

The Unlikely Lord: McNaughtons' First Christmas

By Sullivan Clarke

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Chapter One

Mary Cromwell wasn't used to being the strong one, but as she felt her husband shudder beside her, she squeezed his hand reassuringly. It seemed unfair, less than a year after meeting his father, Edmund was now walking the long, cold path from the chapel to the MacNaughton family crypt. Ahead of them, the glass coach bearing the body of the man who had acknowledged his only surviving son drew ever closer to the stoic stone structure.

In the valley below, MacNaughton manor glowed with the lights of Epiphany, a stark contrast to the barren hillside where the crypt, surrounded by ancient graves, waited to receive the next to last of the male MacNaughton line.

It was Edmund who was the last, and if he suspected his father's admission of paternity was borne of a desire to see his line continue, he did not mention it. It had been almost twelve months to the day earlier when Edmund, a servant in the Cromwell household, stood stunned along with everyone else when the visiting lord acknowledged that the young man before him was the result of a liason with the village midwife. The only one who had not been completely surprised had been Mary Cromwell. The young man who had served her family had never seemed to fit the image of a servant. His stance was too straight, his features too handsome and refined, his manner too decisive.

He'd been a leader then, too, and more than once Mary had watched - fascinated - as he spanked one of the female servants for some act of laziness or dishonesty. And then one fateful day he's caught her spying and humiliated her so completely she'd thought she could not endure another day alive. But in time they'd spoken again, and professed a mutual attraction. It had been bittersweet for the both of them, for they were from different worlds - or they were until the day Lord MacNaughton finally claimed Edmund as his son.

After that everything had happened in a dreamlike, dizzying haste. Edmund's physical resemblance to the wealthy lord was unmistakable and hushed tongues that may have wagged to the contrary. Edmund was removed from the house to go live with his father, and Mary had been devastated until a week later when the Lord MacNaughton and his newly minted son had shown up so that Edmund could ask for Mary's hand. It was a union that delighted Mary, thrilled her mother, and surprised her father who had no knowledge of his daughter's growing attraction for the young man who had been their servant. But given the vast wealth Edmund stood to inherit, Cromwell was quick to sanction the union.

They were wed shortly afterwards at the behest of Lord MacNaughton, who admitted privately to the young couple that his declining physical state had not been merely due to losing his wife and two sons in close proximity. He was sick, and he told them that nothing would make him happier than to see his son Edmund wed and have a child on the way within the year.

"It is the vanity in me," he said, "that I would see my line continued through this union. It is my dying wish."

As Mary trod along beside Edmund, she found herself blinking back tears, for almost ten months after the wedding she had still failed to conceive a child. Each month when her show of blood arrived, she felt more anxious and more convinced that Edmund was harboring disappointment that he was simply not expressing.

The stress put her in a rather bad mood at times. One night after a particularly sweet session of lovemaking, Edmund kissed her on the shoulder.

"I love you, Mary MacNaughton," he said.

"You won't for long if I keep disappointing you," she said sadly.

He grew quiet. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Your father is ill, Edmund, and he may die before I can provide him assurance that I will bear children to carry on the MacNaughton name."

"And you think I'm so cruel a man that I would blame you for not yet swelling with a child that it takes both of us to make?"

Mary flushed and looked away. "My father turned to other women when my mother did not give him sons. Your father turned to other women too. It is the way of men..."

"Mary, stand up." Edmund took the hand of his naked wife and sat up on the edge of the bed. Raising her to her feet, he led her round till she was standing in front of him. In the moonlight coming through the window, she could see that his expression had turned grim and purposeful. Mary, by now, knew that expression well.

"I did not mean to imply.." she began, but he cut her off.

"Whether you meant to or not is irrelevant, Wife. You would suggest that I would put you or any children we have through the pain I endured growing up? We've spoken of my childhood, of the sadness I felt at not having a father, of my mother's pain at knowing the man she loved was husband to another, of the guilt. To even think I've learned nothing from those sad lessons is an insult, and I will not be insulted in my own house."

Mary felt herself tossed over Edmund's lap, but this time she was shedding tears even before his hand descended upon her smooth bum in the first painful blow. Her husband was right; he'd confided in her on more than one occasion how the sad circumstances of his birth affected his mother and robbed him of a father's guidance. Even though Lord MacNaughton had finally claimed him, part of Edmund struggled with the timing; had the Lord's two legitimate sons not died, would he have ever admitted that the young servant was his blood? Edmund never asked his father, partly because he knew his sire was

ashamed of what he had done, but also because he knew the man would be honest and in that honesty might come new hurt and resentment.

Over his lap, Mary felt shame at causing her husband another kind of hurt. She was the one person he should never have to doubt, and yet she had prejudged him based on the actions of great men with little regard for their actions when she knew her husband was different.

He was spanking her hard now, his hand rising and falling in steady, stinging blows that covered the span of her little bottom and had her sobbing a non-stop stream of apologies. When Edmund had worked as a servant in her father's house she had spied on him when he spanked an errant serving girl. When he caught her, she admitted that she'd been fascinated by the punishment and secretly wanted the same done to her, for she'd known nothing but indulgence. Edmund told her once that if she ever married a man who would correct her in such a fashion, she would quickly lose her romantic notion of spanking.

Now, whenever he spanked her, she realized all too well the truth of those words. Edmund was a strict, consistent disciplinarian and in the short time they'd been married his firm hand had substantially improved Mary's behavior. Edmund, while formerly a servant, had always maintained a gentleman's manner while his highborn wife had a bit of the chit in her and enjoyed defiance and gossip for its own sake. When she began to go astray under his watch, he quickly and sternly corrected her by spanking and Mary, who at once spent hours thinking of ways to trick him into correcting her, now spent a great deal of time making sure she avoided Edmund's particular form of justice.

She was bawling unintelligibly when the spanking finally ended and he tipped her up to stand back in front of him.

"I trust you will think twice before insulting the character of the man who loves you?" he asked. His voice was firm, but not unkind. Even in tears Mary was a beautiful picture.

She nodded, and Edmund sighed and pulled her into his arms.

"It is true that my father would die happier knowing there was an heir on the way, Mary. But it is God who gives and takes life. If He deems it fit to bless your belly with our child before my father passes, then it would be a joy. But if he does not deem to do so until after my father dies, then we shall have to accept His will. In the meantime, we will be patient, for whenever we do learn that we are to become parents our joy will be no more or less greater for its timing."

He kissed her nose.

"And as for me, I shall enjoy the act of getting you with child until it happens."

She looked up from underneath her moist lashes and managed a smile, even as she rubbed a bum that had gone from scalding to throbbing, sore tenderness.

“As do I, she admitted.”

Edmund laid back, pulling her on top of him. Mary allowed this, and straddled him, her silken thighs holding him willing hostage as she lowered herself onto his ready cock. He reached up, gently cupping her sore bottom and she moaned with a mixture of pleasure pain as he squeezed her possessively. Mary began to rock back and forth, savoring the slow, exquisite build of pleasure that culminated in their mutual starburst release. She leaned forward and kissed him before falling into a happy and dreamless sleep.

It had been such a wonderful night, even if she had gotten a spanking. Edmund had fallen asleep with a smile on his handsome face. His visage now was so much different. He looked drawn and sad as he trudged the frozen crown behind the coach. It had stopped now, for they had reached the crypt. Here would his father rest eternally, as would Edmund and Mary at some yet-to-be-determined time. The crypt was on a hillside overlooking the large stone manor. In the waning light of day, the windows glowed every more brightly with holiday warmth. The priest chanted as the coffin was lifted from the coach. The inside of the crypt was large, the walls around filled with spaces where former MacNaughtons slept. Mary shed a tear as her father-in-law was slipped into one of the spaces; when she stole a glance at Edmund, he was bravely attempting to blink his back, but he could not stop his lip from trembling. Mary could not help but wonder what he was thinking. Did he cry for the loss of a father he'd only just begun to know? Or did he cry because of the years they'd been apart while the old Lord put his hopes and dreams and love into legitimate sons, only turning to Edmund when those lads were lost.

Mary tried not to think of what she sometimes wanted to say to soothe Edmund - that even if he did miss all those years of having a father, now he'd been made a very wealthy man - one with a title and lands and respect that came with an old and lauded name. After announcing to the world that Edmund was his son, Lord MacNaughton had moved him into the manor and instantly began to school him in the running of his estate and various businesses. When Edmund came to call on Mary, he confided in her that the pallor some had noticed in MacNaughton, who'd been dubbed “The Sad Lord” had not simply been caused by grief, but by an illness that was now racking him with fever and coughs that often produced blood. It saddened Edmund even further to entertain the ugly truth that his father knew his time was short, and had likely turned to him because he could not bear to see his estate fall into the hands of Lord MacNaughton's estranged brother.

