

ANNA
BELFRAGE

*Revenge
&
Retribution*



SilverWood

Chapter 1

Some aspects of human life should be accompanied by grey skies, whining winds and a steady drumming rain – executions, for example. To contaminate a day as spectacular as this bright June day with the sordidness of a hanging seemed irreverent. It was hot and humid, a combination that made linen shifts stick to backs, stays itch against irritated skin, and hair curl haphazardly. Alex Graham wished she'd worn a cap under her hat and scowled in the direction of Kate Jones, impeccable as always. Not that the woman was wearing a cap – or much of a hat – but her heavy, smooth hair remained in its neat bun, no matter the weather.

Alex shifted from foot to foot, regretting she had worn her woollen stockings instead of her single silk pair. If she wiggled her toes, she could actually feel puddles begin to form between them, and she could only imagine how they would smell afterwards. Smell: another drawback to spending a day as warm as this in far too close proximity to all these unwashed bodies. She at least was clean – squeaky clean compared to most of them – and when she sniffed the sleeve of her best summer bodice she could only make out a lingering scent of lavender, overlaid by the salty smell of her own skin. She raised herself on her toes to scan the crowds. What was taking them so long?

Matthew Graham frowned. Two dark brows pulled together over light eyes, the mouth set, and the back stiffened – enough for Alex to follow his gaze across the assembled people to where Stephen Burley was being manhandled towards the scaffold, fighting every step of the way.

“So he dies, right?” Alex slipped a hand into the crook of her husband's elbow. Unfortunately, there were two more Burley brothers, and even if it was three years since she'd

laid eye on any of them, she doubted they'd forgotten their grudge against Matthew – or their intention to make him pay with his life for killing the youngest Burley ages ago. She swallowed, shifted on her feet, and tightened her hold on Matthew.

“Aye, but not as he should,” Matthew said.

No, Alex sighed, because if it had been Matthew who'd apprehended Stephen, he'd have turned him over to the Iroquois – in her husband's opinion, just retribution for all the homestead burnings, all the pillage, Stephen and his brothers had done dressed up as Indians.

“Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,” Alex murmured. “One of the wiser statements in the Bible, if you ask me.” She snapped open her new folding fan and attempted to create a draught around her face to cool her overheated skin.

“Revenge for what they did to my son should be mine.” It came out in clipped, angry tones.

Alex didn't reply. In this, she and Matthew were in total agreement. Ian had been shot by the Burleys while fending off an attack on Matthew, and as an unfortunate consequence had fallen off his horse, landing on a rock. His lower vertebrae had been damaged, and Ian would never again move easily through his days. Easily enough, Alex smiled, watching Ian thread his way towards them with Betty by his side. Betty, on the other hand, puffed like a whale, one hand on her protruding belly.

“You should've stayed at home.” Alex eyed her daughter-in-law, thinking she looked like a balloon about to burst.

“I didn't want to.” Betty's hand tightened on Ian's sleeve. Where Ian went, there went Betty, wife and head nurse rolled into one, and as protective as an aggressive cobra when it came to her husband's dignity.

“As long as you don't give birth on the horse,” Alex said.

“Oh, I'm sure I'll have warning enough to get off it first.” Betty grinned, making Alex laugh.

“I'm not really sure why I'm here.” Alex moved closer to Matthew. She hated hangings. From the first one she had witnessed, hidden in a thicket on a hillside, to the

subsequent ones she had been forced to watch, they all made her feel sick – and distinctly aware of how fragile her neck was. She rubbed a hand along the side of her throat and swallowed. Could one swallow when the noose tightened? And, afterwards, while you hung dangling like a side of beef, did you still swallow? Want to swallow?

“You don’t have to watch, lass,” Matthew said, drawing her close.

“I hope it’s quick,” she sighed against his shoulder.

It wasn’t quick. It was a long, protracted affair, and however much Alex agreed that Stephen had this coming to him, she was still horrified by the slow strangulation, the choking, desperate sounds that emanated from the dying man as he struggled to drag air into his lungs. Much better in her time, at least capital punishment no longer existed in the twenty-first century. Umm, she amended, it didn’t back home in Scotland, but weren’t they still executing people in the US?

Alex allowed her thoughts to meander freely, her eyes closed to the scene on the gallows where Stephen Burley was still twitching. This was 1684, a century more or less before the United States of America broke free from the mother country. And here, in the Colony of Maryland, Alex Graham, born 1976, stood hiding her face against her husband’s coat. Totally impossible, entirely ludicrous, but there you are – sometimes strange things happened, even if dropping three hundred years backwards through time had to qualify as being beyond strange, right?

The people around her cheered and catcalled when the next condemned prisoner was led up to the scaffold. Alex peeked. One more?

“Get me out of here,” she said. “I don’t want to see this.”

Matthew took a firm grip of her hand and made his way out of the throng. He paused in the scarce shade afforded by the meeting house and studied her with a little crease between his brows. “Alright then?”

“Yes.” She looked down the narrow main street and back at where Ian and Betty were extricating themselves

from the crowd. Ian was limping as he approached them, face drawn with one of those sudden bursts of pain that assailed him. Alex knew better than to voice her concern – at best it would be met with an irritated comment that she should not meddle in matters that weren't her concern. Besides, it was his life, and Betty was capable of giving him whatever help he needed.

