

ANNA
BELFRAGE

Serpents
in the
Garden



SilverWood

Chapter 1

“Are you sure?” Betty Hancock trembled with agitation. “What if you don’t come back? Ships are wrecked, and—”

Jacob Graham scoffed and went on stuffing his few belongings into the canvas sack he had procured a day or so ago. “I know the man. Captain Miles is a wily sailor. He’s been sailing the seas longer than most – he’ll keep me safe.”

“But—” Betty protested, only to find her mouth covered by his. For some minutes, all other activity came to a halt as they concentrated on exploring this new found pleasure. His tongue flicked against her lips, and she opened her mouth under his, keeping her eyes wide open.

He pulled back with a pleased grin. “You like it, don’t you?”

Betty’s face heated. It was wrong to lust for someone not yet your husband, and still... She smiled and nodded, going back to helping him pack his clothes.

She peeked at Jacob from under her lashes. Four years he’d lived with them, and the boy she had once regarded as a brother had in the last few months changed into a man – a very young man, but definitely a man. Well over six feet tall, with fair hair that hung straight and thick down to his shoulders, and startling light hazel eyes, Jacob Graham was a lad that turned more than his fair share of feminine heads on the street, and not only among his contemporaries.

“Why?” Betty asked for the hundredth time.

Jacob exhaled and sat back on his heels. “You know I’ve always wanted to.”

She gave a grudging nod. As long as she’d known him, he’d spoken of his desire to see the world, and these last few years living so close to the sea had increased that itch. Still, all of this made her feel inconsequential, discarded.

“But what about me?”

“I’ll come back, and the pre-contracts are already signed.”

Betty made a sound halfway between a sob and a chuckle. “The pre-contracts? You know as well as I do, that they can easily be broken. Our fathers may decide to not uphold them, and in particular my father might be tempted not to.” She was not for nothing the daughter of the single man of law in town, had grown up in a household where deeds were drawn up and amended on a daily basis, and had seen far too many contracts for marriage being declared null and void by one or both contracting parties. “He’ll be very disappointed.”

Jacob nodded, cheeks colouring. “I don’t want that. But this isn’t for me; I can’t spend my life drawing up papers.”

“My father will never allow me to wed a seaman. So what will you do, Jacob? Once you come back from your journeys?” She’d touched upon a sensitive subject, she could see.

He twisted, muttering something about becoming a merchant, mayhap a farmer like his da. A farmer? She couldn’t quite see herself as a homesteader’s wife.

Jacob raised a hand to her cheek. “A healer, I think. That’s what I would like to be.” He pulled out his three books from where he kept them under his bed, and opened the heaviest of them. “I know this almost by heart.”

So did she, what with the time they’d spent perusing the Culpeper herbal he’d inherited from his grandfather.

Jacob’s finger traced the detailed drawings of a foxglove. “We grow this at home. My Offa brought the seeds with him.”

She leaned against him to look over his shoulder.

“You’re tickling me,” he said.

No she wasn’t, it was her hair. Betty hated it: wild, exuberant, impossible to tame into anything resembling a neat hairdo, and on top of that a reddish brown, not a bright gold like her sisters’.

Jacob rubbed his head against hers, let the book slide to lie on the floor, and kissed her.

“How long?” she said much later. “How many years must I wait for you?”

“I don’t know. Two? Three?”

Betty shook her head. “My father won’t let me wait. I’ll be wed elsewhere before you come back.” Around them, the house was quiet, everyone but them asleep. She’d never been in his room at night before, and never in only her chemise and a shawl. She was very aware of her breasts pushing against the thin cloth, of how his eyes kept returning to them time and time again. Jacob moved closer. She shifted away and he followed after.

“If...” He broke off and took her hand, playing with her fingers.

“If what?” Betty asked, breathing heavily.

“If we bed...”

She scooted away from him. Bed with him? His fingers grazed her arm, the side of her neck, and she had no idea what to do with the responding flickers of heat that coursed through her.

“We can handfast,” he suggested, “and then...”

Betty looked at him with trepidation. According to her father, handfasting was a custom best eradicated, as it left the woman vulnerable to misuse. But in their case, the betrothal was already formalised, the contracts drawn up and signed. Except that the contracts called for Jacob to be eighteen, and that was more than two years away.

For a long time, they sat on the bed, eyes locked together. Scarcely able to breathe, Betty nodded and placed her hand in his much bigger one. What was she contemplating? She tried to reclaim her hand, but his fingers had already closed round hers, a warm, strong grip. Her pulse was swift, like the fluttering of a bird’s wing, and beads of sweat formed along her hairline and behind her knees.

“I, Jacob Graham, take you, Betty Hancock, as my truly wedded wife, and to you I pledge myself,” Jacob said, eyes huge in his pale face.

“I...” Betty licked her upper lip, feeling somewhat faint. “I, Betty Hancock, take you, Jacob Graham, as my truly

wedded husband, and to you I pledge myself.” A nervous gust of laughter escaped her. She wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to do this.