But even with those nagging questions, Edmund enjoyed the company of his father, and his father him. He often expressed regret that the circumstances of Edmund's birth had not been different.

“You were the son I should have had above the covers,” he said to Edmund on the day of his wedding to Mary. “Strong, true, smart. I would convey my apologies to your mother, but she will have nothing to do with me. She refused to speak to me after I broke her heart; she would not forgive my lies and rejected my offers of money to support you...”

Edmund himself had not spoken to his mother since his father had claimed him. He'd sent word, but his uncle told him that she felt betrayed that he was taken in by the man who had abandoned her. She also feared that the sudden wealth would change him. Edmund had been saddened, but had not pushed her. He hoped she would eventually come around, but was still stung that she'd not come to his wedding to Mary.

Now his wife squeezed his hand as he watched the stone door close the door on his father forever.

"I love you, Edmund."

He looked down at her.

"And I love you," he said. "You're all the family I have left now, wife."

Mary shook her head. "You have your mother."

"A mother who feels I've spurned her by accepting my father's name," he said.

Mary put her arm around Edmund and looked up at him. "And you don't think there's any way you can redeem yourself in her eyes? You're her son. Surely she can't be that stubborn."

"Only a person who'd not met Sylvia Leeds would say such a thing," Edmund said with a sad laugh. "My mother is nothing if not stubborn."

"Did she resent your father so for spurning her?" Mary asked.

"No, it wasn't her being spurned that angered her so, but the injury to her pride," he said.

"But surely she knew how these great men are.." Mary asked.

"My father hid his station from her," Edmund said. "My mother was - is - a remarkably beautiful woman. My father saw her when he was passing through the village and inquired about her. He found out that she was a tireless advocate for the poor and downtrodden and had a disdain for the aristocracy. He came back, disguised as a traveling man and seduced her. He'd thought it to be a solitary dalliance, but he was smitten with her and sought to set her up as his mistress. She would have none of it, even after he revealed his true identity. When she discovered she was pregnant with me, she rejected his offers of help. Gifts of money and finery were returned. He gave up after realizing he could not lure her. She never forgave him for the deception, for fooling her."

"So she kept you from him?" Mary asked.

Edmund shook his head.

"I would not put it in such a manner. Even if my mother had allowed herself to be cared for as a mistress, my father never would have openly claimed me. Circumstance - not love - forced his hand..."

"He did love you, Edmund," Mary said.

"He came to love me, yes," Edmund said. "But I am not without my mother's pragmatism. I know that were it not for his being without another heir, he would never have sought me out. Now I have wealth, but am without both parents."

Mary felt saddened by his tone.

"Don't give up," she said. "It is, after all, the season of Epiphany. It is the season of hope; who knows what may yet happen."

Chapter Two

Now that she had a household of her own, Mary found herself wishing that she'd paid closer attention to the running of a large household. Her sisters had all paid heed to their mother's instruction, but Mary - in her own defiant manner - had enjoyed distressing her mother by telling her that she'd had no need to learn of such domestic things since she would not be getting married.

So when Mary did find herself married, she also found herself in the rather embarrassing predicament of living with a man who knew more about the running of a fine house than his well-bred wife did. After all, Edmund had paid close attention to the instruction of the head of the household staff at Cromwell Manor, where the staff was well-disciplined and worked seamlessly day by day.

It bothered Mary that her husband possessed more domestic knowledge than she did. Now that she had a house of her own to run, and a man who made her feel like a woman, she wanted to fully enjoy her role as lady of the manor. But a recurring issue in their short marriage had been her constant missteps in running a fine house. She had no knowledge of how to manage a household staff, and when the head servant came to her with a question she often did not know how to answer him. She filled the shopping list with foods that were out of season, berated servants for not putting out flowers that were yet to bloom and dismissed questions the staff put to her as "unimportant."

Edmund knew that Mary had been raised without much instruction. He knew that she was now ready to assume the role as adult. But he also recognized that she needed a basic education in running the house. Unfortunately, she was as stubborn as she was clueless and now that his father had passed and it was just the two of them, the new Lord MacNaughton realized he had a whole new set of problems on his hand.

Mary refused to take responsibility for her mistakes. If something went wrong, she blamed the servants rather than allow that the fault lay in her. Had she been married to another man, perhaps she may have gotten away with the attempt to foist her mistakes off on the household staff. But as a former servant himself, Edmund knew how hard the servants worked. And he was not about to allow his wife to belittle them because of her own shortcomings.

Epiphany brought with it a whole new set of issues. There was decorating to be done, gatherings to be arranged and guests to invite. The household staff had already done much of the decorating and in the last days of Lord MacNaughton's illness neither Edmund nor Mary had paid much heed to the trappings of the season. But now that word of his death was spreading and condolences were trickling in, along with them came a new sense of urgency to ready the house for distant relatives and friends who would no doubt come to pay their respects to the grieving couple.

"Perhaps I should oversee these matters, being that I have more experience running a household."

This caused Mary to scowl.

"I am not a dolt," she said, bristling. "And while it is true that I should have learned more at my mother's knee, I have learned much in the months we've been married. I will manage just fine!"

Later Edmund would blame himself for not trusting more in his own instincts. On the evening after his father's funeral, he came in from visiting his father's resting place to find the main hall filled smelling of smoke. His heart was in his throat as he rushed to the source of the problem - someone had put greenwood in the fireplace that now belched clouds of soot.

Beside the fireplace he found his wife berating a new houseboy between fits of coughing.

"Are you an idiot?" she asked. "This wood is burning all wrong!"

"I told you ma'am!" The lad looked stricken as his mistress regarded him angrily. "The holly was too green to cut and burn! But you told me to cut it anyway!"

"You didn't say it would smoke like this!" she hissed.

"I told you it was too green!" he replied.

"Do NOT speak abruptly to me!" Mary snapped. "How am I to know what that means? You should have told me! You aren't fit to serve in this house! Put this fire out and then pack your things and go!"

"Mary!" Edmund pulled his gloves off and threw them on the table, angry.

He looked at the young man. "Leave us."

"I beg of you," the boy said, stricken. "Please don't relieve me of service."

"You are not being relived of service, lad," Edmund said. "Go assist the cook; she needs help in the kitchen. Leave the fire and the lady of the house for me to tend."

The boy fled and Edmund, scowling, stormed past Mary, knelt down and emptied the ash can onto the fire until the flames were smothered.

"How could you do that?" asked Mary incredulously. "How could you undermine my authority to a servant?"

He stood and took her by the arm. Wordlessly, he pulled her from the room. As they were exiting, they passed Adams, the head of household staff. The older man had an alarmed look on his face. Edmund quickly apprised him of the situation and asked him to open the windows and clear the room of smoke.

"In the meantime the lady and I will be in our chambers. See to it that we are not disturbed during our...discussion."

Did the servant smirk a bit at this? Mary could have sworn that he glanced at her with a self-satisfied smile. She wanted to note this, but Edmund was already walking towards the stairs, pushing her ahead of him. She could sense that he was angry, and knew that his purposeful manner did not bode well for her. He was going to spank her. And for what? For being rude to a servant?

Once upstairs, he pushed her into their room and shut the door. Mary instantly began her defense.

"Edmund," she said. "I know you are upset, but you have no reason to be. You are no longer a servant. Do you not understand that? Your allegiance is to me now, not the serving class!"

But Edmund had already taken off his jacket, and as he began rolling up his sleeves, he fixed his wife with a stern look.

"So you think that a change in my station has changed my character?" he asked, advancing towards her.

"N-no!" Mary said nervously, backing away. "But it does mean that you should remember where your allegiance lies, Edmund. It lies with me, not with the people who work for us."

"Oh, I agree." He'd rolled up his sleeves and was reaching for her now. "That is why I am so determined to give you what your parents would not - a stern lesson in how to treat others." He sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled his struggling wife over his lap. "Had I no allegiance to you I would not care how badly you behaved, nor how shabbily you treated people who have done nothing to deserve such ill treatment."

"Edmund, no!" Mary tried to stop him from pulling up the heavy fabric of her gown, but already she could feel the cool air on her legs as he pushed the hem up to the small of her back and trapped the layers of cloth underneath his arm. She felt him bare her bottom and whimpered in fearful expectation at the double humiliation of knowing that she'd not only made another bad call in directing the household staff, but now stood to be spanked for her actions.