“Where's Ruth?” she said instead, standing on her toes to look around. From her vantage point, right at the edge of the small square that housed the meeting house, she could see most of Providence. Four larger streets extended like the spokes of a wheel from the central docks and wharves, situated three hundred yards or so downhill from where she was standing. The streets were lined with narrow houses, most of them of wood, here and there in brick or stone. Only Main Street was cobbled – the others were no more than dirt roads – and its gutters were decorated with the contents of chamber pots, garbage in general, and the odd, tenacious dandelion. To her right, she could make out the recently painted exterior of the Anglican church, home to a growing congregation of non-Puritans – as yet a minority, but capably led and represented by their cheerful reverend, William Norton.

Most of Providence was out and about today; most of them were presently cheering what was happening by the gallows, so the town was unusually deserted.

Alex shielded her eyes, looked in the direction of Minister Allerton's house, close to the western palisade, and repeated her question.

“I left her with the minister and his lasses – he didn't want to come anyway,” Ian said.

“Oh.” Alex set her mouth. She liked Minister Allerton, finding him a devout and compassionate man with a broadminded approach to much of human life. She liked his daughters, in particular Temperance, who at sixteen was a plump, rosy girl with her father's grey eyes and, Alex supposed, her mother's blond hair. She had never met Mrs Allerton, and now she never would – at least not in this life. No, all in all,

Alex was very fond of Julian Allerton. What she didn't like was how the minister regarded her soon seventeen-year-old daughter Ruth, and she definitely disliked how Ruth gazed at him. Twenty years or so her senior, he was, and in Alex's opinion that was far too much. She wondered if Matthew had noticed, and if his reaction was similar to hers.

She waited until Ian and Betty moved off to talk with a group of younger acquaintances and shared her concerns with him. To her huge irritation, all he did was smile. "She's a pretty lass."

She most certainly was, with dark red, sleek hair and eyes so like her father's, light hazel that in sunshine shifted from celadon green to gold.

"Very," Alex said, "and not yet seventeen. She's barely a year older than his daughter, for God's sake!" Nor were things made simpler by the fact that their Daniel and Temperance were betrothed.

Matthew sighed. "He looks, Alex. He wouldn't be a man if he didn't look at a pretty wee thing like our Ruth."

"Hmm." Alex gave him a sidelong glance. "Do you?"

"Oh aye," he said, the corner of his mouth twitching. "It's nice at times to rest your eyes on something young and bonny."

"Absolutely, I do it all the time. Now that young man for example..." She bobbed her head at a man – no, a boy – standing some yards away, and looked him up and down. "Very nice arse."

Matthew clearly didn't find that amusing, glaring down at her.

She snorted and sank her nails into his hand. "If you look, Matthew Graham, then so will I."

"I don't, not really."

"Good," she nodded, "then I won't either." She threw a lingering look at the boy. "Probably very boring in bed. You know, stick it in and, wham, it's over. Not at all like you." She dropped her voice and winked.

"Alex! Hush!" Matthew's cheeks went a dull red, but he tightened his hold on her hand.

“Anyway,” Alex went on, nodding a greeting to one of the older Providence matrons, “it’s not only Julian looking at her, it’s Ruth looking at him as well. And not, I might add, because of his handsomeness, seeing as he’s rather plain.”

“Inner qualities, Alex, inner qualities. You must learn to look beyond the outer shell.”

“He’s pushing forty. He’s more than twice her age!”

“He won’t do anything untoward.”

“And should he come asking, you’ll just say no, right?”

At his silence, she stopped. “Right?”

“And if it is she that comes? If it’s our Ruth that comes and tells you she’s dying with love for that grey-eyed, balding minister of hers?” He looked at her until she dropped her eyes.

“Oh shit, hoisted on my own petard...” She scuffed at the ground and frowned. “Then I’ll tell her she has to wait until she’s eighteen,” Alex said with a sigh.

Their discussion was stopped by the sudden appearance of Minister Allerton himself, complete with youngest daughter Mercy and a trailing Ruth, walking arm in arm with Temperance.

“And Patience?” Alex asked, offering Mercy a boiled sweet.

“Over there,” Minister Allerton replied with a vague wave of his hand in the direction of the bakery. He was doing a good job of bringing up his daughters on his own, and Alex liked the fact that he had insisted they stay with him after their mother’s premature death and not be sent back to live with their large family back in Boston. “Any day now.” He nodded in the direction of the port.

“I sincerely hope so,” Alex said. “We want to leave the day after tomorrow.” It had been something of a fluke that Stephen’s execution had coincided with the expected return home of one of their sons. Still; they’d been here six days now, and so far no Daniel. She shaded her eyes and looked out at sea, scanning for anything that might look like the sloop from Massachusetts, but the silvered waters of the Chesapeake lay flat and empty, the June heat creating a shimmering haze that

floated enticingly a few feet off the surface.

“And has Daniel made up his mind?” the minister asked Matthew.

“Aye.” All of Matthew expanded with pride. “He’s going for ordination.”

“Ah.” The minister nodded, sending a shrewd look in the direction of Alex, who kept her face neutral. “It pleases you, Alex?”

“It pleases Daniel, and that’s what’s important, right?” In her very private moments, the ones she kept even from Matthew, she’d admit that she wasn’t all too happy about one of her sons becoming a minister in the Puritan church; so easy to become straight-laced and judgmental, to become inflated with an excessive sense of self-importance – in particular in an age and place like this, when God and his ministers ruled most aspects of people’s lives.

