

Arrival, June 1668

“Will you be alright?” Captain Miles sounded very concerned, handing Alex Graham the youngest of her sons. Alright? Alex looked at her assembled family, all of them staring at these unfamiliar surroundings, and managed to produce a smile.

“Of course we will,” she told the captain, “and at least the ground doesn’t heave.” Captain Miles laughed, shaking his head. Alex grimaced; it had been a rough crossing this time, taking all of nine weeks from Edinburgh to Providence, Maryland. Fortunately, none of her children seemed to have inherited her tendency to sea-sickness, adapting quickly to life aboard the *Regina Anne* – well, with the exception of Daniel, who had fretted at finding himself constantly tied to either his mother’s or father’s side. His father... Alex threw a worried look in the direction of Matthew, standing silent and alone some yards away from his family. He was drowning in grief, somehow diminished by this exile from the land of his birth. She considered going over to him, but at the sight of a small man hurrying towards her husband she chose not to, concentrating on her children instead.

“Graham? Matthew Graham?” Matthew turned at the sound of his name and nodded warily. The wee round man before him beamed and sketched a bow, for all that he was the elder of the two and definitely the more well off – at least to judge from his clothes. Matthew bowed as well, one arm ensuring little Ruth didn’t fall out of the carrying shawl as a consequence.

“Isaiah Farrell, at your service,” the man said, “one of Providence’s founding fathers, one might say.”

“Oh,” Matthew replied, taking in the rather small collection of houses that went for a town here in the darker parts of the world. Not even of a size with Cumnock, he sighed, homesickness tearing at the lining of his stomach, his gullet.

“The Leslies asked me to keep an eye out for you,” Mr Farrell explained, “so as to ensure you wait for them.”

“Thomas Leslie?” Matthew asked.

“Yes, Thomas and his brother, Peter. They’ll be down in a week or so – we have business to conclude.”

Matthew brightened considerably and turned to smile encouragingly at his wife, beckoning for her to come forward and be introduced.

“Thomas will be here within the week to guide us,” he said, and Alex face broke out in a relieved smile. He nodded, thinking that from what he could see, this little settlement was an enclave in an endless wilderness, and he’d been worried sick as to how they would possibly find their way to where Thomas Leslie and his family lived.

Alex curtsied to Mr Farrell, gave him a good day, and then returned to their children and their bundles, thinking their few belongings looked entirely inconsequential. Well, at least Matthew carried a substantial pouch on the inside of his breeches, as did she, sown into her

petticoat pocket for safekeeping. Not entire paupers, for all that they looked it at the moment.

“Who’s that?” Mark asked, peeking curiously at the man conversing his father.

“Mr Farrell,” Alex replied breezily as if she’d known the man for ages, and then went back to studying the little town, dominated by the wharves they were presently standing on. A dirt track climbed the slope from the port to the small meeting house, there were several rows of houses – some rather grand three storey buildings, most substantially humbler – an inn, a couple of warehouses and that was it. Not exactly a metropolis, but full of people all the same, some of which were now making their way down to the quays, no doubt attracted by the sight of the *Regina Anne*.

Alex regarded the inhabitants, taking in the modest clothes, the high necklines and the linen caps that covered every single female head. The men were mostly in grey and brown, all of them in hats – even the boys wore hats, and Alex threw a worried look at her very hatless brood. One dark-clad man stopped in front of Matthew, heartily pumped his hand up and down a couple of times, inclined his head to Alex, and swished off, making for where the harbourmaster was deep in discussion with Captain Miles.

“A kirk,” Matthew said later, ushering her into the little room he’d found them at the inn. “A Puritan congregation, no less, and Minister Walker has assured me of a warm welcome.” For the first time in months he looked genuinely happy – for like a microsecond. “So tomorrow we go to kirk in the morning.”

