

CHAPTER ONE

I've been waiting eighteen months to meet Frances Gray, and now that she's actually on her way, I'm sneaking out the back door.

I almost make it, too. I get one foot into the courtyard when a voice behind me says, "And where to you think you're going, Miss Mallory?"

I slowly turn to see the housekeeper—Mrs. Wallace—standing there, her arms crossed.

"I'm . . . checking on my new garden," I say.

"You're fleeing before Mrs. Gray arrives. You have realized that she will see through your charade and stop you before you can marry her son."

I peer at her. "I know the sun is strong today, but are you unwell? It's Isla who's getting married. I'm not even courting."

She fixes me with a look. I fix her back with the same one.

"I overheard the conversation," she says finally. "Dr. Gray is going to tell Mrs. Gray about your illicit relationship before they arrive."

"Illicit?" My brows shoot up. "That sounds dirty. Is it dirty? I can never tell with Victorians."

"If by 'dirty' you mean a wholly inappropriate relationship of a sexual nature, then yes."

"We're not—"

I stop myself before I say Gray and I aren't having sex. *Someone*

has decided that, despite the fact neither of us is anywhere near virginal, we are waiting for our wedding night. That someone is definitely not me. As I'd point out, the fact we aren't actually having sex yet doesn't keep people like Mrs. Wallace from presuming we are, so what's the point?

The point is that he's protecting our shared future. Our relationship is already scandalous enough. I accept that he understands the risk in ways I can't. Also, while I'd never admit it to him, there's something to be said for anticipation.

I can say none of that to the housekeeper, so I only reply, "Have you caught me sneaking to Duncan's room? Or him to mine? As the person who changes the bedding, I think you'd know if—"

She lifts a hand. "Enough. The point is that you are running off, and I will not allow such disrespect to Mrs. Gray."

"How is it disrespectful if I slip out and give the family more time together? Hugh will be arriving soon, and Mrs. Gray should spend time with him and Isla. Far from showing disrespect, I believe I'm actually showing *respect*."

"You are fleeing."

"And shouldn't you be telling me to keep going? Give me a ten-pound note and a fare thee well?"

She manages to cross her arms even more. "Dr. Gray wouldn't want that."

"Hmm, but isn't it for the best? If I disappear in the night, vanishing before I can ruin him?"

"It's not night."

"I could wait in the stables and do it properly."

We continue to eye each other. When I first arrived in the nineteenth century—meaning when, to Mrs. Wallace, the scheming Catriona became Mallory, clearly as part of a *new* scheme—I couldn't blame her for not trusting me. Of course it seemed as if Catriona was playing a con game, something that was especially obvious to Mrs. Wallace, a former con artist.

Even after I was forced to tell her the truth about the time-travel body-swap, she refused to believe it and continued her campaign to protect her darling, innocent Dr. Gray . . . who is thirty-two and well beyond needing anyone's protection.

By now she knows the time-travel body-swap is real, so she can't

possibly think I'm scheming Catriona. She just keeps up the suspicious act as a warning. Telling me she has her eye on me, and if I hurt him, expect a kitchen knife to accidentally fly through the air and into my heart.

Look, I respect it. Gray deserves that level of loyalty. I just wish it wasn't aimed my way. I especially wish it today because this is exactly what I'm afraid of with Frances Gray. That she'll take one look at me, in Catriona's twenty-one-year-old blonde bombshell body, and see a gold-digger with her claws in her baby boy.

"You need to face her," Mrs. Wallace says.

"I will. I'm just giving them time—"

"If you cannot face her, you do not deserve him."

Now my hard look turns to a scowl. She only lifts her chin, as if she's gotten in the conversation-ending jab.

Horseshoes clatter on cobblestones, and I look up sharply to see the coach turning into the mews. I curse under my breath. I'd expected they'd stop at the main door to unload Frances's bags.

"Quick," Mrs. Wallace says. "If you hurry, you can still make it out the front way."

There is no mockery like the mockery of a gorgon Victorian housekeeper. I straighten, tugging at my bodice and tucking in an errant curl. Then I fix on my most welcoming smile and start forward . . . as Gray swings out of the still-moving coach. The otherwise empty coach.

I stop short. "Were your mother and her companion not at the station?"