Alex sighed. They’d been driven to leave Scotland for religious issues, escaping persecution by coming to this small colony that had early on embraced religious tolerance. Over the last few years, this open-mindedness had narrowed down substantially, with increased conflicts between the state’s minority Catholics and predominant Protestants, many of whom were Puritans/ Presbyterians, like her husband. Like herself, come to think of it; at least, in the sense that everyone assumed she was of the same beliefs as her husband.

It always made her laugh. Agnostic, hard-nosed Alexandra Lind had no time for God until the day she’d had the misfortune – or not, depending how one saw it – of being on an exact ninety-degree crossroads when a thunderstorm broke out overhead, effectively creating a rift in time. Even now, twenty-six years later, she had to hug herself at the far too vivid recollection of her fall through time. All that noise, all that bright light, and with a thud she’d landed here, in an age very much defined by faith. With the passing years, she had adapted and conformed, and now she would never dream of not saying grace before eating, or of not sending up a quick, genuine prayer to God at least once during her day. Short and to the point mostly, not a lot of waffling

about, sometimes rather acerbic, but still...

"...and I hope you'll agree," Minister Allerton was saying, looking at Matthew.

Alex forced herself back into the here and now. Agree to what?

"Aye, why not?" Matthew said.

Ruth beamed at him, curtsied, and rushed off with Temperance in tow.

"Agree to what?" Alex asked in an undertone when they were walking off.

"Betrothal," he teased, making her pinch his arm. "Ruth is to stay with the Allertons for some weeks, and then they will all come up to Graham's Garden for the harvest."

"Bloody tradition that has become," Alex muttered, but with no real heat. The minister more than pulled his weight on the farm for the three or four weeks he was there, and his girls were all willing to help however they could. "I'm not sure I like it that she stays with them, in particular, given our previous discussion."

"Julian is an honourable man," Matthew said.

"And if he isn't?"

Matthew looked down at her. "Then the minister might find himself short of his balls." He leaned towards her with a grin. "Big balls, by the way."

"Matthew!"

They spent the evening with Matthew's sister, Joan, and her lawyer husband, Simon Melville. Matthew and Simon played chess; Alex and Joan spent several hours talking out in the yard, while Joan sucked hungrily at one of the two joints Alex had rolled for her. As she smoked, Joan relaxed, her normally so tense features smoothing into a bland, woozy expression, allowing that full mouth of hers to curve now and then into a smile. They all knew it was a matter of months before Joan died, but as Joan refused to broach the subject, her family played along, with Matthew and Simon pretending not to notice Joan was as high as a kite when they joined their wives in the yard.

It was almost midnight by the time they made it to bed, a narrow contraption in the small room just under the roof at the inn that stood a stone's throw away from the meeting house. It was like entering an oven, the small window giving very little relief, despite Matthew propping it wide open.

"...so Joan is a bit worried, given that the midwife is convinced it's twins this time, but Lucy doesn't look all that peaked in my opinion, and her girl is what? Nearly two?" Lucy Melville, now Jones, reminded Alex of a well-fed, sleek cat. Astonishingly beautiful, permanently silent due to her deafness, Matthew's niece had turned most male heads in Providence a full 360 degrees before she was safely wed to Henry Jones. Now, at soon nineteen, Lucy was like a gigantic, attractive pear, her ninth-month belly sailing before her. "Personally, I'm far more worried about Joan, she's down to looking like a walking skeleton, and—"

A soft snore interrupted her. Matthew was asleep, sprawled diagonally across the rope-frame bed. In sleep, his face smoothed itself out, the mouth curving into its natural generous expression. The grooves on his brow and around his nose, the network of shallow wrinkles at the outer corner of his eyes, they all softened.

His hair lay dark against the white of the pillow, grey and brown intermingled, and to her he was as beautiful now as he had been the first day she saw him. He looked young and vulnerable in the weak light, his right arm thrown high over his head, the other slung across the pillows. One leg was pulled up, and from beneath the hem of his bunched-up shirt, his penis peeked, half-tumescent. Alex moved over to kiss his cheek, filled with an overwhelming tenderness for this man – her man.

Matthew grunted in his sleep, but her hand on his head and yet another kiss made his lips twitch into a smile before he rolled over on his side, mumbling something about being very, very tired.

Alex returned to sit on the stool and studied herself meditatively. Almost fifty-two, she mused, not quite a year older than Joan. Not an entirely bad age, actually. She

scratched at a small scab on her thigh, blotted the resulting blood with her fingertip, and proceeded with a detailed inspection of her body.

Very nice feet, she smiled, but then she had always had very nice feet – that and good tits. They were still good, at least according to Matthew who, with a twinkle in his eyes, would tell her that he was a far better judge of them than she was. She cupped them, squinting down at them. Yes, quite okay, as was most of her, except for that permanent pouch on her belly and the very ugly scar on her right biceps, courtesy of a wolf.

She nipped at the excess belly skin and frowned. In her age, she could have had a belly tuck done and gotten rid of this. On the other hand, a twenty-first century Alex wouldn't have lived through ten pregnancies to begin with. And, in her age, there would have been help to be had for whatever it was that was eating Joan alive. It was getting much, much worse, with Joan increasingly wasted each time they saw her. The marijuana no longer helped all that much so, increasingly, Joan spent her days in an opium-fuelled daze in a desperate attempt to find some relief.

