he burst out laughing. "Well, if not, how do you explain that you were his spitting image?"

"That last day," Wes said, "Alexander told me he wasn't my father."

Arthur sighed. "He was your father, Wesley," he stated in a flat voice.

"How do you explain that Alexander and I look so different," Wes challenged.

"Not just look different. Are different. Or were," he finished quietly. "We don't know if he's alive anymore than you do."

"Wesley," Inez said gently.

"I'll tell him," Arthur said gravely, his eyes on Wes. "Your father married your mother, God rest her soul, when Alex was three."

Wes blinked. "What?"

"Your father loved him. He wanted you two raised as brothers, real brothers. And he treated you both the same. He loved you both. I don't know why Alex could never let it be."

Wes felt lightheaded.

"Sit down," Arthur growled.

This time, Wes obeyed.

“How many times did I tell you not to take anything Alex said to heart?” Arthur said, frowning darkly.

“Why did no one tell me the truth?” Wes asked in a weak voice.

“I just told you. Your father—”

Wes closed his eyes and nodded. God above, he was stupid! Why had he never figured out the truth before, when it was so bloody obvious?

Inez and Arthur exchanged another worried look.

“You were always all heart, boy,” Arthur said, his voice more gentle than before.

Wes clutched his hands more tightly together, determined his emotions would stay in check.

“You’re just like your father that way.”

“The inheritance,” Inez said, speaking quietly, reverently.

Wes opened his eyes and stared at the table before him.

“When the rebellion began and Alex let his position be known—”

“Yes, I remember it well,” Wes said bitterly.

“Your father didn’t want to come between the two of you, but you know he supported independence.”

Wes frowned. Had he known that? Had they ever discussed it? The arguments had all been between Alex and himself. He looked at Arthur but he was thinking of his father, who had suffered a fit that had cost him the use of one side of his body and his speech. A person could understand what he said if they were willing to be patient and really listen, but Wes had been young and full of many things, patience not being among them.

“He told Alexander if that was what he truly felt, then he should take his inheritance, the value of half his estate, and go to England,” Arthur continued. “Your father never doubted the patriots would be victorious, you see, and he felt that Alex would never be safe after that.” Arthur paused as Wes absorbed this. He could see it was a shock to the younger man. “We had it all put in writing and Alex took his inheritance.”

Wes blinked. “He did?”

“He did. We don’t know if he survived the rebellion or not. I hope he did, but, one way or the other, we won’t hear from him again.” He paused and then added, “I don’t believe.”

“You left so suddenly,” Inez said. “We could have told you all this after your father was gone but—”

“We never expected you to run off,” Arthur said severely. “You ought not to have done that.”

“We’ve worried and prayed for you,” Inez said.

“That’s right, damn you,” Arthur thundered.

That did it. The dam within Wes broke and he laughed and cried at the same time. It was too much emotion to keep bottled and the more he let out, the more rushed in to take its place—grief, celebration, relief. Inez and Arthur both moved in to hold him and to reassure him that he was indeed home.

## Chapter 16

George Lloyd couldn't believe his good fortune when he looked out his window to see Wesley returning. And here he was, agonizing over what to write in a letter. "Hail the great Hale," George said, already getting up to intercept his foe. Talking would be so much better than writing. For one thing, had he written, he wouldn't have got to see the look on the major's face when he found out.

Elizabeth had been glorious in both beauty and charm last night at the ball. In a shimmering gold gown that had brought out the beauty of her pale green eyes, she awed everyone she met. It was as if she was lit from within. He hadn't been able to take his eyes off of her.

She honored him with a dance, one dance, during which she'd kept some distance between them. Foolish woman; her resistance just made him want her more. Of course, she didn't really know him yet. She'd learn.

It was a queer thing to think back on how frustrated he'd been midway through the evening. He'd been trying to get Elizabeth's attention, to no avail, when Nordstrom appeared by his side with a curt, two-word message. "She's taken."

"Whom do you mean?" he'd asked coolly.

John Paul merely grinned and strolled on. The bastard. He'd felt so agitated at that point that he left the ballroom. He walked upstairs to cool his head and take a piss, never expecting the solution to his dilemma to be presented, especially one conveyed by a silky female voice.