"We dropped Isla and our mother around the front," he says as he strides over to meet me. "Her traveling companion has continued on to Glasgow to visit her own family."

Right. While she brought someone for the trip, they've separated now that they're in Scotland. Normally, a woman of Mrs. Gray's stature would have a companion or ladies' maid, but the Gray siblings come by their eccentricities honestly.

"I offered to come around with Simon, in case you tried to make a run out the back door."

"Make a run out the back door? Pfft."

He looks pointedly from me to the rear door to the garden gate. Then he turns to Mrs. Wallace. "Thank you for stopping her."

"Oh, she wasn't stopping me," I say." "She was offering to carry my luggage."

He shakes his head and waves for Mrs. Wallace to go back inside. Once she does, he walks over and kisses me. Then he takes my hands.

"It will be all right," he says.

I nibble my lip. "I wasn't fleeing. I was just going to the corner for a newspaper. Maybe go for tea on my own. Give you all a little more time."

"She wants to meet you, Mallory."

Meet me? Or assess me?

I don't blame her. My parents would have done the same to Gray. I'm just very aware of how I look. The longer I'm here, the more my body dysmorphia eases. I glance into the mirror, and the person I see looking back has become the person I now think of as me. Mallory Mitchell.

I've made Catriona's body my own, with different fashion choices and a different lifestyle that has somewhat reshaped me. I accept this body is mine. Being in a relationship with Gray has sped that along. He's never known me to look any other way. I'm Mallory Mitchell, a woman who might appear to be the sister of his former maid, but every gesture and expression marks her as her own person, a woman he also knows is actually his own age.

Every now and then, though, I am acutely aware of how I appear to others. That's no longer dysmorphia as much as it is a weary acknowledgement of how much we—especially women—are judged by our appearance. As a young woman with blonde hair, blue eyes, and curves, that judgment is that I lack substance and intelligence. Assumptions like that can be very useful in detective work. They are not useful when trying to prove I'm a worthy partner to a distinguished and brilliant scientist.

I *look* like arm candy, therefore I must *be* arm candy.

"I'm going to get my spectacles," I blurt. "You distract your mother while I slip upstairs and—"

"Your spectacles are gone."

I glare up at him. "You stole my spectacles?"

"I would never set foot in your room and touch your belongings. Isla took them, after we discussed the matter and agreed drastic measures were required. You do not need spectacles."

"I might. I needed corrective lenses in my old life, and maybe somehow my brain is affecting Catriona's eyes—"

"Those lenses were glass. Nothing but glass. Part of a costume you do not need." He puts his hands on my shoulders. "I want you to meet my mother as yourself, Mallory. Not hiding in ill-fitting dresses or wearing fake spectacles or coloring your hair or any other scheme you come up with."

"I never threatened to color my hair. Do you know how harsh dyes are in this time period?" I shiver. "I don't even want to know what they make them with."

"As I recall, hair dyes are different. But perhaps I should not say that or it will give you ideas." He takes my hand. "Come inside and meet my mother," he says, and starts walking for the door, dragging me along behind.

For the first year I was in Victorian Edinburgh, Gray and Isla's mother felt like a physical presence in the Robert Street town house. They spoke of her often, as did Mrs. Wallace. Isla and Annis have visited her in Europe. Gray planned to, but he got busy, and anyone who knows and loves Duncan Gray accepts that this will happen. I do know he wrote to her—or he did when others reminded him.

This past summer, Frances was due to visit twice. The first time, something came up and she rescheduled, but then Isla and Hugh became engaged, and so the plan changed again. They decided she'd come up for the wedding and then stay for a few months afterward.

While I'm sure she'll be happy of the extended visit with her grown children, the actual reason for that longer stay is me. She knows Isla hired Catriona Mitchell shortly after Frances's last visit and that young woman became Gray's assistant and then his partner in a detective agency and then—albeit unofficially—the woman he is courting and plans to marry.

Frances doesn't know about the time-travel. To her, the housemaid named Catriona suffered a head injury that drastically changed her personality and she now goes by Mallory and is her youngest child's partner, in every way.