Their clasped hands were slippery with sweat. Jacob leaned forward and brushed his lips against her cheek. His hot breath tickled her skin, and she shivered. He kissed her again, his hand came up to rest lightly on her breast, and Betty felt the oddest sensation, like miniature feet pattering over her skin. She panicked when he pressed her down on her back, a quick instinctive struggle that made him freeze, his eyes never leaving hers. He waited, his hand heavy on her breast. She could feel her heart begin to race. He slipped his leg between hers, and she fell back against the pillows. He tugged at the drawstring of her shift, and she crossed her arms to hold the cloth to her. Gently, he loosened her hold, and she let him, allowing him to bare her chest.

“You’re very pretty,” he said, raising a finger to one of her nipples. She held her breath as he touched her, closing her eyes when his hand inched the shift up her legs. She liked the warmth of his fingers on her skin, and she relaxed, her whole body softening. Jacob kicked off his breeches and lay on top of her. She opened her eyes wide when she felt his member pressing into the skin of her belly. So big? Jacob slid down to lie between her legs, and then he was inside of her and it was all over. Betty Hancock was now officially a married woman, and she still didn’t know if she wanted to be.

When the time came for him to leave, they had managed a couple of times more, and Betty was left strangely disappointed and sore, with the dawning realisation that this night might lead to a child. Jacob kissed her one last time, stroked her over her undone hair, and smiled.

“My wife.” He clambered out of the window and dropped to the ground below. A few moments later, he was gone, swallowed up into the night.

Jacob moved stealthily through the sleeping port. *Regina Anne* was due to sail at daybreak, and he had but an hour to make it on board without being noticed. He hadn’t been

entirely honest with Betty. Captain Miles hadn't offered him a place on board, would never offer him a place unless it was with parental consent. Jacob hefted his bag higher onto his shoulder and slunk along the shadows in the direction of the furthest end of the wharf.

For some minutes, he stood studying the *Regina Anne*, trying to assess how to best get on board. He sighed. He'd have to swim and clamber up her sides. Not that much of a trial this balmy August night, and a while later Jacob curled into a tight sodden ball in his chosen hiding place. He used his damp bag as a rudimentary pillow and closed his eyes, reliving the night. Not yet sixteen and already a man...

In his head, he saw Betty's coppery eyes as they stared up at him. He felt a flash of guilt at leaving her to face their parents alone, but consoled himself with the thought that Mama would be there for her. He was almost asleep when an unsettling thought struck him, and he sat up so abruptly he banged his head against the low ceiling. Nay, he decided, they were too young for there to be issue; of course they were.

Some hours later, rough hands closed on Jacob. He was dragged from his makeshift bed by a sailor the size of a giant and frogmarched over to where the captain was waiting, looking anything but pleased.

"Jacob Graham." He sighed. "And what am I to do with you? Whip you and set you ashore?"

Jacob grinned. The coast was dwindling fast behind him, and as to the whipping – no, he didn't much believe in it.

"I want to see the world," Jacob said, "now, before I grow too old."

Captain Miles huffed with exasperation. "And do your parents know where you've gone?"

Jacob hitched his shoulders. "I left them a letter," he replied in a tone far more relaxed than he was.

"You left them a letter? Daft lad! Matthew Graham is not going to like this, is he?"

Jacob ducked his head. A pit yawned inside of him at the thought of Da's reaction.

“Besides, aren’t you under apprenticeship?”

“Aye, but I don’t want to be a man of law.”

“An absconded apprentice...” Captain Miles scratched at his cheek, all the while studying Jacob. “As I recall it, you’re contracted to...” He broke off and gave Jacob a compassionate look. “Ah, I see. You don’t like her.”

Jacob blinked, confused. “Like who?”

“The lass – Betty, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I like her very well. Once I’m back, we’ll wed properly.” Jacob stretched. A man, he was a married man.

“Wed properly? What have you done, lad?” Under the captain’s disapproving eyes, Jacob squirmed, but mumbled that handfasting was a recognised tradition.

“Handfasting?” The captain’s voice was incredulous. “You handfasted with a lawyer’s lass, and you think that will be binding?”

“Not in itself, but we...” Jacob made an unequivocal gesture, all of him swelling with pride.

Captain Miles seemed mightily unimpressed, two parallel furrows forming between his brows. “You’re a wee fool, Jacob Graham. What have you done? What have you left the lass to face alone?”

Jacob felt most of his bravado dissipate at the expression on the captain’s face. What had until now seemed a romantic gesture paled into unappetising tawdriness, and his ears heated at the thought of what they might all think of him. Bed with her and then be off, and Betty would be branded at a minimum a fool, at worst a slut. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to block out the sudden clear images of William Hancock and his wife Esther, and the way they stared at their youngest daughter.

“Maybe I should go back.” Jacob looked at the faint shoreline.

“Och aye? How? Are you a fish?” The first mate, Smith, laughed at his own joke.