“Whoopee,” Alex muttered unenthusiastically, earning herself a disapproving frown from her husband. Well, sorry; Alex couldn’t help being somewhat more sceptical to all this religious stuff – blame it on her upbringing, way out there in the future nineteen hundreds, three hundred years or so from this the year of our Lord 1668. And besides, it was his faith, his refusal to knuckle down and abjectly conform to the laws of Charles II, that had forced them from their home in the first place. No; she resolutely shoved these disloyal thoughts away and turned to inspect her children.

“Water,” she said, “plenty of warm freshwater so that I can properly wash the lot of you.”

“Not me,” Ian protested, “I’ll wash myself.”

“You cheat,” Alex said sternly, eyeing the lanky thirteen-year-old with some misgiving.

“I’ll make sure he washes properly,” Matthew put in, coming to his son’s rescue.

“Huh,” Alex snorted, but gave in.

Some hours later, and the small room was crammed with clean, sleeping children. Alex stepped carefully over one sprawled leg there, an arm there, as she made her way to the bed with a very hungry Ruth in her arms. With a grunt she settled down against the headboard, undid her shift and helped her daughter to lie comfortably at her breast.

Beside her, Matthew was already fast asleep, snoring softly. Alex rested her free hand on his head, tugging at his hair. He was so unhappy, her man, and she didn’t quite know how to help him. To her, there’d been no choice; to remain in Scotland was to invite premature

death for him and destitution for her and their children, but for Matthew leaving had been an amputation.

She sat holding Ruth for a long while after she'd finished nursing and then slid down to lie beside Matthew, unable to sleep in these unfamiliar and far too hot surroundings. Only June; how hot would it be come August? She kicked off the quilt, ran a hand over her body, arresting her hand over her belly. She hadn't told him yet, but she was quite sure there was a new baby Graham in the making. Too soon, far too soon, with Daniel just two and Ruth not quite six months, but what was she to do? She rolled towards her sleeping man, his arm came out instinctively and drew her close, wet lips brushing at her nape, her cheek.

"Alex," he whispered drowsily, "my Alex."

She lay for a long time sleepless in the dark. She was scared of all this unknown. She was tired, borderline exhausted after weeks of contrived cheerfulness, of maintaining a calm, reassuring facade not only for the sake of the children but also for Matthew, a constant chirpiness that was beginning to grate on her own nerves. And soon... not that she intended to ever admit it, but the idea of plunging into an unknown forest had her half terrified. Who knew what they might be walking into?

"How many days?" Alex attempted to sound casual, studying the surrounding forest with a mixture of awe and trepidation. So far, she had not ventured outside the palisade that encircled Providence, and now she stood a couple of yards from the town's gates, not sure she wanted to proceed further. Not that she had any choice, she reminded herself, swallowing back on a sigh.

Thomas Leslie had not heard her, busy with his grey horse. Alex stifled a laugh. Thomas was a dear friend, and she'd been overjoyed to see him some days ago, throwing her arms round his neck in an embrace that had made Thomas blush and Matthew frown. He was also a study of various shades of grey, from his hair through his eyes, to his mended coat, his stockings and now his horse. Compared to his elder brother, Peter Leslie was a popinjay, what with his purple coat and his mop of curly hair. She glanced at Peter, deep in conversation with Matthew, and repeated her question.

Thomas tightened the girth before turning to face her. "Six? Seven? On horseback it takes three, but we're mostly on foot." He waved a hand at the Graham caravan. One horse, two mules Matthew had bought off Providence's only Spanish inhabitant, two pigs, one goat, a wicker cage containing six hens balancing precariously on top of one of the mules' pannier baskets, one adolescent boy with a huge load and a musket, Mark trudging with a sizeable bundle of his own, and little Jacob walking steadily by his mama's side, proudly carrying a basket. Daniel was presently astride the horse, Matthew was as loaded, if not more, than Ian, and Alex had Ruth in a shawl and a blanket roll on her back.

"We look like a band of gypsies." Alex adjusted her cap.

"Aye," Ian agreed, clucking at the mule.