The problem is that in Victorian Scotland, I can't just keep living with Gray after Isla moves out. Frances is the solution. Once Isla's the

wedding is over, when Gray and I will become officially engaged and marry shortly afterward, but in the space between weddings, Frances will be the lady of the household. In other words, she'll be chaperoning us.

I sneak a glance at Gray as he leads me inside. His handsome and severe features are relaxed, his dark hair perfectly tamed for once, not a spot of ink or blood on his white shirt or his brown skin. That skin color means he's not Frances's biological child. He's her husband's illegitimate son, whom she raised after his birth mother's death. Raised him as if he was her own, which makes her the kind of woman I already like a great deal. And I'm terrified she'll feel the polar opposite about me.

"I'm acting like a child, aren't I," I murmur as we climb the stairs.

"No, you're acting like a woman who cares what impression she makes on her future mother-in-law."

"Future mother-in-law?" I lift my left hand. "I do not appear to be engaged, sir."

He makes a noise in his throat. "Whose fault is that? The man who would have put the ring on your finger two months ago? Or the woman who refuses to make it official until after this wedding?"

"Do you *have* a ring?" I say.

"I am not answering that."

"Is it a diamond? I hope not. I know that's the fashion in my time, and it's becoming the fashion here, but I've always thought they're the least interesting gemstone." I pause. "Unless you already got me one, in which case I adore diamonds."

He shakes his head. "You only tease because you have already made your views on diamonds known, and so you know if I had a ring, it would not be that. However, since you have not actually agreed to marry me, you cannot expect me to have bought a ring."

"But that's how it works. Guys gotta roll the dice. Invest in a fancy ring, and then propose, and pray that if she refuses, you can still return it. I hope you saved the receipt."

"The receipt for what?" Isla says as we step into the hall.

I glance over to see Isla standing next to someone who could be her in twenty years—a tall and handsome woman with red hair whitening at the temples.

I stop short. I don't mean to. I can't help it. Gray had lulled me

into conversation, and I'd forgotten where I was going, and now his mother is here. Right in front of me. When Gray keeps walking, his hand on my arm, I stumble.

He catches me. "Mallory," he says. "I would like to introduce you to our esteemed guest. Mrs. McGregor, who will be the harpsichordist at Isla's wedding." He glances over at my expression. "Oh, I am sorry. Did you expect someone else?"

"Duncan," the woman says. "Your jokes have not improved." She steps forward. "Frances Gray."

"M-Mallory Mitchell," I stammer as I fumble a curtsy.

Gray sighs loudly, making me want to smack him. I almost do . . . until I realize that's definitely not the way to make a good first impression on anyone's mom.

"Mallory is nervous," Gray says. "I have told her not to be, but she never listens to me."

"A wise decision," Frances says. "I am so pleased to meet you, Mallory. May I call you that?"

"Y-yes."

"And you will call me Frances, which is completely shocking, and I do not care. The advantages to age. I am allowed to be eccentric."

"You have always been eccentric, Mother," Isla says.

"But now I have an excuse. I am old, and I have been living in a foreign country, and just look what has happened to my manners. In fact, I am so uncouth that I am going to inquire after tea without waiting for my hostess to mention it."

"It will be right up, ma'am," Alice says from the doorway.

Frances beams at her. "Excellent. Then I suggest we settle in and wait for the groom to arrive."

CHAPTER TWO

A week later, it's Isla's wedding day, and I think I'm happier about that than she is. Oh, she certainly wants to marry Hugh McCreadie. The police detective—and Gray's best friend—has been in love with her since they were teenagers. It took her a little longer to see him that way, mostly because he's her *younger* brother's friend, but once she did, there was no one else in the world for either of them. Then it took even longer for them to admit their feelings because Isla is a widow, meaning she spent two years in mourning. She's been out of it since earlier this year, which is a relief, because marrying your second husband while dressed in mourning for your first would be really awkward.

Otherwise, it's not awkward at all because Isla's first husband, Lawrence Ballantyne, was an asshole. He'd married Isla for her family money and proceeded to abuse her emotionally until they'd separated under the fiction that her constitution wasn't suited to subequatorial travel. Isla came home to live with Gray, as lady of the house to her bachelor brother, while Lawrence stayed in Africa, pursuing his dream of being the next great African explorer. That dream had been funded by Gray, who might not have been able to stop Isla from eloping with his former classmate, but he'd happily paid to keep him far away from her.