“I can swim.” But not that far; even he realised that.

Captain Miles clapped Jacob on his shoulder. “Too late, son. We can’t turn back now. But you’ll be off this ship the

moment we get to Edinburgh, and there I will turn you over into the hands of your uncle. And let us hope the wee wench isn't too harshly whipped."

Jacob's guts wrenched at his words. No, he told himself, Mr Hancock wouldn't do that. Surely he wouldn't.

Betty couldn't move. Her back, her thighs, but mostly her buttocks were one huge burning pain. When her father had discovered Jacob was gone, he had been most upset, but when he threatened to tear up the pre-contracts, she had defiantly told him it was too late, because she was a wife in all ways that counted. The silence that had fallen had been absolute. She'd heard her mother gasp an "oh, Betty" before her father's hand had closed on her. He had dragged her upstairs and commanded her to undress down to her shift.

She hadn't understood what was about to happen until her father had yelled for her one remaining unwed sister to come, and for Doris, the serving girl, to come up with his horsewhip. Still she hadn't fully believed he would do it, because she had never seen him hit anyone before. Curtly, he'd told her to turn around and grab the bedpost, and to her surprise, he had tied her hands to it. She had yanked at her bindings, looking with brimming eyes at her mother.

The household had stood silent while her father explained that his daughter had shamed him, acting the whore to his erstwhile apprentice. When she protested, he had yelled at her to be quiet, to hold her tongue, depraved child that she was, and then he had raised his hand and brought the whip down for the first time.

Once he stopped, she was no longer crying: she was mute with pain and shock. When he had undone the ropes around her wrists, she had fallen neatly to her knees before her bed. A hand on her elbow helped her to stand; someone had eased her out of her bloodied shift, washed her and dressed her in cool linen before leaving her alone to meditate upon her sin and seek forgiveness from Our Lord.

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Two days later, the door to her room was unlocked, and Betty was told to come downstairs. She dressed slowly, barely capable of moving without pain, and when she finally made her way down to the parlour, her father told her she was coming with him to break the news about Jacob to his parents. At his instructions, she returned upstairs to pack some clothes together. Her mother came to help, but Betty shook her head, turning her back until she left the room. If she was shocked by her father's anger, she felt betrayed by her mother, and she vowed she would never speak to her again – at all.

To sit a horse was torture. Betty spent a considerable amount of time padding her backside with her skirts. Her father's eyes burned into her back, and she hoped he was at least slightly ashamed of what he'd done to her. She was never going to forgive him for it, ever. She adjusted her straw hat so that her face and particularly her eyes were fully shaded, and sat waiting while her father kissed his family farewell. She had kissed her brother and sister, but had stood cold and unresponsive in her mother's embrace, ignoring the look of hurt that flashed across her mother's face.

Not once did Betty look back. Her spine was stiff with defiant pride, but inside she was crying for her mother.

Chapter 2

Matthew Graham was not given to romantic gestures, but on this, his wife's birthday, he wandered for some time through the woods surrounding their home to pick her a posy, something he had done but rarely before. Forty-seven... It made him want to shake his head in astonishment because, to his eyes, Alex looked not many years older than when he had first met her, twenty-one years ago.

He stopped to scratch his head, flapping his hat in a feeble attempt to create a cooling breeze. Maryland in the last week of August of 1679 was a hot place, distinctly different from the Scotland they had left behind, and on days like this he longed for the cool of a Scottish glen, the softness of a northern summer, so different from this browbeating, constant heat.

He swore when his thumb caught on a thorn, but gave a determined yank to add a pink briar rose to his little bouquet, and turned at the sound of young voices, one repeating a shrill "wait for me, wait for me".

A late three clover in sons, he smiled, seeing David and Samuel rush across the yard with Adam tagging at their heels, his smock billowing in the wind. From the stable came Daniel, as always in a heated discussion with Ruth, and where Ruth was, there, inevitably, was Sarah.

He scrutinised his daughters from a distance: one tall and willowy, with hair of such a dark red that it at times looked almost purple and his own hazel eyes to match; the other sturdier and rounder, with inquisitive eyes and fair hair that fell in a thick curtain well down to her waist. Or would have, had their mother allowed the girls to go unbraided. Of all their children, only two had inherited their mother's blue eyes: Daniel and Sarah. All the rest were

clearly stamped with his own hazel green, and, according to Alex, the likeness between him and his sons was at times risible. Matthew didn't agree; he was secretly proud to have fathered children so unmistakably his.

He took a step back into the shade when his wife appeared at the kitchen door, not wanting her to see him standing like this, more or less spying on them all. She clapped her straw hat onto her head and strode off towards the kitchen garden, her full skirts swaying as she moved. He smiled when he recalled the first time he'd met her: how she had stared at him, not fully comprehending what had happened to her! Well, who would? An undulating crossroad, a rift in the fabric of time, and Alex tumbled from 2002 to land at his feet, badly burnt by lightning and concussed. His wife... Matthew's chest expanded with warmth. His magical lass, God's gift to him.