Alex uncorked her stone jar and poured a generous puddle of lavender-scented oil into her hands. At least she'd gotten rid of the quack, she thought as she rubbed the oil into her hands and face. Idiot, to suggest a woman as frail as Joan be bled three times a day. No, what Joan needed was surgery and chemotherapy. What she'd get were invigorating tonics and even more opium. Lucky her.

Chapter 2

Lucy Jones inhabited a world of almost silence and had done so since the day of her birth. A silence in which her thoughts stood stark and sharp-edged against a backdrop of constant visual and tactile stimuli. The odd, muted sound would now and then penetrate to her brain, but mostly Lucy heard through her fingers and eyes; she assessed body language and read lips. She moved through rooms full of people that supposed she understood nothing, and all the while she added nugget after nugget of information to the hoard she kept in her brain. Swift and dexterous, she ghosted her way into offices and studies, sifted through opened letters, journals and ledgers. She read deeds and documents; she perused the odd love note and long, boring tracts on God and Church, King and Country.

She knew everything about the people closest to her: her father and his sordid adulterous matter back in Scotland; her mother and her silent battle against constant pain; her mother-in-law's dalliance with the hot-headed glazier recently arrived from England; her husband's infatuation with Barbra, the new house slave. Lucy smiled at Barbra, inspecting her for signs of pregnancy. No, not as yet, but given Henry Jones' repeated absences from the marital bed, it was just a question of time. Well, Barbra would make a good wet nurse, and the half-breed baby could be handed off to another of the slaves to nurse. Barbra shifted nervously under her assessing look, and Lucy broadened her smile. Barbra swallowed and escaped when Lucy waved her away with the breakfast tray.

Lucy stretched luxuriously and got out of bed, one long, narrow hand on her swelling belly. She twirled in front of the three-foot mirror that Henry had bought her as a wedding

present, importing it at an exorbitant price from the famous Manufacture Royale des Glaces in Paris. He'd had it framed here, complaining that the heavy gilded frame had cost him almost as much as the looking glass, but Lucy knew that to be a lie – the glass pane had cost four times as much.

She smiled at what she saw: thick hair the colour of copper threaded with gold, strong cheekbones, and a straight nose, neither too long nor too short. Dimples appeared when she smiled, her lower lip was nice and plump, and all of her was covered with velvety skin of that startling white that only redheads ever have. No freckles, except for a smattering over the bridge of her nose, and ironically her ears were overlarge, protruding somewhat from her head.

Lucy adjusted her embroidered linen shift over her breasts, and looked about for the silk nightgown she'd had made some months ago. She stroked the soft dove-blue surface. She liked this new life of hers, and if that included tolerating Henry's little infidelities while she was pregnant, so be it – however difficult she found it. He'd been honest enough to admit that he found her repellent in her bloated state, going on to underline that it was only her he truly loved. Lucy was no fool, in fact rather the reverse, and of late she had intercepted glances between Henry and sweet lithe Barbra that spoke of more than a male itch. No, Lucy decided then and there, Barbra would have to go, however competent a wet nurse she would make.

Lucy drew the bolt on her bedroom door and sat down at the little table she used as her private desk. The drawer was kept locked, and right at the bottom, her hands closed on the wrapped package and drew it out. This was her treasure, her best kept secret – a little thing that should have been destroyed years ago, had she obeyed her father.

Burn it, her father had said, his eyes wild, burn it, lass! And Lucy had hurried to the kitchen with the wrapped item crushed to her chest to do as he said, but had frozen with her hand extended towards the grate. From the thing she'd held came noise, and Lucy's heart had leapt like a startled hart when, for the first time in her life, she truly heard. Not

the muted, distant sounds she would occasionally pick up, not the discordant, jarring noises that now and then broke through her veil of silence: no, this was a veritable banquet of sound – screams, songs, the eerie call of gulls, laughter, voices drowning in each other, the lapping sound of waves against the shore – all of it bombarded her reeling brain.

With a shaking hand, she'd uncovered what she held and found herself looking down at a painting, an exquisite little painting of...she didn't truly know. The sea perhaps, or the sky as it looked to the west moments after the sun had dropped out of sight, leaving a band of shimmering greens and blues in its wake. A painting that spoke to her, and Lucy had clutched it to her heart and lied when her father asked if she had burnt it. Yes, she had nodded, and all the while the little magic painting lay hidden under her bodice.

Three years on, the painting lived in her desk. She caressed its sides and placed it on the table. Lucy closed her eyes and listened, drinking in all those sounds she only heard here, sitting at her desk in solitude. People weeping, crying for their lost ones...the high sound of a girl laughing... the darker notes of a man's voice. To Lucy, they were all intoxicating, a bouquet of sensations that left her mildly drunk for the remainder of the morning, an addiction she no longer could do without.

Her father had never explained why she was to burn the picture, saying only that it was evil and dangerous. Dangerous? Lucy scraped a nail over the thick oil paint, tracing the scrawled M in the right-hand corner. Yes, it probably was, but not to her, even if at times her head would throb and her vision cloud if she looked at it for too long. She pursed her mouth, considering why her father, Simon Melville, would have thought it evil. What could this little square of bright colours possibly do? With a sigh, she rewrapped the painting in its square of muslin cloth and returned it to its hiding place.

At times, Lucy admitted that the single largest benefit of her marriage to Henry Jones was his mother. She liked

Kate, admired her even, and, in particular, she enjoyed spending time with a person who so clearly regarded her as an intellectual equal rather than a halfwit.