"Please don't!" She tried one last, plaintive plea for mercy although she knew from experience that once Edmund decided she had earned a spanking there was no way she was going to get out of it. He was holding her fast now; the strong arm that pinned the fabric to her lower back was wrapped around her tiny waist. There was little she could do

except beat her fists on the bed in frustration as his free hand descended on her helpless bottom with a resounding “SMACK!”

Mary yelped from the pain, and by the fourth resolute blow she’d dissolved into tears. Her pain tolerance wasn’t very high, and each time she found herself over her husband’s lap she found herself wishing she were less impulsive, found herself wishing she had stopped and remembered how bad Edmund’s spankings hurt before doing something she knew would warrant punishment.

Edmund had assured her that his reaction to her defiance or bad behavior would be consistent. If she broke his rules, she would be spanked. In his mind, a lady was no less above a spanking than the lowliest made. In his mind, everyone was answerable to authority.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” she cried. She did not have to look back to know that the fair skin of her bottom was reddening most rapidly under her husband’s large, punishing hand. Each determined swat hurt worse than its predecessor.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!
SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!
SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

Finally the blows slowed and subsided, leaving on the sound of her pitiful sobs. The bedclothes underneath her face were sodden with tears. When he tipped her off his lap, Mary stood on shaky legs. The heavy material of her skirts brushed her bottom roughly as they cascaded back in place, causing a fresh round of sobs. Her hand immediately flew back to rub the sting from her bottom, but Edmund intersected it.

“No, Mary,” he said firmly. “You need to feel every moment of pain from this spanking.”

Then he did something he’d never done before. Rather than hold her close and talk to her about what she’d done, he led her to the corner and ordered her to put her nose where the two walls joined together.

“You will stand here,” he said, “and think on your vanity. Just as I have found myself elevated, sometimes the reverse happens and grand families find themselves falling from their place in society. Yes, it is rare, but it does happen. And should such a fate ever befall you I fear you would have a difficult time finding the humility you would need to live such a humble life. I want you to think on that, Mary, until I come back to fetch you. And should I reenter this room to find you rubbing your sore bottom, you will find yourself back over my knee. Understood?”

She nodded, unable to answer through her sobs.

Mary heard the door click as Edmund left and stood there, reflecting on what he’d said. She remembered when she used to surreptitiously watch him when he’d worked as a servant in

her father's house. She'd hated her existence then, and romanticized the life of the servants who returned each evening to their little thatch-roofed homes. They were able to marry whom they chose and were free from the expectations of society - free to laugh, to express themselves, free to love...

She'd never thought to be fortunate enough to marry Edmund, and she knew that had he not been revealed as a member of the upper class, they'd still be apart. But it was at times like these that she realized there was still a cultural gulf between the two, and as much as she tried she could not escape the condescending mindset of her class. Edmund's words had been sobering. If they were to lose their fortune would she be happy? She was so used to getting her way; until marriage to her stern husband she always had. Now that she lived under his steady hand of correction, she was more careful. But her arrogance had not diminished, and she secretly feared that her behavior may eventually become intolerable to her husband. Mary wondered if it were happening already. Edmund always held her after spanking her. But this time he'd left her alone with her pain, sorrow and shame.

Mary could hear the door open. She did not turn around and stood there meekly with her hands at her sides, sniffing pitifully even though she desperately wanted to rub the soreness in her bottom. Perhaps Edmund would, as he sometimes did after a spanking, when he was sure she was contrite. Perhaps he'd take her to bed, kiss the tears away from her cheeks. If she was sufficiently chastened, he may even make love to her.

But this time was different.

"Dry your eyes, Mary," he said. "And make yourself presentable. I would have you go downstairs and apologize."

She looked at him, shocked. "To whom?"

"To the lad you offended," he said.

Fresh tears sparkled in her eyes. "You would choose him over me?" she asked.

"It is not a matter of preference," he replied. "You are my wife and the love of my life. But you are also a reflection on me. Your behavior speaks to my leadership as your husband."

"But he is a..." Her voice trailed off. It was no use.

"Five minutes," he said. "I expect you downstairs, and when you arrive I expect you to be the very picture of contrition."

He left and Mary stood there, rooted to the spot. She tried to tell herself that she should not feel betrayed, but she did. She'd been punished; she'd paid her dues. And now Edmund was going to force her to apologize to a servant? Was it not enough that half the staff had probably heard her cries as she was being punished? What did he aim to gain by

humiliating her further, unless it was to diminish the respect of the staff for her? The houseboy she'd reprimanded had only just been hired; she did not even know his name.

She looked at the clock. Three minutes had already ticked away. If she did not arrive downstairs Edmund would come back, spank her again and bring her down still crying. Mary wiped her eyes one last time, sniffed in an effort to compose herself and walked stiffly from the room. She knew as soon as she mounted the stairs that the servants knew she'd been punished. One of the girls she passed looked knowingly at her fellow maid and they did not even try to keep their voices low as they began to whisper. She distinctly heard the word "spank" and flushed deeply at how brazenly they spoke of her shame.

Downstairs her husband was waiting in the hall along with the young man and Adams, the head of household staff. Adams was vigorously apologizing for having sent the young man into tend to the fire.

"Had I known, I would have sent a senior servant with him," he was saying, but Edmund held up his hand.

"It does not matter," he replied. "My wife had no right to..." He stopped upon seeing her. "And here she is now. Mary, I believe you have something to say to this young man?" He indicated the houseboy with a nod of his head.

Mary felt her heart pound in her chest. She knew what she was about to do would earn her more punishment. But she did not care. It may be wrong, but she knew in some ways she was also right.

"I have nothing to say to him," she replied. "The matter has already been privately settled between the two of us, Edmund."

He looked at her, his jaw a straight line. It was the first time she'd ever seen Edmund look angry. His voice was low as he dismissed Adams and the houseboy.

"Don't go far," he said to Adams. "You will be returning as soon as I have set this young lady's manners to right."

"My manners are already at right," she said evenly. "It is you who are confused, husband."

Adams and the houseboy hastened out.

"You forget yourself, Mary," Edmund said.

"And you forget yourself," she replied. "Tell me, Edmund. Do you feel so guilty over leaving your social caste that you would humiliate me just to remind these servants that you are still one of them? Do you feel so out of place, so separate?"

Edmund said nothing, only regarded her silently. But already there was a flicker of discomfort in his blue eyes.

"You punished me for my rudeness, and justly," she said. "You might as well have done so publicly, and if it is approval you seek from the servants here then you may be proud to know that the serving girls do not even try to hide their mirth at my situation. They are bold enough now to laugh at me on the stairway of my own home. Perhaps they will go home tonight and tell how the servant turned lord beat his wife for being rude to one of them."

She paused. "Perhaps word of it will get to your mother, Edmund, and she will love you again."

It was a cruel gamble, the statement she made. But she knew in her heart she spoke the truth and that it would either enrage Edmund into beating her or throw the icy water of truth on him, awakening him to his own hypocrisy.

"Is that what you really think of me, then?" he asked. Edmund's expression was somewhere between indignant and hurt.

Mary sighed and walked over to him.

"You mean well in your guidance of me, Edmund," she said. "But just as I am having a difficult time adjusting to rules of my new life, so are you having a hard time adjusting to the rules of yours. You cannot straddle both worlds, Edmund, and you cannot use me as the embodiment of all you find wrong with your new life."

"That is not what I am doing," he said. "When I punish you, I do so to correct you."

"Yes," Mary said evenly. "But when you seek to humiliate me before the servants you are using me to send a message to them. And I shall not abide it. Beat me if you want to for what I say, Edmund, but if you correct me for the wrong reasons you will lose my love forever."

Edmund stared at her in silence and when he reached for Mary this time it was to pull her to him in an embrace, not to punish her.

"You are right," he said. "I have fallen short as your husband and guide, Mary. Sometimes we do not see our own sins when we are looking at the sins of others. You are right; I am over-careful with the servants and there is truth to what you say, even if I did not realize it until you pointed it out to me this very day. I do feel a certain discomfort with my sudden elevation in rank. And I am stung by my mother's rejection. I find myself confused sometimes, and regretting all that has come to me."

He stepped back and looked down at her. "All except for you," he said. "That is the one thing I am sure of. Do you forgive me, wife, for my lack of care to your feelings?"