"I know things about her," said the voice.

The voice took him by surprise, and he turned from a corner of the guestroom he'd been assigned, cock still in his hand, to see the maid he'd noticed earlier. She had dark expressive eyes and a sensual manner of moving. He almost laughed at the sheer gall of the chit. "Do you mind?" he asked, turning back around to finish his piss.

"Not at all."

She actually had the nerve to step in and close the door behind her. "What can I do for you?" he asked, his back still to her.

"Miss Gordon, who I've noticed you watching," the chit said. "I know things about her."

"What things?" George said in a bored voice. He turned to face the maid. "You nervy little bitch."

She smiled. "My name is Eunice."

"Why would I care what a maid's name is?" he asked coldly. He snapped his fingers twice. "That's all I need to know. There's your name right there."

"Fine, then." She shrugged and turned to walk off.

"What things?" he snapped.

Eunice turned back to him and surveyed him up and down. It was a look that made him want to tie her down and lash her until she screamed for mercy.

"About a scar on her body. In a personal place most people don't know about."

His mouth suddenly watered, picturing where it might be. "Where?" he asked, his voice gruff with arousal.

She laughed.

He narrowed his eyes at her and took a few steps forward. "You're going to pay for that insolent laugh at my expense."

She watched him, her dark eyes gleaming, and she didn't back off a step. "So sorry, sir. Insolence seems to be a problem with me."

"Ahhh, that's what you like," he guessed. "You're a little bitch in heat who needs to be beaten by her master."

"Do you want to be my master?" Eunice cooed seductively.



He took off his jacket and dropped it on the bed. "Yes, for a while. I think I do." He reached for her and began to remove her clothing. She'd had to beg him not to rip it. "Then get it off," he ordered.

He'd taken down his breeches and began stroking himself as he watched her undress. "Why did you mention Miss Gordon's scar?" he asked, yanking on the base of his shaft, the way he liked it.

"I thought you might want a way to get her."

"Hurry up. How do you mean get her? How would I get her with that knowledge?"

"Use it on Major Hale," she said. She heard his breath catch and she saw the slow smile spread over his face.

"Get me that grease over there," he pointed to a small jar on his dressing table. "Now, grease me," he ordered, when she'd returned with it. She did, in a slow, practiced movement. "So he knows about the scar, does he?"

She nodded. "That's right."

"Grease your ass," he said. He waited for a reaction, preferably fear, but instead she calmly stuck her forefinger all the way in the grease and handed the jar back to him. He watched as she walked to the bed and climbed on, assuming the doggie position. She spread her legs wide and kept close to the end of the bed for his convenience. Twisting her upper body so she could see him, she reached around and stuck her greased finger inside her ass, moving it in and out. Her lips were open and she moaned softly. The sight of it made him hard and impatient, and he moved forward to give it to her.

With one hand, he reached up and took hold of her shoulder, and with the other he positioned the head of his cock at her anus and shoved it in all at once, pulling her back against him as he did. He slid in with a satisfied grunt then grabbed her hips, rocking her into his thrusts for maximum penetration. "Had some passage down this road," he said brokenly.

She was smart enough not to answer, he noticed. Come to think about it, she wasn't even whimpering. He liked virgin ass much better. In fact, there wasn't much that was better in life than

a tight, virgin asshole. The kind Elizabeth Gordon would have, he was sure. He closed his eyes and imagined he was laying claim to Elizabeth's ass. She'd be crying and moaning, perhaps even screaming. Yes, screaming. He liked it when they screamed. He'd trained his staff to ignore any screaming, male or female, they heard after a certain time in the evening and in particular rooms of the house. Rooms he would have Elizabeth in.

Perhaps he'd take his time with her. Make her take his thumb, then two fingers. Oh yes, he'd stand her up in front of the looking glass in the red room so he could watch her face as he stretched her. That image did it for him and he came with a series of muffled cries.

He pulled out and went for a washcloth to wipe himself off. "Where is the scar?"

"On her side. Here," Eunice showed him.

"What else do you know?"

"She's not very experienced," Eunice said. "She makes noises. Cries out a lot." She knew that firsthand from listening outside the door.