Kate was sitting at her desk when Lucy entered the parlour and brightened at the sight of her. She patted at the chair beside her. Lucy smiled back, dancing over the dark hardwood floors despite her huge, protruding belly. Twins, just like Henry had been a twin, even if his brother had died some years ago. Lads, she hoped, heirs to the plantation and all the riches Kate was accumulating. Not that she didn't love her little Frances, but male children were what was expected of her – by her husband and her mother-in-law.

“Good night?” Kate enquired with a smile. She set her quill down and moved the open ledgers aside.

Lucy nodded and pulled the ledgers towards her. Together with her mother-in-law, Lucy kept all the accounts, and it was their neat hands that flowed up and down the columns, detailing expenses and incomes.

New slaves, she noted with a slight frown. Again? She tapped at the item with her finger, raising a questioning brow.

“For the tobacco farm,” Kate explained. “You know how quickly they wear out.”

Lucy made an acquiescing movement and went on with her inspection of the latest entries. Dyed broadcloth? Dark red? Lucy lifted her eyes to where Barbra was minding little Frances. Definitely a new skirt, and definitely dark red... Lucy scowled. Mayhap she should send Barbra off to the tobacco farm, but something in her gut told her Henry wouldn't like that. Sell her off while Henry was away elsewhere? Lucy sneaked a look at Kate and concluded this was not an option. Her mother-in-law might not approve of Henry bedding a slave – in fact, she probably pretended it wasn't happening – but as long as Henry wanted the wench to stay, stay she would. Lucy sighed. No, she would have to think of something else. With an effort, she returned her attention to the ledger.

“That? Oh, that... You weren't supposed to see that,” Kate

said. "It's something Henry wishes to surprise you with."

Lucy smiled. A sizeable amount, spent down in St Mary's City with one of the better merchants. She patted herself on her belly and got to her feet, indicating with her hand that she intended to go out.

Providence in June was at times uncomfortably warm. Lucy snapped her fan open, adjusted the brim of her hat to ensure her face remained in shadow, and hurried off in the direction of her parents' house. In sober velvets and immaculate linens, she swept through the town, her hair modestly hidden under an elegant hat. People bowed and curtsied; young Mrs Jones was a valued customer for all that she was considered simple. Poor lass, old women would sigh as they looked her up and down, unaware that she understood every word they uttered: pretty enough but deaf as a door post. Imagine Henry Jones marrying her!

Minister Walker stopped and bowed, his mouth moving with extreme slowness as he enunciated a good day to her. Lucy simpered and curtsied and wondered if Mrs Walker had any idea of where her God-fearing husband spent most of his evenings. Lucy did, slipping in for the odd visit with Mrs Malone, who not only made the town's best beer to serve at her brothel, but who was also beyond doubt its most competent high-fashion seamstress.

Not that Mrs Malone would ever dream of being indiscreet, but chatter away to her girls she did, while deaf Lucy stood silent on a stool, her eyes leaping from mouth to mouth as she added bit after bit to her extensive information bank – like the fact that Minister Walker was a frequent guest, an old dear who drank far too much beer and flirted enthusiastically with the girls, even if he had never succumbed to his carnal itches – except for that time five years in the past.

"Distraught," Mrs Malone said. "The poor man was so disgusted with himself, it made my heart break." Well, that was as it should be. A minister to do such! Lucy had wrinkled her nose, thinking that no man was above sin.

Lucy didn't like it when they discussed her father, a far

too regular visitor to this establishment. Nor was she amused at some of the detailed descriptions of her own husband, roused and half-naked in Madam's own bed.

"Just like his father in his tastes," Mrs Malone had said, and they all laughed, throwing Lucy pitying glances. Lucy had twisted her hands together to stop herself from hitting her. The woman was older than Methuselah – what in God's name could Henry see in her? A lot apparently, but not only in her, as the other girls added anecdotes of their own, starring Henry Jones and his eager member.

"And Frances?" Her mother didn't attempt to hide her disappointment, her narrow shoulders slumping even more than usual. Lucy gave her a concerned look. She loved her mother more than she loved anyone else in the world, and this long, slow dying was unbearable to watch.

Joan patted her hand and gestured for her to sit down on the bench in the backyard, pouring them both some buttermilk. "It's good for you," she said at Lucy's face. "And it's good for the weans."

Lucy rolled her eyes, but drank. Afterwards they both laughed at each other's white moustaches.

Lucy wasn't delighted by the sudden arrival of her aunt and uncle. Ever since Matthew Graham had caught her reading his private correspondence some years ago, something of a chilly truce existed between them. But her mother brightened markedly in the presence of her brother, smiling as he teased her about her latest addition to her hen coop.

"She's a good layer," Joan said. "Every day during spring and summer."

"She's bald!" Matthew laughed. "You have to knit her something to wear, indecent as she is."

"Who has ever heard of a hen in clothes?" Joan protested.

"And who has ever heard of a hen with no feathers?" Matthew said.

"It's only round her rump." Alex bent down to inspect the said hen.

“Aye, immodest little baggage.” Matthew nodded at the cock. “Not that he much cares, does he?”

“Maybe that’s why, you know, desperate females and all that.” Alex undid her hat, and dropped it onto the table, fiddling with her hair.

“Alex!” Joan eyed her new hen and sighed. “Now I won’t see her without noting her nudity. The pot,” she said, wagging a finger at the hen. “You go into the pot within the week.”