"I do," Mary said. "And I will work harder to be more gracious to the staff. But you, Edmund, you must chastise me privately and not make it known. And you must impress upon those who work in this house that we are both to be respected."

He nodded. "I shall see to it," he said. "I suppose we have a lot to learn, the both of us."

"We do," she said. "Perhaps things will be easier once you make peace with your mother."

Edmund shook his head. "I do not think that will happen," he said.

But Mary wasn't prepared to give up so easily. Last year their fates had been changed by chance. This year she was determined to change them through action.

Chapter Three

"I am surprised you are so eager to see your mother," Edmund said the next morning when Mary announced that the time had come to visit her parents.

She looked down, not wanting to meet his gaze lest he see the lie in her eyes.

"I think the time has come for me to beg her instruction in household matters," Mary replied. "I can hardly bother Adams for his advice all day long, and besides, it is embarrassing to ask him so many questions regarding things I should already know. My mother will no doubt be pleased that I am finally come to her for help."

"But could you just not invite her here?" Edmund asked.

Mary smiled. She was touched to know her husband would miss her, but decided it might not be such a bad thing for him to spend a few nights alone in the bedchamber. A few days of abstinence combined with some time to think about the discussion they'd had the day before would perhaps make him appreciate her more.

"No," she said. "She shall travel here for the Epiphany supper this year. I need her advice on preparations. I shall be fine. The coach is solid and I'm sure you'll send me with the best driver."

"Indeed," Edmund said, and kissed his wife gently. Mary looked up at him and smiled. Her look was innocent, but underneath her mind was already going over the plan she had hatched to make her husband's holiday a memorable one. For it was not her mother she was going to see, but his.

The idea had come to her the night before. If Edmund's mother would just accept his decision to claim his father's name and estate, then he would feel that he could settle into his new life while keeping a stake in his old one. Mary wondered if Sylvia Leeds even knew that the old Lord MacNaughton had died. News traveled fast in the village, but if she were traveling about looking after the pregnant women in the countryside then there was a chance that the news may not have reached her. Mary was hoping two days would give her enough time to find her mother-in-law and convince her that she needed to make amends with the son who still loved and needed her.

Mary did not like the idea of deceiving her husband, but she knew that if she asked Edmund for permission he would tell her "no." If Sylvia Leeds were stubborn, she'd passed that trait on to her son. Mary decided it would be better to ask for forgiveness than for permission, and she envisioned a mother-son reunion so sweet that it would never occur to her grateful husband to punish her for misleading him.

She'd packed even before she'd told Edmund she was going and was relieved that he'd not forbidden her to go or - worse yet - thought to join her. She'd been certain he would not. He'd been receiving word that some of his father's distant relatives would be arriving to pay their respects. Their company would keep him at MacNaughton manner and buy her the time to do what she needed to do.

It was mid-morning when two of the servants finally finished packing her trunks into the carriage. Mary noticed that the servants were especially respectful; Edmund had obviously talked to Adams, who had put the word out that his wife be shown full respect. The two maids who had laughed at her the day before had even curtsied in the hallway and called her "ma'am" in a solicitous tone. Mary was relieved. She would need the driver of the coach to see her as an authority if she were going to get him to take a route other than what he'd been told to take.

Edmund kissed her as he helped her into the carriage.

"Be home in no less than four days, Mary," he said. "I would not have you miss our first Epiphany together."

She kissed him gently. "Nor would I," she said.

Mary settled into the seat and the door closed with a click. The carriage jolted and began to move at a brisk pace. She kept her eyes trained on the scenery as she traveled, gauging where she was from the landscape. As the light disappeared she knew she was entering the road through the thick forest that separated the two manor houses. Mary moved forward and banged on the roof.

"Driver!" she called. "When there was no response she banged again." "DRIVER!"

She heard him call to the horses to slow and sat back in her seat as the carriage stopped. The driver's seat squeaked as he hefted his portly frame from off the springs. A moment later the door opened.

"Madam?" he asked.

"There's been a change in plans," she said. "I wish to travel to the village ahead of my trip to Cromwell Manor."

The driver looked perplexed. Removing his hat, he scratched his head nervously.

"Madam, my instructions are..."

"...changing," she said firmly. "I have business in the village, and as the Lady of MacNaughton Manor in order you to follow my instructions. Are we clear?"

"You've business there? Without your husband?" he pressed skeptically.

Mary stood and exited the carriage, stepping past him.

"Were you and the rest of the staff not just informed to afford me proper respect?" she asked. It was a gamble, this question, but she was sure that Edmund had done just that after their conversation. She sighed with relief when the driver nodded in the affirmative.

"So will you take me to the village? Or will you force me to stand here outside the carriage and wait for the next passing rider who will take word to my husband that you have abandoned me here?"

The driver shook his head vigorously. "No, my lady!" he said. "No such measures are necessary." He stepped aside and opened the carriage door. "Of course I will take you to the village!"

Mary climbed back into the carriage and settled back into her seat. Her heart was pounding in her chest; if Edmund knew what she'd just done he'd spank her beyond tears. But she told herself that even if he found out, he'd be so happy to see that she'd smoothed things over with his mother that it would not matter.

The carriage was moving again now and the woods became thicker as it turned to take the path into the village. It was a notoriously dangerous road. It had been here where Edmund had saved her from the highwayman when she'd taken it upon herself to visit the village out of curiosity. She'd never gotten a chance to meet any of the other villagers, or to glimpse the world that her husband had lived in when he was not working at her family's manor. From her carriage window she could already see the little thatched cottages of the woodcutters and peat gatherers. They lived hard, sparse existences and endured hunger, sickness and brutal winters with nothing between them and the elements but straw and stone. Mary, who had never suffered more than a bad cold and who had never even gotten hungry enough to get grumpy, listened with fascination when Edmund spoke wistfully of his childhood.

She knew he had resided with his mother in a small cottage on the outskirts of the village where Sylvia Leeds served as herbalist and midwife to the locals. Edmund had no siblings, and passed much of his time playing with his cousins. His uncle, the local shoemaker who was going to induct Edmund into the trade before Lord MacNaughton claimed him, had many children - all daughters. Most were younger than Edmund. He'd told Mary how he felt more as a father to them than an older cousin, often meting out discipline or mediating disputes. When Mary had spied on him spanking his cousin Kate, it had not been the first time the lass had found herself over Edmund's knee. When they were youngsters in the village he'd caught her skinny dipping in the pond.

He told Mary how he'd hauled his cousin out, cut a willow branch from the tree and striped her wet backside until she'd howled like a banshee.

Mary had shuddered at the image. She couldn't fathom what it would be like to have the thin, limber switch lay line after line of pain across her wet backside as she struggled in vain to free herself. No wonder Kate so begged for mercy whenever she was spanked by Edmund. He was a most serious and effective disciplinarian.

"I can't imagine enduring something like that," she said.

"And I hope you shall never do anything to earn such a punishment," her husband had said. "Tis a harsh measure to be sure, but one a young woman does not soon forget. Kate never did, and she never sought to swim without clothes again."

Edmund the Leader. Mary wondered if Sylvia had noticed how different he'd been from the other children, preferring to shepherd and guide them over playing games. Even she'd seen something that set him apart from the other servants when he'd worked for her family. It bothered Mary that his mother would not forgive him or at least give her son a chance to explain in person why he'd chosen to take up his father's legacy. Edmund had told Mary that he wanted to find a way to use his wealth to improve the lives of the villagers, many of whom worked for the MacNaughtons and the Cromwells. He wanted to share those plans with the mother who refused to speak to him.

Mary laid her head back against the seat, looking up at the sky through the trees. The forest was thick here, the branches interlacing over the road. Little light came through the tight net of branches. It did not help that the sky had gone gray overhead. Snow flurries had been blowing that very morning, but Edmund said any storm was still at least a day away, and assured her and himself that she would be at Cromwell Manor in time to avoid snowfall.

A distant ringing could be heard; the first signs of the village. The sound of the hammer striking an anvil grew louder and Mary looked out the window again. She could see - and smell - smoke - as buildings began to come into view.

They were tightly packed together in a circular fashion - the most prominent building was an inn. A well stood at the center of the village and beyond that were stalls offering various goods. Villagers carried baskets, toted or were trailed by children, or led cows, pigs, or goats. Hunters coming in from the forest toted poles loaded with game. Two men were struggling to carry a stag, its lifeless tongue lolling from its mouth. Mary had never hunted before. The only time she saw meat was when it was already on the table. She looked away.