God's gift was in a black mood. It was too hot, far too humid, and why did all the flies within a three-mile radius seem to hover round her hat? She hitched her skirts up and frowned down at her dirty feet. A bath, she decided, a long solitary swim in the river later on, with no children, no sounds but that of her own breathing and pulse. She slapped at a bug on her arm, glared at her empty basket and the overflowing vegetable garden. This was one of those days when she longed for very strange things from her former life, chief among them an ice-cold bottle of Coca-Cola – the retro kind with its bulging shape. Or a 99 flake, with the soft ice swirling round and round inside the little cone... She sighed and went back to her digging.

“For you.”

Alex sat back and raised her face to Matthew, squishing her eyes shut when the sun hit them.

“For me?” The black mood evaporated and she stretched out her hand to the wilting little bouquet. “Thank you.” She stood and smiled at her man. Not exactly ice cream, but still. She studied the little posy and stuck her hand into his. “This needs water, and so do I.” She led the way down

to the house, set her flowers in a stone jar, and grabbed her basket. He took her hand, and they strolled off towards the cool of the river.

“Alone!” Alex barked at her children when they seemed to be on the point of joining them. “We want to be alone, okay?” She suppressed the twinge of guilt she felt at the crestfallen expression on Adam’s face – after all, it was her birthday and if she wanted to have quality time with her husband, well then...

“Okay, okay.” Daniel grabbed at his youngest brother to keep him back. “We’ll go down later,” he promised Adam.

“Later.” Adam nodded, eyes hanging off Alex. Nope, she wasn’t about to give in. Beside her, Matthew chuckled, tightened his hold on her hand, and led them in under the trees.

A few moments later, they were both in the water. Alex floated on her back, her hair flowing round her head like strands of dark seaweed. Her breasts bobbed in the water, the nipples puckering with the cold. Matthew took hold of her feet and towed her after him towards the deep.

“Eleven years since we came here,” she said.

Matthew didn’t reply. He let go of her feet and dove below her, coming up just beside her head.

“It seems longer,” she went on. “Much, much longer.”

“You think?” He waded over to fetch the scented soap she bought down in Providence, and settled down to lather both of them thoroughly. “To me, it’s but a blink of the eye.”

“Blink of the eye?” She held her nose and dipped her head under the surface to rinse off. “That just goes to show that you’re not the one who’s been pregnant four times since we got here,” she said when she resurfaced.

He smiled. “Nay, that would have caused a raised eyebrow or two.”

He liked how she got out of the water without self-consciousness, standing for a moment fully revealed. With the exception of her forearms and feet, all of her was a startling pinkish white, her skin glittering with water

droplets. A possessive pride surged through him at the sight of his wife, his eyes sliding over the slope of her hips to her bottom. A right bonny sight she was; a sight reserved for his eyes only – as it should be.

She was aging well, her body firm and strong, her skin taut and unmarked by wrinkles, except for those round her eyes and mouth that showed just how often she laughed. He knew that when she turned, he'd see a belly marked by all her pregnancies, and where he found the resulting roundness attractive, she most certainly did not, now and then nipping at the slight excess of flesh with an irritated scowl. Today though, she twirled, a languidness to her movements that had him wading towards the shore. She picked up a linen towel and dried herself with leisurely movements, lifting limbs this way and that.

“I can do that,” he said, coming out of the water.

“Do what? This?” The towel stroked her flank, continued down towards her pubic mound. “Or this?” She dried her breasts, one at a time. Two swift steps, and he was by her side.

“Aye, I dare say I can manage.” He took the towel from her. Her thighs, the cheeks of her bottom, the curve of her back, and she stood stock-still under his touch, eyes never leaving his.

“There,” he murmured, patting at her hair, “all nice and dry.” He drew her into his embrace, scraping his nails ever so lightly down her spine. It made her shiver and lean against him. Her warm body was a perfect fit to his, soft curves against his larger frame.

“And now I'll have to dry myself all over,” she said, kissing his wet shoulder. He didn't reply, concentrating on her round arse in his hands. She exhaled, slipping her arms round his waist, and shifted that much closer, her thighs against his, her full breasts squished against his chest. He was considering just how to love her when he felt her tense in his arms.

“What?” He leaned back to see her face.

“Angus. I swear that young man does it on purpose! Sneaking up like that...”

Matthew straightened up and swept the surrounding woods with narrowed eyes. He enjoyed loving his wife outdoors, and resented the intrusion. Angus in general was somewhat of a problem, a taciturn worker that spent far too much of his free time alone, and who, with the exception of his sister, never really spoke to anyone above the age of fourteen.

“Not anymore,” he said.

“No, but it sort of kills the mood to know he might be out there peeking.”

He grunted and hunted about for a towel.