Lucy had only half followed this exchange, utilising the opportunity to study Matthew and Alex in detail. Her uncle was a handsome man, albeit that he was well over fifty: all his teeth, thick hair, and a face that was relatively unlined. At some inches over six feet, he was inordinately tall, as were all his sons, in particular Jacob. Lucy smiled. Of all her cousins, it was Jacob that she truly liked, impressed by how he’d gone to London on his own at only sixteen.

Matthew raised an eyebrow at her intense staring, and Lucy ducked her head. Why was it that he made her feel so transparent, as if all the thoughts that darted back and forth inside her brain stood plain to read upon her face for him? That Alex didn’t much like her was obvious, nor did Alex make much of an effort to hide her opinion, even if she always accorded Lucy the respect of treating her like an adult. Lucy didn’t much like Alex either, and in particular she didn’t like it that the woman looked so radiant, her skin an unlined pink, her dark blue eyes clear and glittering. Her hair was, as always, brushed to a shine, strands of grey highlighting a mass of brown and bronze and chestnut. Mayhap there was some truth in all that posturing around the importance of eating raw greens, Lucy mused, grimacing at remembered meals at Graham’s Garden that consisted of far too much spinach and beets, and far too little gravy and pie.

Lucy produced the little piece of sharpened coal she always carried with her and doodled while she waited for her uncle and aunt to leave. She drew swirls and whirlwinds, a small patch of something that heaved and sucked. She smiled down at her effort: the little picture, albeit muted now that it was all in grey.

Joan placed a hand on her sleeve, making her jerk upright. Her uncle's face had gone a sickly white, and as to Alex, she was staring at the little drawing with revulsion.

"What is it you're drawing, daughter?" Joan asked, her grey eyes wide.

Lucy tried to cover the scrap of paper with her hand, but Matthew was quicker, snatching it away to study it closely.

"Oh God!" He crumpled it together.

"Joan?" Alex said. "Has she seen one of those?"

Joan nodded. "We were sent one, three years ago."

"Sent one?" Alex wet her lips with her tongue. "By whom?"

"We don't know. It just came, aye? But we burnt it, didn't we?" She met Lucy's eyes. "We burnt it."

Lucy nodded, several times. Of course she'd burnt it.

"Thank the Lord for that!" Matthew slumped in his chair.

"Amen to that," Alex said, looking as if she were about to faint.

Lucy eyed them both with interest. They were frightened, badly frightened, and once again she found herself wondering what the little painting could possibly do. To ask outright was not going to work, she could see that in all of their faces, and seeing as neither her uncle nor aunt showed any indication of leaving, Lucy chose to cut her visit short. She rose, curtsied politely and left, promising her mother she'd be back on the morrow.

"Luke," Matthew muttered when Joan left them to escort her daughter to the door. "It has to be Luke that sent them the picture."

Alex nodded. There was no doubt in her mind: this bore the elegant signature of Luke Graham, Matthew's estranged brother – and she knew for a fact that he'd had one of these horrible paintings in his possession a few years back. Even worse, she knew who'd painted it, hating this reminder of her strange time travelling witch of a mother. She kept a cautious eye on Joan, moving around in the kitchen to find them something to drink.

“How could he do that?” Alex said in an undertone to Matthew. “He knew the painting was dangerous. I told him!” Not that she’d wanted to, but upon realising Luke had one of Mercedes’ pictures in his possession, she’d felt compelled to warn him – more for the sake of her son, Jacob, who at the time was in London and spending a lot of time with Luke. She smoothed at her skirts, a sudden itch flying up her legs. She could still remember the fear that had gripped her upon reading Jacob’s detailed description of the painting, down to admitting just how ill it made him feel. Alex drew a deep breath. If you looked too long, the painting trapped you. It sucked you in and transported you elsewhere, and...Damn Mercedes! Why, oh why had she chosen to litter the world with these dangerous portals through time? She knew why: Mercedes was trying to paint her way home to fifteenth century Seville, but ironically her little portals did not seem to work on her.

“Simon is Luke’s least favourite person in the world bar one. To send it to me wouldn’t do him much good as he knew we would recognise it for what it was.” Matthew shrugged. “Ah well, it didn’t work. That evil piece of magic is safely burnt.”

“Thank heavens for that,” Alex said before turning to smile at Joan, returning with pitcher and mugs.

Chapter 3

“But with the Duke of York openly papist, God alone knows where all this will end,” Simon Melville said, receiving nods of agreement from the assembled men. The recently failed plot against the king and his brother, the duke, had left England heaving with religious conflict – again. Matthew shifted in his chair and caught the eye of Thomas Leslie. The latter smiled weakly. Both of them had fought for the Commonwealth back in the 1640s, and neither of them wished to see the country plunged into the devastating disaster of civil war again.

“There are rumours that the king himself holds papist sympathies,” William Hancock said, “and as to his wife, well, we all know she is.”

More murmurs. Catherine of Braganza was undoubtedly Catholic, and it was very fortunate from a staunch Protestant view that she had proved incapable of giving Charles II any children. Now it was too late, she being near on forty-six, but who knew what influence she exerted over the king?

“It must be terrible to have your own son plot against you,” Matthew said, thinking that Monmouth was an ingrate. Everything he had, the royal bastard owed to his royal father, and then to conspire against him, plan the murder of him no less...

Hancock shrugged. “All that need not concern us, but the situation here is becoming strained as well.”