"Stop at the inn, please," she said to the driver. She knew that he was a villager, and that she could ask him where Sylvia Leeds might be, but in case her search was fruitless she didn't want the driver to go back and tell her husband what she'd been planning.

The driver parked the carriage near the end and came around to help Mary out. As soon as she stepped from the interior, almost everyone within sight fell silent. Mary regarded them, puzzled, and then realized that for many, this was their first sight of a lady. Her dress was of a rich cream brocade shot through with gold threads. She wore a hooded cape of fox fur

lined with satin. Mary knew her outfit probably cost more than two years wages for the people staring at her.

She nodded graciously and then went into the inn. It was dark; the only light came from the golden glow of candles in wall sconces. The interior smelled of meat and potatoes and the sweet, stale smell of ale.

"Room, madam?" A stout man with a bad head and thick moustache walked over, wiping his hands on his apron. His eyes glittered with expectation. "Our finest is available. We don't get many who can afford it, but a lady like you..."

Mary reached into her purse and pulled out enough to cover the room and more. "I do not know if I will be staying, but I'd like to pay for three days in advance," she said. When she put the money into the man's hands, she squeezed his fingers and looked into his eyes. "And I need information."

The man nodded. "Anything your ladyship desires."

"I seek a woman," she said. "A Sylvia Leeds. Do you know her?"

The man laughed. "Why everyone knows Sylvia," he said. "Do you seek healing? You don't look like you've a babe on the way."

Mary flushed. No, there was no baby on the way and she didn't like being reminded of it. The frown on her face said as much.

"I'm sorry," the man said. "Twas not my place to say. But Sylvia is the midwife and most women who seek her..."

"It hardly matters," Mary said, wishing to change the subject. "I just need to find her."

The man's brow furrowed. "That's easier said than done, milady," he replied. "Sylvia goes where she's needed, and with illness and babies everywhere you look there's no way to say where she'll be from morn to morn."

Mary felt her frustration growing.

"If I were to seek her out, then, what would be the best way to go about it?"

"You could hire someone to find her," he said. "My son would happily..."

"No," Mary said, determined not to let the villagers charge her for what would likely be some drawn-out, expensive search. "I want to find her myself. Where do you suggest I look?"

The innkeeper looked disappointed but as he fingered the gold coins he decided not to push his luck.

"Her cottage is outside the village, 'bout a mile past the mill down in the deep wood. Folks say the wood is haunted. If you're needin' a charm I have..."

"I'll be fine," Mary said. "I have my driver to protect me."

"You'll not be wanting to take a carriage back in there," he said. "You'll want to go by horse."

"Very well," Mary said. "Is there a stable nearby?"

The driver stepped up now, his face concerned. "Lady MacNaughton, I'm not sure."

"Lady MacNaughton?" The innkeeper repeated the driver's words loud enough for everyone to hear and now Mary could feel every eye in the place on her.

"You're the bride of the new lord, then?" The innkeeper's eyes darted from his audience to Mary, who turned to quickly glare at her driver. Her identity was not information she has wanted to so soon reveal.

"Yes," she said, seeing no reason to lie now. "And I would speak with my husband's mother."

"She wants nothing to do with you. Or her son." A gruff voice sounded from the corner.

Mary turned to see a tall, dark-haired man coming her way. He wore a homespun shirt, brown pants and boots. His eyes were dark brown, his jaw strong. She could see something of Edmund in him.

"Are you his uncle?" she asked.

The man looked her up and down. "I am," the man said. "My name is Owen Leeds."

"I'm Mary MacNaughton," she said. "Do you know where I can find your sister?"

"Like I said," he repeated. "Sylvia wants nothing to do with you or yours. So take your fine coach and your coin and go home."

"You've no cause to be angry with me," Mary said. "And I'm not in the habit of taking orders from others..."

The man smirked. "Of course not. The mighty MacNaughtons and Cromwells take everything but orders, doncha?" His expression was hard, angry. "Already thinking you're too good for us, are you? Think you're above us." He stepped closer and it was all Mary could do not to shrink away from the tall, angry man who looked down on her.

"I've said nothing of the kind," Mary said with more bravery than she felt. "Whatever anger you have, sir, is misdirected and speaks to your flaws, not my husband's."

The man's face was thunderous as Mary turned away.

"Where are the stables?" she asked the innkeeper. The man stammered for a moment, still stunned by the altercation, before directing them to where they needed to go.

"Madam," the driver said when they were out of earshot. "Perhaps this is not such a good idea. It seems these folks harbor the MacNaughton's ill will..."

"Just that one man," Mary said, "although I do not know why."

"It could be dangerous finding out," the driver said. "And you only said you wanted me to drive you to the village, milady. You said nothing of traveling into a haunted wood..."

"Is that why you are afraid," she asked him.

"I've head the stories," he said defensively. "But I never believed them..."

"So you're afraid of that man?"

"The shoemaker?" The driver shook his head. "No. And although I have lived in this village I do not know why Lord MacNaughton's uncle now hates him. Nor why his mother refuses to speak to him. My kin always spoke highly of the Cromwells and the MacNaughtons."

"Yes," Mary said. "And to my knowledge, both families treated the villagers well, which is why I must find out why Edmund's mother has turned her back on him now."

"Still," the driver said. "Going on horse can be risky. If you got hurt, Lady MacNaughton..."

"If I get hurt I will take full responsibility," she said. "I am not a child, and I am capable of handling a horse. If we leave now we can find this Sylvia Leeds and speak to her. Perhaps we can clear all of this up and be home by the morrow."

The driver looked up at the sky. It was getting grayer by the moment.

"I don't have a good feeling about this," he said.

"Well I do," Mary said stubbornly. "And I am going with or without you. Do you think my husband would be angrier if you accompanied me or angrier if you left me to fend for myself?"

The driver knew he had no choice.

“This way,” he said, defeated, and turned to the stables.

“She’s a stubborn one,” he thought as they walked. “If she were mine, I’d blister her but good.”

At his side, Mary was worried about that very thing. Her mission had become more complicated than she’d expected, and despite her optimistic tone, she wasn’t so sure coming had been such a good idea after all.

Chapter Four

The innkeeper had not been exaggerating about the roads. Once Mary and her driver had ridden the rented horses past the mill, it became apparent that the narrow path to the midwife's cottage was not easily traversed. The trees were denser here and even more ominous. The woods were unnaturally quiet around them.

"Is that it?" Mary asked hopefully when a small structure appeared in the wood. It was barely visible through the ancient trees that surrounded it.

"Looks to be," said the driver. He dismounted and took the reins of Mary's horse. She dismounted as well, her legs shaky under her after having ridden for so long.

The cottage was dark.

"There doesn't appear to be anyone at home," the driver said.

Mary tied her mount's reins to a nearby branch. "I want to see," she said stubbornly.

The driver sighed and secured his horse as well before following his stubborn employer up the narrow stony path to the cottage. It was larger than it looked from the road. Sylvia Leed's home was larger than some of the villager's dwellings and as Mary looked around she could see why. Part of the cottage was actually an attached barn, and from within Mary could hear the plaintive calls of animals.

She walked back to the front door.

"Hello!" she called tentatively. "Hello! Is anyone home?"

No answer came from within. Mary put her hand on the door and pushed. The door opened with no resistance.

"I wouldn't go in if I were..." the driver began, but Mary was already inside.

The cottage was one large room. A hearth sat against one wall with an elaborately carved mantle. On either side were shelves with bottles holding an array of herbs and elixirs. A table in the middle of the room contained what looked to be a work in progress. An open book of medicinal recipes sat beside a mortar and pestal with traces of ground herbs in the bottom. Mary sniffed the air, for the first time noticing a pungent smell. She turned and looked to the remains of the fire. Above it sat a small cauldron, its contents boiled down to a thick, charred sap.

Her eyes scanned the room and for the first time she noticed a chair upended, and a picture lying face down on the floor. She walked over and picked it up. The frame was broken but

the portrait inside remained. It showed a stunningly beautiful woman with a blonde toddler on her lap. Edmund and his mother.

"I think there was a struggle here," she said to the driver. "If Sylvia Leeds is gone, she did not go willingly. She was in the middle of making something when someone came in and took her."

From the barn a goat called pitifully. "See," she said. "Her animals cry for food."

She walked into the barn. The animals there were indeed frantic. Two goats - one with an engorged udder, paced madly back and forth. They had no food or water. A group of hens sat fluffed and weak on their perch. Mary took a scoop of grain and threw it to the animals.

"I'll get them some water," the driver said, picking up a bucket and taking it out to the well.