"We all did when we arrived." Thomas gave Alex a kindly smile. "You'll be fine Alex; you're safe now." He threw his head in the direction of Matthew. "And he'll come round."

“You think?” Alex gave him an uncertain smile.

“Of course he will. He just needs purpose again. And once he sees the land I’ve claimed on your behalf...” Thomas grinned. He looked at the surrounding woods. “And it’s beautiful, don’t you think? All these glorious trees, so much untouched wilderness – here for us to colonise and tame.”

“Well, as long as the weather holds we can pretend it’s a picnic,” Alex said, and for the first few hours it did. And then it didn’t.

Eight days later, they crested a small hill and Matthew informed them that now they were on Graham land. He folded the large hand-drawn map he’d been studying for the last few hours, nodded at the tall sycamore just off the bridle path, and explained that from this tree and due north it was their land – two thousand acres of as yet uncleared virgin forest.

“To the south we border on Leslie land, but you already know that,” he added. Yes, they all did, still somewhat shell-shocked by their brief stay at Leslie’s Crossing, a huge sprawling farm teeming with people. It had been a relief to spend a night indoors after six nights shivering in the damp and cold of an insistent Maryland rain, and even more to be rid of the flies, that constant hovering cloud of insects that had plagued them for days. It had been more difficult to adapt to all the people and the resulting noise after days spent in the woods.

Thomas Leslie had offered to ride with them for the last stretch as well, but Matthew had shaken his head; he wanted to walk in alone into his new home, unable to explain why this was so important to him.

Matthew shifted closer to Alex, took her hand. “It’s good land.” And bonny, the late afternoon sun dipping the surrounding landscape in hues of gold. The land folded in a series of low, sinuous hills, and they walked together along what had to be an old Indian path, barely visible through the trees.

“Our future lane.” Matthew felt a bubbling energy surging through him as he surveyed all this, all of it his. He held Alex’s hand tightly in his own as he led their family deeper and deeper into this silent wilderness. The trees thinned out, and suddenly they were in a clearing, a large swathe of grasses and sloping ground that fell from where they stood to where a broad band of glittering water was visible.

Alex did a slow turn. From further up the slope came the sound of water, a small spring jumped cheerily across the ground for some yards before submerging itself again. Everywhere flowers, unfamiliar flowers most of them, even if Alex recognised both lupines and columbines, and in the trees sang birds she had no names for, gawking at flashes of bright, bright orange and cheeky red. A huge white oak stood in isolated splendour, its lower branches growing almost horizontal to the ground, and Alex moved over to stand in its shade, a hand caressing the rough bark.

After some minutes of awed stillness the boys exploded into activity, gambolling like lambs through the waist high grasses. Alex set Ruth down in the shade, stretched her back with relief. She did a slow turn, taking in a landscape that reminded her of bucolic Sweden

rather than the harsher Scotland. She crossed over to the spring, dipped her hand in water that was surprisingly cold and drank. Slowly she sank down to sit, her eyes glued to the river.

"It's beautiful," she said to no one in particular, reclining back against her arms. Matthew flopped down beside her, and suddenly he was his normal competent self, bursting with ideas as he sketched where he'd build the house, and there he'd set the stables, and over there... Alex hid her face in her apron and cried.

"Alex?" Matthew sat up, arms coming round her. "Shush, Alex." That only made her cry all the harder, pressed uncomfortably into his chest. "Ah, lass," he groaned, attempting to lift her face off his shirt. "It's going to be fine." Alex nodded and cried and cried.

It was hard, backbreaking work, months of struggling with mammoth trees, with recalcitrant boulders and an exuberant nature. But bit by bit, Matthew and Ian cleared fields and pastures, stacking felled timber into neat piles for the construction of barn and house. A small cabin sprang into being, August became September, and late in the month Matthew set off for Providence, leaving wife and children with his Leslie neighbours.