They all nodded. Squabbles between neighbours acquired undertones of religious fervour. Protestants of all colours ranged themselves against the few Catholics that had made it this far north of St Mary’s City, and, increasingly, the protests against Catholic Lord Baltimore grew.

“We must rid ourselves of the papists,” one man Matthew

didn't recognise said. "Force them to leave lest they stab us in the back."

"They came here for the same reasons we did," Thomas reprimanded, "to live in accordance with their conscience. They've built themselves lives and families just as we have."

"A Test Act, that's what we need," the unknown speaker went on, rudely ignoring Thomas. "Have them swear an oath by which they disavow themselves of all that papist heresy."

"Papist heresy?" Matthew laughed. "It's us that are the heretics, at least to them. After all, the Catholic Church came first."

"For shame, Matthew!" William Hancock looked quite severe.

"Tolerance is a virtue," Matthew said.

William shook his head. "Not always, not when it puts our faith at risk."

Matthew chose not to reply, somewhat relieved Alex wasn't present. His dear wife would by now have been most incensed, berating them all for bigotry while reminding them that they lived in a colony that had passed an Act of Toleration, allowing for all Christian faiths to live side by side.

"What?" Matthew was brusquely returned to the ongoing discussion by Thomas' hand on his back.

"We were saying that at present we need do nothing," Thomas said. "It's not as if we've experienced much violence – at least not from our fellow colonists."

"Ah, are you having problems with the Indians?" William asked.

Thomas pursed his mouth. "At times, but it's mostly theft, no more. No, it's the others that worry me more."

"The others?" The unknown man leaned forward.

"Renegades: bands of white men that have lost much in the previous Indian wars and now compensate themselves as they can." Matthew regarded his hands, fisted them a couple of times. Men like the Burley brothers, men who burnt and killed and ravaged.

"Papists." The new man nodded. "See, I told you."

"Papists?" Matthew said. "I don't know about that, but

it seems to me they're not much concerned with religion anyway."

The meeting broke up shortly after. Thomas and Matthew strolled back to their respective lodgings. The June evening was agreeably warm, and as a consequence business was brisk in the taprooms that abutted the port area.

"Who is he?" Matthew asked as they made their way across the deserted marketplace.

"Lionel?" Thomas made a disgusted sound. "A young hothead, recently come from the home country with the intent of building More's Utopia over here – in glass, no doubt, given his profession."

"Ah. As intolerant as the author, I gather."

"It would seem so," Thomas agreed. "More was a rabid and cruel pursuer of those that held faiths other than his own."

Matthew wouldn't know: he was nowhere as well read as Thomas, and said so, making his friend smile at him.

Ten years older than Matthew, Thomas suffered from hair loss, and had decided to compensate for this with an exuberant wig of glossy black hair, which if anything made him look even older than he was.

Now he lifted the hairpiece off his head and scratched. "Damned heat! Were we like him? In our youth were we as righteous as he is now?" He sounded out of breath, chest heaving slightly after their quick walk up the main street.

Matthew thought about that for some moments.

"Probably." He had per definition hated Papists and Anglicans as a youth, had signed the Solemn League and Covenant that called for the extirpation of popery and prelacy. And then, several years later, he had sworn an Oath of Abjuration of his previous loyalties, officially bowing to the supremacy of King and Church of England. "An oath I took without any intention of upholding it," he said, grimacing somewhat.

"One does as one must, and at the time you couldn't have done otherwise without placing your family at risk."

"I placed them at risk anyway." Riding off to Conventicles, helping Covenanter preachers...now those

memories made Matthew shake his head at that younger self burning with convictions he no longer held.

“That isn’t true. You still hold to your beliefs. A society ruled by free men for free men, a church that recognises every man’s right to speak directly to God.” Thomas patted Matthew on the back. “And some of these things we have here.”

“Aye, some we do.”

Matthew was somewhat disgruntled when he arrived at the inn to find Alex had already supped, but at least his wife joined him at the table as he ate.

“I saw Constance today,” she said.

He picked at the stew on his plate. Bower’s Inn was relatively clean, served a good breakfast but a dismal supper, and this was awful.

“Constance? Peter Leslie’s wife?”

“Mhm.” Alex grabbed a piece of bread. “With a man,” she added, wagging her eyebrows.

“Mayhap her father.”

“Too young, and no, it wasn’t her brother either – not unless she’s into incestuous relationships.”

“Ah.” Matthew wasn’t all that interested.

Alex chewed her bread in silence. “If—” She drank some of his cider and took yet another bite.

“If...” Matthew prompted.

“If she were to take a lover, would that be considered adultery? Given that Peter Leslie doesn’t want her back, but refuses to divorce her?”

“Of course – she’s a married woman.”

“Who hasn’t had her husband in her bed for what? Four years? She’s not even thirty yet!”

“Peter Leslie is doing mankind a favour by keeping her out of the marital market, surely you agree? What that wee baggage did to poor Ailish Leslie...” He shook his head. Peter’s daughter-in-law, Ailish, was permanently scarred – badly scarred – after the time Constance threw hot sugar in her face.

“Yes, that was pretty bad, but to leave her permanently

in limbo... It wasn't her idea to marry Peter in the first place, was it? That must have been a pretty dreary initiation in the pleasures of the marital bed, what with her nineteen to his fifty-odd."

"For better and for worse," Matthew said, even if he considered his neighbour had shown severe lack of judgement in wedding the lass. He shoved his wooden platter away with an irritated gesture. "If the boat doesn't come in tomorrow, we leave for home anyway. I can't go on eating pig swill." And he had to get back home – in these uncertain times, all of him itched with an urgent need to ensure his family was safe.