Mary continued to walk around the cottage, her unease growing with each passing moment. It was becoming clear to her that Sylvia Leeds did not leave her house of her own accord. She was in the middle of making an elixir, and by the recipe in the book it appeared to be for a sick child. Her animals had been left without food, her fire had been still going and her door had been left open. Most disturbing to Mary was the upset furniture. Was it possible that the midwife had been taken by force?

The driver came back in from where the animals were.

"I milked the goat a bit, poor thing," he said.

"She's been taken," Mary said. "She wouldn't have left the animal in such a state. Nor her place..."

The driver looked around and sighed. "We should go get help then..."

"Help?" Mary asked. "Now? It may be too late if we go back. The coals are still a bit warm. It's not been more than a day or two. We have to look for her."

"Milady," the driver said. "You've risked enough. If she has been taken you've no business going after her."

"I do," Mary argued. "This isn't just any villager. This is Edmund's mother. She's...she's family!"

She stormed out past the driver who followed at her heels, trying to reason with his determined mistress.

"Perhaps, so, but Lord MacNaughton will have my hide if you get hurt, and even if you don't he's likely to tan yours, milady."

Mary glared at him. "You know about that?"

"Everyone does," he said sheepishly. "The young lord had a reputation for being strict with the younger servants put in his charge when he worked at your family's manor. It surprises none of us that he's a strict husband."

When Mary blushed his tone softened.

"Don't be embarrassed, milady. A husband's taking a corrective hand to his wife's backside is nothing out of the ordinary among folks around here. It's part of day to day life. It says a lot for the young lord that he doesn't spoil you just because he's a nobleman now."

"I don't want to be spoiled," Mary said. "But I'd prefer my business not be common knowledge either."

"Then come home and make report of these events to your husband," he pleaded. "Because if you persist he's liable to thrash you for all to see. You know he would not approve of what you're doing..."

But Mary had already mounted her horse and was turning it towards the path.

"Do you even know where you're going?" he asked.

"Where would we find the nearest neighbor?"

The driver sighed. "I'm not sure, but I think her brother lives down the path by the mill we passed."

"You mean Owen, the one we met?" Mary asked, her voice edged with apprehension.

"Yes, the unfriendly one," the driver said. "The one who looked none too kindly among you."

"Well, he'll be far more kind when we tell him how worried we are about his sister," she replied.

"Milady!" The driver spurred his horse after Mary's, but she was already riding up the trail towards the mill. She was certain that whatever differences Owen had with the MacNaughtons, they'd be put aside once he learned his sister had possibly been abducted. In fact, she surmised, he may even be grateful for her help.

The air had grown cold and a chill wind blew through the trees. The horses' breath came out in clouds of steam. Mary ignored the driver's muttering as they rode on. The first fat flakes of snow were beginning to fall when they arrived at the path that led down by the mill.

The road to the shoemaker's house sloped downward into a glen. Mary was surprised at how secluded it was; she'd had no clue there was even a cottage around when she'd passed.

But as she rounded a bend in the path it came into view. It was a large cottage but that did not surprise her. The shoemaker had a thriving trade and had raised a large family of girls.

A glow came from within the house and greenery adorned the window sills in a sign of the season. Someone was home, at least. Good, Mary thought as she dismounted her horse. She walked up to the door and knocked, the driver on her heels.

After a moment a woman wearing a homespun dress and an apron opened the door. She had red hair and ruddy, wind-burned cheeks. She was fair of face, but with eyes that crinkled at the edges from laughing or squinting against the wind and sun, or both. Those eyes widened as she stared at Mary. It was as if she could not believe she was real.

"Is this the home of Owen Leeds?" she asked.

The woman nodded and closed the door until only her face showed.

"Who wants to know?" The woman asked brusquely.

"I am Mary MacNaughton. I saw your husband earlier today and told him I have come here seeking his sister - my husband's mother-in-law. I'm looking for Sylvia Leeds but when I went to her home I found she wasn't there. I fear some ill fate has befallen her."

"We know nothing," the woman said and slammed the door. Mary heard the bolt drop in the lock and stood there, perplexed.

"I told you they wouldn't talk to us," the driver grumbled.

But Mary was far from giving up. She pounded on the door again.

"Please!" she called frantically. She could hear female voices on the other side. One spoke in a low, angry tone. The other appeared to be upset.

"My husband has not spoken to his mother since our marriage and is desperate to see her this Epiphany season! He loves her very much and wants nothing more than to be reunited with her!" she cried. "If some ill fate has befallen Sylvia Leeds surely you and your husband will want to help her! Please!"

There was no answer, just more heated conversation from within. It was still low in volume and even when Mary put her ear to the door she could not make out what they were saying.

"Please!" she cried again, yelling at the door. "Don't you even care?"

"Oh, we care all right." Mary recognized the deep voice, but just as she gasped and turn her driver fell down at her feet and she stood facing Owen Leeds. He held the stout club that he used to knock her driver unconscious but just as Mary recovered enough to cry out and drop down to assist him someone grabbed her from behind and hauled her up.

Mary could not see who held her and struggled furiously to no avail.

Owen grabbed her arm and pulled her away from her captor and Mary turned to find a scruffy older man staring at her.

"Put this one in the barn with the cow," Owen instructed the man, indicating the driver with a kick of his boot. "Tie him up good and tight. Gag him."

Mary cried out as the older man grabbed the driver's feet and began to drag him away. She continued to struggle as Owen pounded on the door of his house.

"Lemme in!" he said. This time the door opened and Mary found herself thrust inside. She careened towards a table and caught the edge before she fell. She was shaking as she looked up and then her breath caught in surprise as she found herself looking into the equally frightened face of Sylvia Leeds.

The door slammed behind Owen and she slowly turned to face him. His wife stood at his side, along with two adolescent girls.

"You shouldn't have come," Owen said, his voice barely containing his fury.

"I told you this would not work, Owen," Sylvia Leeds said, and Mary felt her mother-in-law's arms go around her. "I told you someone would come looking for me sooner or later."

"Didn't think it would be one of the MacNaughtons," he replied. "But it shouldn't surprise me. They think they have the right to go where they will, take what they want..."

"Give it a rest, brother!" Sylvia said. "Your bitterness has made you half-mad at it is. First capturing me, now taking this lady. Can you not see that you make things worse by the minute?"

"Don't talk to my husband in such a manner, you slattern!" Owen's wife stepped forward, her hand raised, and Mary gasped for the woman would have surely struck Sylvia had Owen's hand not stayed hers. But the woman's tongue would not be restrained.

"Were it not for your whoring ways none of us would be in this position. You ..." She looked Mary up and down with disdain. "Too good, too beautiful for the village men. You had to open your legs for some fine lord instead."

"I did not know he was a Lord..."

"A whore you are nonetheless. He was not your husband. And what did you get for it?"

"A son," Sylvia shot back. "A good son, the one thing you could not give my brother."

This time it was not Owen's wife who stepped forward but Owen himself. His hand snaked out and caught his sister hard across the cheek. Mary cried out as he struck her, but when Sylvia turned her head back her eyes - through teary - were unashamed.

"Strike me if you must, Owen. But you know it's true. How dare you judge me when your own daughters - intelligent, worthy girls - are deemed unfit to enter your trade. You were as proud of Edmund as the rest of us until he decided to spurn your offer and claim his birthright. Don't lie. This has nothing to do with Edmund. It has everything to do with you and your plans to groom him to be the son you never had."

The room fell silent.

"Is that why you have not talked to him?" Mary asked.

Sylvia's eyes stayed trained on her brother as she answered.

"Owen forbade it," she said. "Edmund's decision grieved my brother so that for some time I was torn between loyalty to my son and loyalty to my brother. But as Epiphany approached I found myself missing my son more and more. I confided in a friend that I was going to send word to Edmund to meet with me so we could arrange a visit - either at my home or his. When my brother found out he abducted me so I could not reunite with my son."

Mary looked at Owen, whose expression was as hard as ever.

"And you will not reunite with him, not until he gets his head from the clouds and comes back home - to us - and lives the life he was meant for."

"He is living the life he was meant for," Mary argued. "If you could but see him. He has always had an air of command that could only have come from..."

She stopped herself but knew she was too late.

"Too good to be a shoemaker, is he? Too good to take up a trade I worked and built?" Owen spat. "Too good for an honest day's work which was more than the son-of-a-whore deserved!!"

"But what of what your sister said?" Mary countered. "You have daughters! Pass the trade to one of them!"