Where she had no self-consciousness, Matthew definitely did. It was only with Alex, and on occasion with his bairns, that he was ever fully naked, far too aware of how scarred he was. His back was a criss-cross of welts, sword slashes had over the years decorated his torso, and the latest addition, a wide puckered scar on his thigh, was due to a blow with an axe. He made a discreet inspection of himself: still tall, still broad in chest and shoulders, and with a full head of wavy dark hair – even if there was some grey in it.

Alex approached him with her flask of oil and stopped for an instant to cock her head at him.

“Gorgeous,” she said, making him laugh. “Eye candy, all of you.”

He liked that, preened under her eyes, and adopted one pose after the other to show off his physique.

“Yes, yes,” she grinned, “you already know I consider you the most beautiful man alive, don’t you?” She patted at her spread petticoats. “Lie down, and I’ll see to your back.”

He did as she said, pillowing his head on his arms. He loved this: the strength and warmth of her hands, the intimacy of her touch, and the relief that flooded through his aching back when she massaged blood back into permanently tensed muscles. He was not as enthused when she went on to dig her fingers into his buttocks, yelping in protest when she found a particularly tender spot.

“No pain, no gain,” she reminded him, and finished up by covering all of him with oil. “There, as good as new,” she said, handing him his shirt.

Matthew decided to remain where he was. The sun warmed his skin, grasses tickled his nose, and he closed his eyes, drifting into an agreeable doze. Alex patted him on the rump and moved off.

It was nice down here by the river, a welcome breather after more than a month of strenuous harvest work. Alex reclined against her arms and stuck her nose up towards the sun. Vaguely, she could hear the sounds of her children, the piercing voices of the younger boys carrying through the quarter-mile of distance.

Nine children...no, ten, she corrected herself. There was Isaac as well, but he was somewhere in the distant future, by now a man she couldn't even envision apart from being sure he had dark hair and eyes. She firmly relegated her 21st century son to the outer fringes of her consciousness, turning her thoughts instead to those children she had around her. Children was something of a misnomer when it came to Ian and Mark, both of them married men. Jacob was down in Providence, detained by his work from coming home for the harvest, while the remaining six were most hale and hearty, at least to judge from the noise they were making.

"Peter Leslie's had yet another son." Matthew came to sit beside her and rummaged in the basket for something to eat.

"A boy? How do you know?" Alex shook her head at the offered bun and hunted about for her comb.

"Ian told me. Peter sent word to them this morning."

"I wonder what they talk about," she mused, tugging the comb through her wet hair. He took it from her, settling down to untangle her curls.

"I imagine they don't. He hasn't married Constance for her conversation, has he?"

Too right he hadn't. Their closest neighbour, Peter, was well over fifty, and his young wife was thirty years younger than him.

"And not because he needs more children either." After all, Peter already had ten children by his first wife. No, eight, because the youngest boy had died of smallpox together

with his wife, Elizabeth, and one of the girls – Amy? – had recently died in childbirth.

“Two lads in two years. I dare say he’s pleased with her fecundity.” Matthew pulled his brows together, and Alex knew exactly what he was thinking: Peter’s daughter, Ian’s wife, had so far presented her husband with only one son in six years’ marriage, and that was not for want of trying – at least not according to Ian.

Alex patted Matthew on the arm. “They have one. In time, they’ll have more.” She had said the same thing repeatedly to Ian, comforting her stepson as well as she could.

“You think?”

“I hope so.” She shared a quick look with him. Both of them had noticed the increased strain in Ian and Jenny’s relationship.

While Ian was a frequent visitor, coming over on a daily basis for a quick word with his father, or to borrow the mules, leave a cheese, collect a ham, Jenny rarely came with him, preferring to remain at home with her cows. It probably didn’t help that Naomi, Mark’s wife, was pregnant with her second child – her firstborn, Hannah, was only a year old. Alex smiled at the thought of her granddaughter. Sturdy and serious, Hannah was a biddable child with hair that grew in interesting wisps, and eyes that clearly marked her as a Graham.

On top of this, there was Adam. From the way Jenny would at times eye Alex’s youngest son, it was obvious she resented Alex for having produced yet another baby when Jenny seemed incapable of conceiving again. Alex blew out her cheeks: she’d been terrified at finding herself pregnant again, Samuel’s protracted birth still too fresh in memory. She glanced at Matthew. If she’d been scared silly, he’d been frantic, berating himself for being an inconsiderate fool until she’d told him to shut up – it wasn’t as if she’d wanted him to be careful at the time, was it?

“Jenny should come over more often,” Alex said. “It does her no good to sit all alone and brood.”

“Aye, and she doesn’t go to Leslie’s Crossing either. The whole place is overrun by weans.”

“Plus there is the matter of Constance. Imagine having a stepmother who is five years your junior. Ugh!”

“Aye, that must be difficult, and wee Constance doesn’t really help, intimidated as she is by all her stepchildren.”

Alex made a disparaging sound: anyone less intimidated than Constance she couldn’t imagine, however frail she looked. Behind those fluttering eyelashes lived a hard-nosed young lady, frustrated by her restricted role in the Leslie household.