One of those safaris eventually killed him. Personally, I wish he'd died of some terrible, ravaging disease. Failing that, I'd have settled

for him perishing in a thoroughly ignoble way, like being trampled by an elephant while squatting in the jungle at night. Being crushed to death by an amorous gorilla would also have been acceptable. But no, he was killed by a leopard that didn't even devour him—he'd startled it at a kill, and it attacked and then fled.

In my rare philosophical moments, I wonder whether the universe sometimes tries to right its wrongs. My grandmother believed I travelled through time because this is where I was supposed to be. In the same way, I'd like to think that some higher power brought Hugh and Isla together as compensation for what she went through with Lawrence.

So when I say I'm happier today than she is, I don't mean about the marriage. I mean the wedding. If Isla could have had her way, she'd have eloped again. She just wants to get to the happily-ever-after part. Except this is her groom's first marriage, and he's marrying the love of his life, and if he wants the whole nine yards, Isla is never going to tell him she doesn't.

It's not a big wedding. This is, after all, Isla's second, and also Hugh is estranged from his parents. Isla and Hugh decided to get married in the town house back gardens, which are still lovely even as fall settles in.

Marrying outside of a church isn't unusual. Victorian Scots are only starting to move toward church venues, and having it at home is perfectly reasonable. As is having it in the morning, with a breakfast to follow.

I'm helping Isla into her gown. It's pine green, which isn't actually a concession to her twice-married status. While white dresses have been in fashion since Queen Victoria wore one to marry Prince Albert, other colors are equally acceptable. This one suits Isla. The dress is silk taffeta, with long sleeves, a high collar, layered skirt and lace trim.

Isla doesn't have a ladies' maid. The family is well-off but they're the rare sort of middle class who have no interest in emulating the nobility with things like ladies' maids. Normally, that's not a problem. The maid helps with hair. Except the maid at our house is now Jack, who does not do hair. Usually, I'd help Isla and Alice is learning, but for a wedding we need someone with more expertise. Frances's companion doubles as her maid . . . and is in Glasgow. All that means

we have hired a young woman temporarily, along with extra staff for the wedding.

The you woman is indeed young—she'd be Catriona's age. Or Catriona's "original" age.

After some discussion, Gray and I decided I would jump two years and I celebrated Catriona's birthday last week as her twenty-fourth. While no one would blink at a thirty-two-year-old Victorian man marrying a twenty-one-year-old woman, the gap made me very uncomfortable, especially since there is no actual gap. And in this era, for someone of Catriona's background, it's an easy fix. It's not as if she went around telling people her age or even has identification to prove it. Making me two years older is simply a matter of saying I'm twenty-four if it comes up.

Isla's room overlooks the front of the house, so I can't see people arriving—they'll come in the mews at the rear. I duck into the spare room to look out the back, and then return to report that the garden is filling.

"Fiona and Archie have arrived," I say to Isla.

"That is Hugh's younger sister and her husband, yes?" Frances says. "The ones that married this spring?"

"It is."

"I believe I met Fiona several times, when our families got together. I remember her as a child, though. She is much younger than Hugh?"

"Nearly a decade," I say.

"And her husband, Archie, is . . ." Frances prods.

"The older brother of the woman Hugh jilted," Isla says, getting a shocked blink from the young woman doing her hair.

Frances sighs. "I meant what does he do for a living."

"I know, but I also wanted to make that clear, in case it comes up."

"I should hope it never would—not at Hugh's wedding. I know he ended an engagement long ago. I know it is part of the reason he is estranged from his parents. I also know it was a very long time ago, and I applaud him for ending it when he realized he loved another woman."

Color rises in Isla's cheeks, but Isla only says, "Oh dear, does he love someone else? Well, this is awkward."

"I mean you, and you know it."

"Mr. Cranston is in the whisky business," I say. "Newly in it. He also knew Duncan and Hugh from school."

Frances's head jerks up. "Not Archibald Cranston."

"The same."

"Oh dear, that poor girl. He was an absolute boor. Dare I hope he has changed?"

"Mmm," I say. "Not really. The marriage was arranged—like Hugh's with Mr. Cranston's sister—but they're actually happy."