Alex yawned and nodded. "Tomorrow, and then we leave."

The sloop was visible already at dawn, and with Alex's hand safe in the crook of his arm, Matthew stood waiting by the docks, eyes stuck on the tall shape he assumed to be his son. Daniel whooped when he came within hearing distance, using his hat to wave at them, and Alex tugged her hand free from where it lay on Matthew's arm, using it to wave at their son.

"God, he's big," she said with evident pride, near on tripping over her feet as she dragged him towards where the sloop was being moored.

"Aye, he is." The lad had grown yet another inch or two; was now near on as tall as Matthew himself was. Blue eyes, hair so dark it was almost black – his son was a handsome lad and educated to boot. His wee Daniel a minister in the making; it made Matthew's throat constrict with emotion. He dashed at his eyes, smiled at how effusively Alex greeted their son, and finally pressed the lad to his chest.

"Best in your class," he crowed, "well done, lad." He looked him up and down. "You even look the part," he said, taking in Daniel's sober clothes.

"So do you," Daniel said, making Matthew laugh.

He wiped at his dark grey sleeves and tapped a finger to the cuffs. "Embroidered," he said, showing Daniel the

intricate designs of revolving stars with which Alex had chosen to decorate this his best summer coat.

“A cravat?” Daniel teased, tugging at the flowing linen around Matthew’s throat.

“Some things you don’t attempt to fight,” Matthew said.

“Oh, come off it,” Alex snorted from behind him. “You enjoy looking good.”

Matthew draped an arm over her shoulders to gather her to him. “And do I? Look good?”

She stood on tiptoe and whispered just what a delectable piece of eye candy he was, and went on to describe exactly what she wanted to do to him – later. Matthew felt his cheeks heat into bright red, a tingling sensation rushing through his privates.

Beside them, Daniel groaned and shook his head. “Da! It’s unseemly. What will—” Whatever else their son had intended to say was interrupted by Ian, who came limping towards them with Betty and one of their huge dogs in tow.

“Can you still ride, or will you be riding pillion?” Ian said with a wide smile for his brother.

“I can,” Daniel huffed. He bent down to scratch Dandelion behind his ear. “He’s growing old,” he stated, fondling the huge head.

“So are all of us,” Matthew said, “and back home we now have a Delilah and a Daffodil as well.”

“Daffodil?” Daniel laughed. “You can’t call a dog Daffodil!”

“Try telling your sister that.” Alex nodded in the direction of where Ruth was flying down the street towards her favourite brother. Daniel rushed to meet her, swinging her in several wide arcs before setting her back on her feet.

“Oh, Daniel!” Ruth kissed him, her dark red braids tumbling free from cap and hat. “I’ve missed you so much!” She seemed to dance on the spot, and Daniel danced with her, for a moment becoming a young lad before recalling he was now almost a minister and a certain gravitas was to be expected.

After Ruth came Temperance, light eyes wide with

pleasure at the sight of Daniel. But no wild embraces, no more than a curtsy and a bow.

“Tss,” Alex murmured, clearly disappointed by this rather formal reunion. “Do you suppose he’s ever kissed her properly?”

Matthew swallowed a surprised gust of laughter and coughed.

“He has,” he said once he got his breath back. “And more than that, aye?”

“How do you know?”

“I caught them at it in the hayloft last year, threatened to belt them both if something like that ever happened again.”

“But you’ve never told me!” Alex let her eyes wander over their son and his sweetheart.

“You never asked.”

Alex sniffed and eyed him from under lowered brows. “I’ll keep that in mind next time I find out something concerning our children, shall I? Unless you ask, why tell?”

Matthew grinned down at her. “You could try, but that tongue of yours is mightily fond of wagging.”

Yet another blue look, this one bordering on glacial, but Matthew just laughed and moved over to talk with Minister Allerton.

“Bloody man, more or less accusing me of being a gossip.” Alex adjusted her new shawl and turned to find her daughter-in-law frowning.

“Who’s that?” Betty said, ducking her head in the direction of a woman who was staring at them – and in particular at Ian, who was staring back, his back stiff as a board. Alex had to squint to make out the woman standing by the fish stalls.

“Fiona!”

“Fiona?” Betty growled in a way that indicated she knew all about this particular woman and liked her not one bit. “What is she doing here?”

“She lives here,” Alex said, “down behind the school, at the cobbler’s.” Well, she assumed she did. She hadn’t seen Fiona except for the odd glimpse in almost a decade, and the

intervening years had not treated Fiona kindly, at least not from what she could make out from here.

“Her children?” Betty asked, looking at the three boys who were hovering around her.

“I suppose so.” Alex shrugged. “She looks awfully worn, doesn’t she?”

“That’s what you get,” Betty said icily. “Some God punishes already in this life, doesn’t He?”

Alex threw Fiona a look. Given how thin and old she looked, how threadbare her clothes were, it would seem she had more than paid for seducing Ian when he was a boy, trying to coerce him into marriage by assuring him the child she was carrying was his when all the while she’d known it wasn’t.

“She’s not had an easy life,” Alex said, feeling quite sorry for Fiona.

In response, Betty snorted and walked over to where Ian was standing. She said something to him that made him laugh and shake his head, one arm sliding round her waist. When Alex looked again, Fiona was gone, as were the scruffy boys.