“A bed warmer,” Alex muttered. “Poor woman, that’s all she’s there for.”

Matthew rose to his full height, tightened his belt, and waited while Alex pulled on her skirts. They walked barefooted towards their home. Around them stood fields of ripe wheat, fringed by the high trees of the forest, and where ten years ago there had been nothing but a small cabin, there now stood a two-storey building, its roof made out of larch shingles, its outer walls beginning to acquire the soft grey of weathered wood. It snuggled into the hillside behind it, sun glinted off the precious glass windows, and two chimneys protruded from the roof, one at each end. To the side of the main house stood a large barn; opposite to the barn were the elongated stables and a collection of small sheds. Together, the buildings created a haphazard ‘U’ round the central yard which was dominated by an impressive white oak.

Matthew did as he always did when he saw his house: he stopped and let his eyes run over it, puffed with pride. Alex smiled and sneaked her hand into his. It was a fine home he’d built them, a house that would stand for generations. She rested her head against his shoulder, and they remained like that for a long time, content just to stand like this, close together.

The peace and quiet was disrupted by their boys. Matthew winked at her, disengaged his hand and rushed at them, sending his sons squealing in pretend fear when he chased after them.

“Mama?” Ruth appeared by Alex’s side.

“Yes?” Alex turned to face her, still laughing at the antics of her man who was now pretending to be a lion.

“Look.” Ruth pointed in the direction of the lane.

William Hancock? What was he doing here? And why was Betty with him, looking as if she’d seen a ghost? Alex uttered a strangled sound.

“Alex?” Matthew hurried over to her.

“Jacob, oh God, Matthew, something has happened to Jacob!” And then she was off, running towards the horses.

Chapter 3

William Hancock dismounted stiffly and nodded in the direction of Matthew. He turned to bow to Alex, and for an instant, his eyes widened, his mouth falling open before he regained control over his features. Matthew glanced at his wife, noting just how visible her body was through the sheer cloth of the linen chemise she wore with neither stays nor bodice. Her uncovered hair hung in damp curls well down her back, and beneath her skirts peeked her bare toes – no doubt in themselves something of an affront to a man as strict as William.

“Jacob?” Alex sounded hoarse. “Is he dead?”

William averted his face from her and shook his head, lips pressed together.

“Then what—” Alex began.

“Get dressed,” Matthew interrupted in an undertone, handing her the discarded bodice from her basket. She went a most becoming shade of pink, and with a mumbled apology disappeared inside the house, calling for Agnes, the maid, to serve their guests something to drink.

She reappeared in less than five minutes, the dark hair now pinned up below a cap and her curves constrained by stays and bodice. Much better, Matthew decided, even if he saw William’s eyes lock on her feet – still bare, if now in her sandals. Well, he wasn’t about to force his wife into stockings on a day as hot as this.

He offered William some more beer. Alex’s eyes drifted over to Betty, a thoughtful expression appearing on her face when she studied Betty’s careful movements. Aye, it would seem the lass had paid dearly for helping Jacob abscond.

A wave of hot anger tinged with shame rose up Matthew’s gullet. By rights, it should be Jacob, not wee

Betty, who wandered the world with a striped and sore arse.

“Jacob?” Alex said.

“He isn’t injured, Alex, not even seriously ill.”

Her shoulders dropped; she unclasped her hands and sat down beside him. “So what is it?”

“He has chosen to leave,” William said. “It seems your son has a yearning for the adventures of the high seas.”

“Jacob?” Alex sounded so surprised William smiled.

“Apparently. Aboard the *Regina Anne*.”

“I’m going to have a wee word or two with Captain Miles next time I see him. To take on our lad without our consent!”

Alex gave Matthew a long look. “Captain Miles wouldn’t do that.”

Nay, Matthew agreed silently. Damned Jacob! Not only had he decided to do some travelling, but he had also chosen to go as a stowaway.

“Well, at least we know where Jacob will end up. Captain Miles will take him back home to Edinburgh and turn him over to Simon.” Alex sounded relieved, a feeling Matthew fully reciprocated. His brother-in-law would take good care of their lad.

“His uncle Simon will give him quite the warm welcome, no?” Mrs Parson put in, shaking her head. “The lad deserves to be whipped.” She set a heaped platter before William: hot griddle cakes dripping with butter and honey that had the children converging like hopeful flies around them. With a grunt, Mrs Parson sat down beside Alex. The old woman was a formidable housekeeper, but first and foremost she was a family member, no matter that she was no blood relation to either Matthew or Alex.

“I’m afraid there’s a further complication.” William nodded in the direction of Betty. He licked some honey off his finger and wiped at the crumbs stuck in the corner of his mouth.

“You want to annul the betrothal,” Matthew said.

“Oh yes! If only it were that simple.” William wrinkled his long nose into an expression of disgust. “You have

a devious son, and a son rudimentarily versed in the law as well. It would seem he has convinced my daughter to consent to marriage and seal that verbal vow by consummating it.”