"Fiona is good for him," Isla says. "And he is very good to her."

"What are you *doing* with her hair?"

That doesn't come from either me or Frances, neither of whom would ever say such a thing to the young woman helping Isla. We all glance over at Annis strides through the door, as much as a woman can stride in a layered long dress. More accurately, maybe, she "glides with intent," enough intent that the poor ladies' maid falls back as she's tugging out a curl paper, nearly yanking Isla along with her.

"Please do not give the girl heart failure, Annis," Frances murmurs. She looks at the young woman. "This is my other daughter, Lady Annis Leslie. Please ignore her."

"She has curled the pieces the wrong way," Annis says.

Isla shakes her head. "As my mother said, ignore my sister."

Frances rises from her chair and leans into air-kiss Annis's cheek. "You look well, darling."

"I look terrible. I lost another maid. Girls these days, flitting from job to job." She eyes the one doing her sister's hair. "I do not suppose you are in need of employment."

"After you insulted her?" Isla says.

"Don't do it," I stage whisper to the stylist. "There's a reason why Annis goes through maids like water."

Frances's laugh is sharp and delighted. "You know my eldest child well, it seems."

"Mallory takes liberties, as always," Annis says. "No one ever taught her how to properly address a countess."

"If I addressed you properly, you wouldn't respect me."

Annis sniffs and looks me up and down. "My brother needs to give you more money. That dress is a year out of fashion."

"It is not," Isla says with a sigh. "We had it specially made for today, and it is both new and fashionable."

"In the hinterlands, perhaps. Not on the continent."

"We are not on the continent," I say. "Which means it's fine. How are you, Annis?"

"I did not see Lachlan outside with Hugh and Duncan. Please tell me he is coming to his sister's wedding."

Silence. Then I venture, "He said he'll be here."

More silence, and I shift my weight. I've never met the fourth Gray sibling. He's always somewhere else. Here and there, doing this and that.

When their father died, Lachlan was supposed to inherit the undertaking business and the town house, along with the responsibility for his mother and sisters. Instead, he cheerfully dumped it all on Gray, despite the fact his brother had degrees in medicine and surgery and zero interest in being an undertaker.

From what I understand, Lachlan made it seem like a gift. It was not a gift. It was Lachlan shucking any burden that might keep him from leading the life *he* wanted.

"Lachlan may show up, and he may not," Isla says finally. "I accept that."

"It is no disrespect to you, Isla," Frances says quickly. "He adores you. You know he does. He just . . ." She shakes her head. "I have four wonderful children, and three wonderfully *responsible* children. It is more than most mothers could dream of."

"He had better be here," Annis says. "And if he is not, he had best hope he is abed with a serious injury, or I shall put him there myself the next time I see him."

Frances looks at me. "Have you met Lachlan?"

"I have not."

"Well, please do not let this sour you on him. He is utterly charming, and he truly does adore his siblings. He is just not . . ."

"A fully formed adult," Annis says. "Despite being nearly forty?"

Frances sighs. "There is always one." She brightens. "But I am about to gain a wonderful, responsible *and* charming son-in-law, and I have every reason to believe my family will expand again shortly." Her eyes twinkle as she looks my way. "With an equally welcome daughter-in-law."

"If you mean Mallory," Annis says, "I am not sure you want her. She will be the most impertinent daughter-in-law imaginable."

"She has not been the least impertinent to me," Frances says. "Perhaps it depends on the person? Mallory has been very sweet. Rather quiet, but I am slowly starting to see a new side to her."

"Sweet? Quiet?" Annis looks at me. "You really are on your best behavior." She turns to Frances. "She is impertinent, outspoken, and odd. Very odd."

"Then she fits right in."

A rap at the door cuts off Annis's response. It's Alice, wearing a new dress, Isla having insisted that the staff attend as guests, with other staff hired to look after the breakfast. That's the theory, at least. Mrs. Wallace is, I believe, still in the kitchen, refusing to give it up until the last possible moment. Alice has been zipping about with messages.

"Dr. Gray wishes to know how much longer it will be," she says. "It is five past the hour."

"One does not rush a bride," Annis says. "Tell him Isla will be—"

"Right there," Isla says. "Tell him to meet me on the landing in five minutes."