"Pass the trade to a female?" His voice was indignant. "My sister's poor judgment is proof enough that women are flawed and unfit to conduct a business."

"Really?" Sylvia asked. "I've done it for years, brother. And I recall a time when you could not feed your family or buy shoe leather where I bartered my work for food and materials for you and yours..."

Owen's face reddened.

"You cannot keep us here," Sylvia said quietly. "Someone will come for us. Edmund is very protective."

Owen stepped forward and took her chin in his hand. "Is he now? If that were true then why were you out in the wood alone with nothing more than a slip of a driver to protect you, lass? Or is it possible that he does not even know where you are?"

Mary was never good at hiding her feelings and Owen smiled as he detected the flicker of guilt in her eyes.

"So I'm right. My nephew the Lord does not know where his fair wife is. He doesn't know that you came looking for his mother. When you don't return, he'll assume highwaymen have taken you and your driver. What then will he have to live for once love is lost along with his connection to the mighty Cromwells? Perhaps he'll realize he was never meant for the life of the gentry and return to settle here, in an honest trade. Who knows. Perhaps he'll end up as a better person than his mother and realize that settling with a villager is better for him anyhow."

"And you expect me to support you in this lie?" Sylvia asked. "You expect me to just stand by while you harm this girl? She is my daughter-in-law and the chosen wife of my son. She is my family and I will not allow it."

Owen now turned to Sylvia, grabbing her so hard by the upper arm that she cried out.

"You are in no more position to make threats than this slip of a girl," he said. "And I am weary of this conversation."

He turned to the door. "WALTER?"

The scruffy man who had knocked the driver unconscious came in.

"You tied him up, then?" he asked.

The man nodded, grunting.

"Good. Take these two down to the root cellar and put them in. Lock it good. On the morrow we'll decide how to rid ourselves of them forever."

The man grabbed both women by their arms.

"You'll pay for this," Mary said over her shoulder.

Owen smirked at her. "Keep a civil tongue," he said. "In this house, I am lord."

Chapter Five

"He's right you know." Sylvia Leeds gently pushed a strand of tear-soaked hair away from her daughter-in-law's face. "You should have told him where you were going."

"How did you know...?"

"I know my son," Sylvia laughed. "He's nothing if not a protector. He's always been that way - over his cousins, even over me during those times he thought he could get away with it. If he knew you were trapped here he'd be worried sick."

She paused. "Where does he think you are?"

Mary sniffed pitifully. "I told him I was going to see my mother, but in fact I came to find you."

Sylvia sighed and leaned back against the wall. "This is my fault," she said. "I never forgave the MacNaughton for deceiving me. Were it not for my love of Edmund, I think I may have done him harm."

She laughed, remembering. "He was so very handsome. So very...masterful."

"He told you he was a traveling man?" Mary asked. "That's what I heard."

"He did," Sylvia replied. "But I think part of me knew he was much more. Never had I met a man with a more commanding presence." Sylvia's voice grew wistful as she spoke.

"Edmund's father was nothing like the village men. He had such a presence about him. The other men of the village have always found me threatening, I think, because I have no need of their protection. I've always made my own way since I determined my gift for healing at a young age. If the MacNaughton had one flaw, it was in assuming that I would be persuaded to give up my calling and live in some fine house as his mistress, his plaything. He demanded it of me, and I came very close to obeying him. But then I found I was with child and I knew that becoming his mistress would condemn us both to a life of living as one man's hidden secret. Our silence would be bought and paid for. Better, I thought, that Edmund just have a mother than a father who would never claim him openly."

"He wanted you to come to the wedding," Mary said. "So did I."

"It was my own stubbornness that kept me away. I was hurt that after raising him he would just assume the MacNaughton name. I was looking forward to Edmund's returning to the village and apprenticing in his uncle's trade. I was disappointed that he had chosen a different path. Owen was even angrier. He's always considered Edmund the son he never had. He never even wanted Edmund to work at Cromwell Manor, but Edmund thought he

needed to get a look at life outside the village. All Owen talked about was Edmund's return. When he found out that Lord MacNaughton had claimed him, he confronted me and I admitted to my brother that the man was indeed Edmund's father. He was furious and sought to stoke my anger against Edmund. It was easy to be angry at first, but a mother's love is a strong thing. As Epiphany approached I told my brother I would travel to see Edmund, and to meet my daughter-in-law. That is when he took me by force and brought me here."

"What does he hope to achieve?" Mary asked.

"He wants Edmund back. He feels he's been wronged. God denied him a son and now the one thing closest to a son he had has been taken by another. Owen is very angry, and I fear a bit dangerous as well..."

Mary stood and walked over to the opposite wall. Through a small window she could see nothing but white. It was snowing. It was snowing and she was stuck in the house of an angry shoemaker. Edmund didn't know where she was, and her driver was hurt and tied up in the barn. She wanted to cry, but was too scared.

"I love him," Mary said to her mother-in-law, and Sylvia smiled as Mary told her how she'd fallen for Edmund when he was still a servant in her father's house, and how she'd confessed her feelings for the handsome young man even before he became a rich young lord with a title and lands that paved the way for their marriage.

"Do you think anyone will come for us?" Mary asked, her voice quavering. She was trying to sound brave, but she realized even as she spoke that her tone was that of a frightened girl. Her mother-in-law smiled and opened her arms to her.

"Come here, lass," she said. "And sit with me."

Mary walked over and sat down beside her mother-in-law. Sylvia smiled and spread the shawl she was wearing so it covered both of their shoulders. She began to hum to Mary. Mary smiled. Sylvia was beautiful and kind and strong. No wonder Edmund loved her so much; no wonder he missed her. She closed her eyes and imagined the three of them together in the manor house. She imagined how happy Edmund would be to finally have his mother back in his life. Soon she was asleep, her dreams filled with happy images of her and Edmund and Mary. They were at a party; the hall of their manor glowed golden with candlelight. She and Edmund were dressed in holiday finery, as was his mother. The green dress she wore complemented her red hair and the bright green of the older woman's eyes. Sylvia smiled as the King's Cake was brought out, remembering now the story that her son had shared with her about the night he and Mary had each found the bean in their respective halves. Mary felt happy and content.

But then a loud noise stirred her from her pleasant dream.

"Get up!" Owen had thrown the door to the cellar opening and had come down to rouse them from where they'd been dozing.

"Why?" Sylvia asked nervously.

"There are men in the village asking about her..." He nodded towards Mary.

"Edmund," Mary said hopefully and smiled at her mother-in-law. "It has to be!" She did not know how Edmund could have found out so quickly that she did not go to her parents' house. But it did not matter.

"You have to let us go," she said. "If Edmund comes he will be angry that you're holding me and his mother."

"He will not find out," Owen said.

"He will!" Mary cried. "And he will make you pay!"

Owen Leeds raised his fist and stepped forward, but Sylvia stepped between them.

"Do not make this worse, brother," she said. "Think on what you are doing. Seeking to force Edmund will avail you to naught. He's always been his own man, even since he was a child he was different in that way..."

"Because of his noble sire?" Owen's voice was bitter, mocking. He spit on the ground at Sylvia's feet.

"Edmund has greatly wronged the Leeds name by casting it aside for the MacNaughton riches!" he said. "And he will pay!"

"By losing the two women he loves?" asked Sylvia.

Owen smirked. "It is not you who have wronged us, Sylvia. You played the whore for MacNaughton. That is all, but what does one expect of females? No, it is Edmund who must pay. You will not be harmed. But you will be used to draw him in. And then my nephew will either agree to renounce the MacNaughton name and come home, or he will die."

Mary felt a chill as she realized his intent. Did he really intend to kill Edmund if he didn't move back to the village? Would Edmund renounce his new title and wealth if he thought he could save his mother and wife the grief of losing him? Mary knew Edmund; he was of such strong principle that he would uphold a vow made even under duress.

Her mind flashed back to when he'd been a servant in her parents' household. She'd romanced his simple life then, and was endlessly curious about the private existence of him and the other servants away from Cromwell Manor. It had all seemed so idyllic and

uncomplicated. She'd thought the people who lived in the village lived a life free of expectations and family pressures. They married whom they chose and followed their own destinies. Now as she stood before Edmund's enraged, half-mad uncle, Mary realized how wrong she had been. The expectations were just as rigid, the family situations no less complicated.