Matthew bit back on a curse, tightening his hold on the earthenware mug to the point he feared it might break. How could Jacob shame him so?

“But...” Alex shook her head. “They’re children!”

“Not anymore. Now they’re married adults.” William pulled at his lip, deep in thought. “We can handle this together. Once we’ve ensured she isn’t with child, we can annul the contracts, and I’ll find her another husband. I have contacts both in Boston and Jamestown, and a lost maidenhead can be compensated in other ways.” He grimaced.

“Or we let the marriage stand,” Matthew said, making Mrs Parson nod in agreement.

Alex gave him an exasperated look. “They’re kids. And, as such, they’ve sworn to love each other forever and slept with each other without comprehending what it is they’ve committed themselves to.”

“How do you know? And seeing as it’s a match we have already considered as being a good one, why call it off?”

“Because I have no wish to wed my daughter to an absconding apprentice,” William said coldly. “My daughter will wed a man that can support her decently, not a man who roams the seven seas, only occasionally putting in at port.”

Matthew regarded both of them in silence and finally shook his head. “In Scotland, such a marriage as they’ve made is legal, and I won’t be party to unravelling it.”

“It isn’t legal here,” William snapped.

Matthew raised a brow: that wasn’t true. The church frowned on clandestine marriages but generally accepted them after the fact. “Mayhap not, but I suspect you don’t wish to have your daughter branded a harlot, do you? Besides, my lad has bedded your lass, and he’ll stand by her. Had I caught them at it, I would’ve belted the wee idiot to an inch of his life, and then it would have been directly

to the minister with both of them.” He bowed stiffly in the direction of William. “My son has dishonoured you, Brother William, and I can but offer my deepest regrets for that. But the lass is now my daughter-in-law, and I’ll see her cared for, that I promise you.”

For all that William was a lawyer, he was not very good at disguising his thoughts. Clear as a day Matthew could read them: how hurt he was by Jacob’s defection, how worried he was for his daughter, and how humiliated he was by this whole matter.

William did some more lip pulling and inclined his head in grudging assent. “I would leave her with you for some months – until we know if she’s with child or not.”

“Of course,” Matthew replied. “We will gladly have the care of her. But you’ll stay the night with us at least.”

“No,” William said. “I must be starting back as soon as possible.”

It was a stilted and formal farewell, William standing before Betty, who kept her eyes firmly on the ground. The lass was punishing her father as best she could, and Matthew felt quite sorry for William, who tried repeatedly to catch his daughter’s eyes.

William attempted a hug, Betty stood stiff in his arms, and with a sigh William let go of her. “I will convey your regards to your mother.” He sat up on his horse. For an instant, Betty’s eyes flashed into his.

“I have no regards to convey to her,” Betty said in a heartbroken voice. She curtsied and sidled over to stand beside Matthew, a silent disowning of her father that cut William to the quick, at least to judge from how his mouth settled into a thin line. Without a further word, he wheeled his horse and set off up the lane, his servant at his back.

“Come, lass,” Matthew said once William had dropped out of sight. “Let me show you where you’ll be sleeping.”

“He’s whipped her!” Alex said later that evening. “The poor girl can barely sit, and it hasn’t exactly helped to spend days in a saddle.”

“He was within his rights,” Matthew said. “The lass forced his hand.”

“Would you do that?” She looked straight at him. “Would you lash your girl to the bedpost and whip her until you drew blood?”

Matthew ducked his head to hide his face from her. Not perhaps quite as savagely as that but, aye, he might, had one of his daughters dishonoured him so.

“Right now it’s Jacob I wish to lay my hands on,” he sidestepped. “Not only has he shamed me by absconding from his master, but to that he has added the effrontery of bedding a lass and leaving her to face the consequences alone.”

“How could he? And what possessed him to leave in the first place?”

In response, Matthew handed Alex the letter their son had written them, and waited while she read it.

“Adventure?” Alex folded the letter together. “He takes off in search of adventure?”

From her customary position by the kitchen hearth, Mrs Parson snorted. “That lad has been dreaming of seeing the world for as long as I’ve known him, and it hasn’t helped to have his head filled with pictures of foreign places, has it? It’s you, Alex, telling him of the wonders of London, of how Venice is built on pillars of stone in an endless marsh, of Rome and the ruins of the old empire, that have woken all that in him.” She went back to her knitting, ignoring Alex’s irritated look.

“How was I to know he was going to do something like this?” Alex protested.

“You should know,” Mrs Parson said. “He’s your son, no?”

“And mine, so the blame is ours to share.” Matthew exhaled, looking down at his hands. What had they done wrong for Jacob to behave as he had done? His fingers tightened around each other. May you be safe, laddie, for all that I want to stripe your back. May you be alright and come back to us, safe and sound.

“Rue, tansy and pennyroyal.” Mrs Parson placed the herbs in a linen sachet.