"Rest," he ordered Alex, worried by how pale and worn she looked. Where he had been busy from dawn to dusk with expanding their hold on their land, Alex had been foraging, avariciously collecting wild raspberries and blackberries, culling stands of mushroom that she strung up to dry on lengths of twine that hung from rafter to rafter in their small home. She found a beehive, returned home covered in stings but with several honeycombs in her basket. She selected a protected spot for her future kitchen garden and with Mark's help began to open beds in preparation of next spring, settling the plants she had so carefully carried overseas to their new home; lavender from Hillview, yarrow, peppermint and thyme but most importantly the rose, a pampered shoot from the rosebush that decorated Rachel's grave back home.

She cooked and baked, she washed and mended, she sewed clothes and knitted, she learnt to milk the goat once the kid was born, managed to construct a somewhat rickety hencoop for her precious birds, and established a friendly relationship with both pigs, mainly through the use of bribes. But it wore her to the bone, all of this did, and on top of that she was a nursing mother, and Matthew was certain she'd lost near on a stone since they arrived. For all that she was rounding with child, her hip bones jutted, and the hollows below her eyes were a constant purple. Something clutched at his heart when he swivelled in his saddle for one last look at her.

"It's hard work," Thomas commented laconically.

"Aye," Matthew sighed, "never-ending, it would seem." The few times he allowed himself to think about it, he was aware of just how tired he was as well.

Thomas clapped him lightly on his back. "That is always the case for a farmer." He eyed Matthew from under his broad brimmed hat. "You need an indenture or two, that boy of yours is a right hard worker, but he's only a lad, Matthew."

“Hmm,” Matthew replied. He didn’t like it; not at all did he like it, but recognised that Thomas was right. He couldn’t manage without a man by his side.

Matthew came back with an indentured servant, a further fifty acres, one more horse and, wonders of wonders, a cow already in calf. He also brought letters from home, bolts of cloth, flour and other staples to see them through the winter, and a carefully packed featherbed.

“I promised,” he grinned when Alex clapped her hands together in sheer joy at the thought of sleeping on a real mattress, not their present rather thin woven reed mats placed directly on top of the rope frame bottom of the bed he’d made. He also brought back a nasty infection, and Alex paled even further during the following weeks, shifting from one sick bed to the other.

“I think the worst is over,” Alex said with a weary smile sometime in late October. She placed a hand on Jacob’s forehead, smoothing back a strand of damp hair. Paul coughed from his end of the room, a temporary arrangement due to his illness as otherwise he was to sleep in the half-built stables. “Him on the other hand...” Alex coughed as well, and leaned heavily against Matthew. “God, I’m tired.” And it didn’t help with the baby either, an active, energetic child that happily pummelled her insides the moment she attempted to snatch some rest. “Definitely a girl,” she sighed resignedly, and then allowed Matthew to help her to bed, his warm hands rubbing soothingly over her belly until the child quieted somewhat and let her drift off into a half-doze. Matthew sat by her side, toying with a curling strand of her hair.

“No great matter.” Elizabeth Leslie said, after having concluded her inspection of Alex. “What she needs are possets and a few days of rest.” Alex struggled up to sit, insisting that she was perfectly fine. She coughed, a heavy rattling sound, and Elizabeth shook her head. “Bed, eggs, honeyed water and some raspberry cordial,” she decided.

“But...” Alex protested, looking at her sons, her man.

“Your children can come and stay with us for some days,” Mary Leslie put in. “Thomas and I will gladly mind them for you.”

Alex slumped back, allowing herself to feel just how tired she was. “Thank you,” she said thickly.

“The little girl is weaned, isn’t she?” Elizabeth asked, taking in Alex’s protruding belly.

“More or less,” Alex said.

“So we take her as well,” Elizabeth concluded. She patted her own expanding waistline. “Some of us are less affected by pregnancy than others, hmm?” she said complacently.

Alex eyed her with mild dislike; Elizabeth Leslie could be quite overbearing at times, and to hear it she was the perfect mother and wife, handling wilderness, Indians, bears, wolves and childbirth with impressive *sang froid*. There was something in her tone that indicated to Alex that Elizabeth herself would never have been laid low by something as inconsequential as the combination of settling new land, feeding one child and being pregnant with yet another. She decided she didn’t care; not now. She just had to sleep. She coughed, cleared her throat and drifted into sleep.