A feeling of panic gripped her. What if Edmund were coerced to return and she - as his wife - forced to give up every luxury she'd grown up with? She'd once fantasized about being a shoemaker's wife when the servant Edmund had told her his plans to follow his uncle into the trade. Mary thought it would be a fine thing to live in a little cottage with no servants or fine clothes. But now that she saw the reality of it she began to waver. If Edmund walked away from everything his inheritance had given him, would she be able to follow?

She had no more time to ponder it. She and Sylvia were being herded up the narrow stairs now and back into the house. Owen's wife continued to glare at them as his two oldest daughter shot frightened glances in their direction. Mary felt angry by how the females were treated but it occurred to her that it wasn't just the villagers who seemed to think women had no worth beyond wife and mother. Even her own father had never bothered to tell her the mechanics of running the estate. Her limited education had been in domestic matters. Sylvia was the first woman she'd ever met who had defied society's dictates, and already Mary admired her for it.

"They're coming," Owen said. He reached and pulled a sword from beside the door and fixed the short scabbard at his waist. Through the window Mary could see the lights of a torch through the snow, but instead of feeling relief she only felt fear.

Owen backed into the corner, pushing the women behind him as he barked to his wife to answer the door. When the knock came, she obeyed and Mary heard Edmund's voice greeting his aunt and inquiring worriedly as to whether she'd seen any sign of a noblewoman and her driver.

"Please come in," his aunt said. "Of course, you'll find our house more humble than ever now that you've turned your back on your kin."

Edward stepped inside, a man at his side.

"I've not turned my back on anyone," he said to his aunt, his voice edged with hurt.

"Haven't you?" Owen said, but Edmund wasn't looking at him. All he saw were the women behind his uncle. His eyes widened.

"Mary!" he said. "Thank God you're safe." And then, "Mother!!"

But when Edmund approached them, his uncle drew his sword and grabbed Mary in one quick move.

"Not so fast, lad."

Edmund stopped in his tracks, his hand dropping to his own sword. But his uncle tightened his grip on Mary.

"Don't even think on it," he said. "I'd hate to mar this pretty face." He raised the blade until the cold steel was touching Mary's fair cheek.

"Why?" Edmund asked. "If it is some quarrel with me, then let us settle this as men. Let her go, Uncle."

But Owen ignored him. "I was the father you never had, Owen. It was me who taught you to string a bow and set a snare and ride a horse. I was going to give you my trade. And what do you do? You reject me and all I would have given for the name and riches of a man who never cared about you until he lost his last living sons."

Edmund sighed. "You have every right to be angry, Uncle. Were the situation reversed..."

"It would not be!" Owen roared, and when he did he grabbed Mary even tighter and pressed the blade even harder against her face. "I am a man. I would never have turned my back on my family!"

"So you would win me back by threatening my wife?" Edmund demanded to know.

"Wife?" Owen sneered. "This woman would not have married you save your new title. You should know how these great families are..."

"That's not true, brother." Sylvia stepped forward to defend her daughter-in-law. "Mary fell in love with Edmund when he was still a servant. She is true of heart."

"Shut up!" Owen roared, not wanting to hear any praise of the MacNaughtons or Cromwells. He faced Edmund now, his face triumphant as he pulled Mary closer to him.

"You have to make a choice, lad," he said.

But before Edmund could say anything, his mother spoke.

"No he does not!"

It all happened so fast that later no one could really remember the series of events. Sylvia reached for a pot on the table and before anyone could react she'd hit her brother on the side of the head with such force that he dropped in an unconscious heap. His wife screamed and ran to her husband but before she could pick up the sword he'd dropped, Edmund restrained her. The man who'd accompanied Edmund hauled a stunned Owen to his feet and checked him for more weapons before tying him. Sylvia rushed to comfort her nieces as her sister-in-law screamed invective at them.

As soon as Edmund made sure that Owen was not seriously hurt, he and his man escorted the two women outside. The horses were in the barn where the very cold driver sat tied to a post. Edmund freed him and then helped lift his wife and mother on the horse that had carried Mary. They hastened back to the village as quickly as the weather would allow, but decided that they could go no further on this night with the snow still falling.

Edmund paid for rooms at the inn, frowning at Mary when the innkeeper told her husband that she'd already paid for several nights in advance for her own lodging.

"It would appear that my wife and I have much to discuss," he said to his mother as he gave her a hug. "You will of course travel home with us for Epiphany?"

"Yes," Sylvia said, returning her son's embrace. "I would be honored. I regret waiting so long, but my own stubbornness and your uncle's anger.."

"No need to explain," Edmund said, giving her a kiss. "We can talk of all this tomorrow but it's been a trying day. It's rest we need now.."

Mary dearly wished she could go straight to bed after the bath, but as she soaked in the oak tub in the room, she knew her husband would not allow her to sleep this night without first accounting for her actions.

She dressed in her nightgown, plaited her hair in a thick braid and walked to the bed by the cozy fire. Edmund was already in his dressing gown, waiting. He sat on the edge of the bed, a wispy, peeled evergreen switch laying beside him.

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Have I not been through enough today?" she asked.

"All that you've been through was of your own design," he said. "If it had not been my uncle you ran afoul of, it could have easily been another highwayman. And what of the fear you caused in me? I cannot begin to tell you how frightened I was when your father came through with no knowledge of your visit. I knew at once something was amiss. It was instinct that led me to the village, and when I learned you were looking for my mother I feared for you. The path back to where she lives can be treacherous to someone who does not know the area."

He paused. "Mary, why would you lie to me?"

She tried to blink back tears. "I wanted to reunite you with your mother. I knew you would never give consent for me to go, and I knew you were too proud to go on your own."

"It does not excuse you, Mary. Come here and let us get this over with."

Mary's heart pounded in her chest, but she knew that her husband was right to be angry. She'd been foolish in her decision to go off without letting him know her destination. The fact that everything came out all right was little solace when one reflected on what could have happened."

She lay herself across her husband's lap, whimpering in fear as he purposefully raised the hem of her gown. Mary's heart pounded harder now. Even though she'd never tasted the bit of a switch, she feared it intensely. Edmund restrained her tightly with one arm around his waist. She felt him raise his other arm and a split second later felt the searing, bite of the switch.

It was worse - so much worse - than she could have ever imagined. She cried out and begged him to stop lest she die, for as he switched her bare bottom methodically she felt as if she may. The switch lay fiery sting upon fiery sting upon her helpless bottom. She wailed helplessly and begged frantically as the punishment progressed down to now target the backs of her thighs. The burn of the repeated lashes was almost brutal in her mind. And as she swore never to disobey her husband again she meant every word.

By the time Edmund stopped, she was exhausted and unable to speak. She supposed Edmund would put her in the corner again, for she had been very bad. But instead, he kissed her deeply and shushed her with a "There, there, now. It's all over." And she knew that he was just grateful to have her back in his arms again.

The house was beautiful for the holidays. As they watched the King's cake brought out, Edmund and Mary glanced at one another and smiled, thinking how this very event just a year before had changed their lives forever. Beside them, Edmund's mother - in a glorious blue gown she'd graciously accepted from her son, sat catching the eye of every eligible man in the room despite her being well past what most would consider marrying age.

This year a groomsman and a young cook received the beans and ordered everyone to dance. Edmund took his wife's hand and led her to the floor. It was a merry, raucous tune and as Mary spun on her husband's arm she mused that life had never been better or brighter. It made her almost giddy, she thought. And then she realized she was giddy.

"Edmund..." She stopped and swayed.

"Are you all right?" he asked, concerned.

"I don't feel well. Not at all."

He led her from the dance floor. Her face was pale. She felt as if she were going to be sick. When someone offered her a cup of wassail - always her favorite - she turned her head away, nearly wretching.

Suddenly Sylvia was at her side.

“What’s wrong?” she asked Edmund.

“She feels ill,” he said. “It came on quite suddenly.”

“Suddenly?” Sylvia asked.

“No, actually I’ve been feeling rather quaint for the last few mornings,” Mary said. “I supposed it was just nerves and excitement of the season.”

But already, her mother-in-law the midwife was putting two and two together.

“Mary,” she asked, taking her daughter-in-law’s hand. When did you last bleed?

Mary thought about it. It had been before the MacNaughton passed and she usually kept such good accounting of her cycle. But now that she pondered it, she realized that she was late. Quite late.

She put her hand to her mouth in surprise.

“Looks like there’s another epiphany this year, Edmund,” Sylvia said, happy tears welling in her eyes. “I do believe your wife just realized she is with child!”

Edmund dropped down and hugged both of them. He’d not thought the season could have been better than the last. But he had been wrong. Mary MacNaughton was having his baby.

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