Alex frowned. “You think? Pennyroyal is—”

“No more than a pinch,” Mrs Parson said, “just in case.”

Alex considered this for some seconds before nodding. After some consultation, Mrs Parson and Alex had decided that Betty was too young to become a mother, and so they’d spent most of the morning amicably arguing over what to give her to ensure this potential pregnancy ended before it became anything more than potential.

“Do we tell her why?” Alex asked Mrs Parson, receiving a pitying look in return.

“The lass bedded Jacob to commit herself to him for life. A wean would, in her present state of mind, just strengthen the bond, no?”

“So then why are we asking her to drink this?” Alex grimaced at the bitter scent.

“For her broken skin. We’ll make poultices as well.”

“I’ll have to tell Matthew.”

Mrs Parson shrugged, muttering that in her opinion men were best left out of women’s problems, but after having had Matthew present at Alex’s last three birthings, she’d given up when it came to him. “He might not approve.”

“Of course he won’t,” Alex said, “but I have to tell him all the same.”

“Is it dangerous?” Matthew asked once he had heard her out.

“Mrs Parson knows her business. She’s been a midwife for fifty years or so by now. Old like the hills, she is.” Alex smiled: she loved that old woman like a mother.

Matthew looked down at her with a deep crease between his brows. “You know she helped Jenny when she was dallying with yon Jochum.”

“And it seems to have worked, right?” She suppressed a grin at his scowl. Matthew had issues with Jenny’s amorous adventures prior to marrying Ian.

“Perhaps it worked too well.”

Alex laughed. “Seriously! If Jenny drank rue tea for some weeks seven years ago, how can it possibly have an effect on her fertility now?”

His frown deepened. “You never know, do you?” He thought about it and then acquiesced. “The lass is too young to face motherhood alone.” He kissed her on the brow, called for his three eldest sons and his servants, and told her they’d be late getting back – he wanted to harvest the last of his fields while the weather still held.

A tired Matthew returned well after dusk, trailed by his sons.

“All of it.” Daniel yawned, blinked and yawned again. “We’ve done all of the wheat and most of the barley.”

Alex gave him a quick hug, served them all a gigantic late supper, and sent them off to bed. She closed down the house, banked the fire, whispered a goodnight to Mrs Parson, and went upstairs to their room.

Matthew was already in bed, clothes left in a heap on the floor. Well, at least he’d washed, a wet and dirty linen towel left beside the basin.

“The day I get hold of Jacob Graham I’m going to chew his ear off,” Alex said as she went about the room, hanging up his clothes. “What was he thinking of?” She was still upset after applying poultices on Betty’s inflamed skin, cursing both William and Jacob to hell.

“You mean thinking with, and you know the answer to that as well as I do.” Matthew cupped his privates and winked, making her laugh.

“Do you really think that’s all it was?” She sat down in front of her little looking glass to undo her hair.

Matthew stretched out on the bed and propped himself up on one arm. “He’s not yet sixteen and, aye, he’s a lad of much heart – we both know that – but he’s also of an age when your member is beginning to itch, when at times there’s no blood left in your head on account of it all being down below your waist.” He fondled himself, his eyes meeting hers in the mirror. “Jacob has known for several months that he and Betty were to wed eventually, and there’s a fondness

between them. He wouldn't have done it unless he cared for her. Unfortunately, he didn't care enough for her not to."

"Or he was too young to understand that."

"Aye, not quite sixteen is a wee bit too young." He caught her eye in the mirror. "Forty-nine, however, is not too young."

"Not too old either, I can see." She smiled and set the brush down. Fluidly, she stood, drew the shift over her head, and came over to the bed.

She basked in the glow of his admiring eyes. She loved the warmth of his hands, the words he murmured in her ear. Even more, she loved how he groaned at her touch, how his thighs tensed, how the muscles of his abdomen hardened. His hot exhalations tickled her skin, his kisses left trails of searing heat on her body. She kissed him back; she slid her hands over his shoulders, down his belly to his groin. Matthew quivered and closed his eyes, his buttocks bunching.

"No more, Alex." He lifted his head off the pillow to throw her a burning look, gripped her shoulders, and lifted her upwards. "I don't want your hands, I want—" Whatever he wanted, she drowned in a kiss.

With a grunt, he rolled her over. He filled her, and she widened her legs to accommodate him. He rose on his arms, she clung to his hips, relishing the size of him, the sensation of being possessed by her man.

"I love you." He held still and she groaned out loud. "Don't you love me?" he asked, and she could hear the laughter in his voice.

"Oh, for God's sake," she panted. "You know I do, you stupid man! Now will you please... ah!" There, at last! He drove into her with exquisite force until all she could think of was him, him, him.

"Definitely not too old," she stated some minutes later. Her pulse had reverted to a more normal pace, but her body was covered in sweat.

He smoothed at her hair. "I don't think I'll ever be – not for this."

"I sincerely hope not," she said.