"I can imagine," he said.

\* \* \* \*

George stepped outside, and the cold morning air snapped him back to the task at hand. Wes was coming out of the stables. "Major Hale," George greeted.

Wes felt a flush of dislike. "Lloyd. How was the ball?"

"Elizabeth was magnificent," George said with an easy smile.

Wes felt himself freeze.

"I want to talk to you about her, man to man," George said in a low tone. "I know we've had our differences of opinion—"

"What about her?" Wes snapped. He did not want to discuss Elizabeth with George Lloyd.

"I want her," George said. "I'm going to be blunt and I trust it won't go any further. One night with her is not enough. I want her for my very own."

The words caused a sharp pain in the pit of Wes's stomach. "What are you talking about?"

“I’m referring to last night. The ball.”

There was a moment of silence before Wes could bring himself to ask. “What about it?”

George looked uncomfortable. “We’re both gentlemen here. Let’s not go into too much detail.”

“Go into detail,” Wes said firmly, nodding his head for emphasis. “What the hell are you saying?”

“I’m saying that Elizabeth and I—” he sighed as if he really didn’t want to be saying it, “—were intimate.”

Wes wasn’t even aware he was shaking his head, horror etched on his features.

George kept talking. “She admitted to me that she’s been with you and while I’m not perfectly comfortable with that—”

Wes couldn’t hear anything for the roaring in his head. “You’re a liar,” he hissed.

George broke off, shocked. “I did not mean to upset you. I never dreamed you truly had feelings for her.” Hale was visibly upset, practically panting like a dog, and it was even more wonderful than he’d imagined.

“You are a liar,” Wes repeated.

“Look, man, collect yourself,” George said quietly. “I’m not lying. Why would I?” He paused. “She has a scar, here,” he indicated his side.

Wes took a step backwards. It felt as if a great weight had just slammed into his chest.

“I don’t want to humiliate anyone,” George said. “I just want Elizabeth.”

“Then take her,” Wes said. It came out in a hoarse whisper. He turned and started inside, blinded from the agony of betrayal. He’d been away for only a few nights and she’d betrayed him—and with George Lloyd.

George crossed his arms and watched the famous Major James Wesley Hale head inside on unsteady legs, knowing he would savor these last few minutes for a long, long time.

\* \* \* \*

Inside, Wes ducked inside the first empty room he came to, a small withdrawing room that typically wasn't used until afternoon. He had to slow his breathing and calm himself. Betrayal! Was he never to know anything except betrayal? He hated Elizabeth Gordon. She was a whore! A whore! He clutched his head, wanting to scream it.

He would leave without a word to her. Not one word. Let Lloyd mention that they'd conferred about her infidelity. The whore! He wouldn't see John Paul or Maggie either because he couldn't bear explaining. He didn't want to admit what a blind, stupid fool he was. Betrayal! First his father had lied—

He drew in a sharp breath and lifted his head. His father had not lied. Alexander had lied to hurt him. And he'd played right into his brother's hands. He'd overreacted. He'd run off to join the rebellion without a word to anyone who loved him and could have set him straight. He sat down hard.

"Elizabeth," he whispered, picturing her face as she'd opened herself to him. He leaned forward, trying to clear his head but all he could do was think of her. "I love you," she'd said. He could picture it so clearly, he could actually hear her voice in his mind. She loved him. She would never have allowed George Lloyd to bed her.

*Then how did he know about the scar? How did he know I'd been with her?*

Answers. He needed answers. He would speak to her. He would have the truth. He would learn from the mistakes of his past. If there had been betrayal, he would leave. He would leave and George Lloyd could have her. There was only one way to find out. Wes stood and went to find Elizabeth.

The house was filled with guests who'd stayed over after the ball, but he ignored everyone he passed. He didn't even really see them. In the back of his mind, he knew he was attracting attention but he didn't care. All he cared about was seeing the woman he'd claimed for his own.

Upstairs, the hall was empty and he strode forward ignoring the small, "Sir!" he heard being repeated behind him.

“Please, sir!”

He whirled around in what looked to be such a rage that Verity actually lurched backward.