It was an eerie, otherworldly experience to wake in their little cabin and it was only them, only him and Alex. The silence made him restless, and he didn't like it that the pallets where his bairns would normally sleep were empty of warm sleeping bodies. Alex was fast asleep and the single source of light was the banked fire, emitting a weak reddish glow that only served to deepen the shadows in the stuffy room. Alex coughed and rolled onto her back. She coughed again, struggling up to sit.

"Are you alright?"

"Better," she assured him and coughed again, before subsiding back against the pillows. "Still very tired," she added through a yawn. He curled himself around her, fitting her into the hollow of his body, and sighed contentedly. She was still too thin, he concluded after running his hands up and down her flank, her thighs, her breasts. He lifted her heavy braid out of the way and sniffed at her nape. Sweat, salt, smoke, fresh green apples and a comforting scent of warm milk – he inhaled, held the taste and scent of her in his lungs and slowly exhaled.

"I want my children back," she said into the dark.

"Aye, so do I. But not yet, a few more days of peace and quiet."

"Mmm..." Alex yawned, shifted closer to him. He held her, staring out at the cramped space that was their home. Home? This was a pathetic excuse of a home, a far cry from their house in Ayrshire, his beautiful Hillview. He sighed deeply and Alex shifted in his arms.

"What?" she asked.

"Nowt," he replied.

Alex raised herself off his chest. "And you tell me I'm a bad liar." She moved up, enough that she could rest her forehead against his. "It was the right decision. We'll be fine."

"Fine," he echoed, more because he felt it was expected of him than out of conviction. Part of him was permanently severed, remaining forever back in Scotland.

"Matthew..." Alex half sat up, shook her head and laid down, turning her back on him. They didn't say anything for a long time. Finally, she got out of bed and busied herself at the hearth.

"I can't help it," he said gruffly over breakfast. "I live the loss of it, constantly."

She didn't reply, setting down his porridge bowl with something of a bang. They ate in silence, Matthew's eyes every now and then sliding over in Alex's direction, but she evaded them.

Once they'd eaten, she shoved the bowl away from her and looked at him from under her lashes. "You wallow. I miss it too, you know."

"Not like I do. Hillview was my home, it was never yours as it was mine," he said brutally, half closing her eyes at the hurt that flashed across her face.

"No," she agreed in a small voice, "after all I don't have a home, do I? Not so that I can go back to it anyway."

Matthew looked away; nay, that would be difficult, given that she shouldn't be here to begin with, a freak thunderstorm transporting her through time to land at his feet.

Alex clumsily got to her feet, grabbed at her cloak and then she was out, the wee fool, barefoot in the November cold, and when Matthew rushed after her she was already ducking in among the trees. He caught up with her easily enough, yanked her to a stop and picked her up in his arms, berating her for rushing thus undressed through the cold, ailing as she was. He carried her all the way back home, kissed her cheek and tucked her into bed.

“We’ll build a new home, here,” he said, “a fine home.” She just nodded, keeping her eyes on the fringe of her shawl. “Our home, Alex.” When she refused to meet his eyes, he gently grabbed her by the chin, forcing her to face him. He sank his eyes into hers, his big thumb drawing small circles over her skin. “Our home, lass,” he repeated. She nodded once, giving him a brief smile.

He bent and kissed her nose. “And Hillview was as much your home as mine,” he said softly, “no home of mine would be complete without you.” He patted her leg, mumbled something about having work to do, and stepped outside into the pale autumn day. Cool clear air filled his lungs, there was a promise of rain in the wind. Under the denuded trees, the leaves lay in thick russet carpets, and when Matthew inhaled, it smelled almost like it did in Scotland. Almost. For a brief second, Matthew Graham closed his eyes and raised his face to the sky, pretending he was home.