He started to snap at her, but the young maid standing before him had been crying. He could tell by swelling of her face and the bright pink tip of her nose. “Yes? What is it?” he asked as gently as he was capable of in his anxious state.

The girl moved her mouth to speak but no sound came out. She was wringing her hands pathetically.

Wes walked to her. “What’s your name?”

“Verity.”

“What is it, Verity? What did you want to tell me?”

“I...I’ve done something terrible.”

“Did you break something accidentally?” he guessed.

She shook her head. “I help dress Miss Gordon,” she said in a shaky voice.

Wes drew back, steeling himself to have his worst fear realized. Verity had his interest now. “Go on.”

“I...all us girls, the servants, sh-share a room.”

Wes shook his head, not following.

“I sleep with Eunice most of the time. She’s...got feelings for you,” Verity said in an embarrassed gush. “Designs, is what Mrs. Tidwell called it. I told her. Today. I didn’t want Miss Gordon to be hurt. Or you.”

Wes was still not following. “Me?”

“She was interested in hearing about Miss Gordon,” Verity tried to explain.

“Who was? Mrs. Tidwell?”

“No, Eunice. Eunice wanted to know all about her. I—” Verity dropped her head in shame. “—told her about the scar on her side.”

Wes drew a sharp breath, beginning to understand. He swallowed. “I’m sure you didn’t mean any harm,” he said.

“Eunice said she’s going off with you.”

“No, she’s not,” Wes assured her. “Verity, did Eunice conspire with one of the guests—”

He didn't need to say more since Verity was nodding vigorously. She was grateful that he'd said it, so that she didn't have to.

"I'm sorry," Verity said. "I'll be punished. Not that that's what I'm sorry for."

"You won't be punished if I can help it," Wes said, reaching out and patting her arm. "Thank you."

Verity could only blink in utter astonishment.

\* \* \* \*

Wes knocked once and walked in. He felt light and strange after the conflicting emotions that had raged in him over the last few minutes.

Elizabeth was out on the balcony and she turned, saw it was him, and smiled the most glorious smile he'd ever seen. "You're back! I missed you so much," she said as she rushed to him. "You missed the ball."

He took hold of her shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes for any sign of betrayal. There was none. "Do you love me?"

Her smile dimmed and her eyes flicked over his face. "Are you all right?" she worried. "Did something happen at Pinegrove?"

"Just answer me, woman," he implored.

"I don't have to," she said. Her voice was gentle, her eyes clear and searching.

"Why not?"

"Because you already know it," she said simply.

He appeared to be stunned, and he pulled her to him with such a force, it robbed her of breath. She didn't try to pull away. Something had happened and he needed her. "You're the man of my dreams," she said. "The future father of my children. You know I love you. I love you with everything I am and everything I'll ever be."

"We're going back to Pinegrove," he breathed into her hair. "We're going home."

"I am home," she said.

He relaxed his hold on her and pulled back to look into her face.

“If I’m with you, I’m home,” she said. “And I should know, Wes, I’ve waited my whole life to feel that way.”

He kissed her, then pushed her an arm’s length away. “I need to have something to eat and then I want to leave. Can you be ready in an hour?”

“Yes, but why the rush?”

“If I see George Lloyd again, I may kill him.”

Wes was serious, and it sent a shiver through her. “Why?” she breathed.

“Because he has designs on you.”

Elizabeth shook her head adamantly. “No, you’re mistaken. In fact, believe it or not, I think he has designs on that dark-haired maid named Eunice. I saw them—” Elizabeth broke off the explanation because Wes had burst out laughing. “What are you laughing at?”

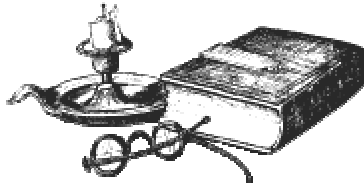
“Oh, Liz. My sweet Elizabeth. We have so much to talk about!”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elle Emriche is the penname for Jane Shoup, author of *The Melodeon* and the soon to be released suspense thriller, *Pedestals*, as well as *Revenge at Mirror Lake*, another Torrid selection from Whiskey Creek Press. She resides in Greensboro, North Carolina with her husband and daughters.



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