The small courtyard is packed. The guest list may have been modest, but I think everyone on it is here. Well, everyone except Lachlan, which I know will be a disappointment to Isla.

I'd wanted to sit farther back, with the guests, but Isla insisted on me being up front with her mother and sister. While Gray and I aren't officially courting, this is the first public sign that my position is shifting, and it has my stomach fluttering. I keep my attention on Frances as I show her to her seat, with Annis beside her and me on Annis's other side.

Gray is going to walk Isla down the aisle. I suspect that even if Lachlan had shown up, that wouldn't have changed—certainly no one had talked about it being anyone except Gray. I'm glad of that. Oh, I think it should be her mother—or no one at all—but if someone needs to "give Isla away," it should be Gray.

McCreadie stands at the front with the minister. He's turned and watching the aisle that leads to the door where his bride will enter. Hugh McCreadie is a very handsome man. I've even gotten used to his whiskers. But today, he radiates joy, and seeing him, I want to kick

my feet and squeal. I'm just so happy for them both. Two ridiculously good people who will make each other ridiculously happy.

Finally, the door opens, and Gray leads Isla out. I might have just seen her a few minutes ago, but I swear that, like her groom, she is even more radiant in the sunshine.

No, she is more radiant where she can see him, waiting at the end of the aisle. Her gaze is entirely on her bridegroom, and it's a good thing Gray has her arm, or she might trip on the cobblestones. McCreadie and Isla draw together like magnets, and when Gray reaches the front, he doesn't lean in to whisper anything to his sister. There would be no point—she'd never hear him. I only hope she hears the minister well enough to say her vows.

Gray slides into the empty seat on my other side, and his hand finds mine. Normally when he sneaks in a hand-holding, I pull away. It's a public place and, god help me, apparently I'm the respectable Victorian. Today, though, I can't bring myself to do that. I just ease over to block the view of anyone who might see.

He squeezes my gloved hand and leans to my ear. "I am not sure who is happier. You or the bride."

"I'm just so happy for them."

"As am I," he whispers.

I'd mentally joked about Isla not hearing a word the minister said, but I don't either. It's just a stream of words as I watch Isla and McCreadie and pour all my well wishes in their direction.

McCreadie has already bought them a town house just across the street and a few doors down, and they'll be moving in right after a honeymoon in Paris. Isla will have her own household to manage, but she'll be close enough for us to zip back and forth. Then there will be baby Islas and baby Hughs, which I know they both want as soon as possible, and I'll be an auntie.

Yes, I'm getting ahead of myself, but I can't help it. If there's also a tiny sliver of selfishness in my joy, it's because this wedding marks the beginning of *my* new life. A life where I can openly be with Gray. Where this will soon be us. Standing before our friends and family and saying our vows.

"Where do you want to be wed," Gray whispers in my ear. "Here? A kirk?"

Apparently, I'm not the only one traitorously enjoying a wedding while thinking ahead to my own.

I motion that we need to keep watching the ceremony. He rolls his eyes but does turn them back to the front, though he also moves just the barest bit my way. Scandalous, but I don't shift away.

I can be thrilled for Isla and McCreddie, having found their perfect match, but I've also found mine. In my old life, marriage had been something I didn't really think about. I'd wed if I found the right person, but I wasn't actively trying to find him, to the despair of my happily married friends.

Deep down, I feared that if I decided I wanted a husband, I'd end up settling for Mr. Right-Enough. I wanted more, and now I have it. A friend, a business partner, and a lover, someone who touches every part of my life while never trying to fully envelop me in his. It's the kind of marriage my parents have, and the kind my soul had longed for. Now, very soon, I'll have it all.

No more hiding. No more whispering goodnight in the hall and dreaming of the day I'll whisper it across a bed. No more waking up alone and dreaming of the day I won't.

But right now I need to take my own advice and focus on *this* wedding.

I tune into what the minister is saying.

"Should anyone present know of any reason . . ."

Ah, the legal clause. My friends had left it out, but it's standard in this period, and for good reason. In historical times, it's more likely for the bride to be underage or coerced. Or for one of them to still be married, since getting a divorce is exceptionally difficult. In my work with Gray, we've seen cases where one person simply remarried, despite not being legally divorced, sometimes even with the former spouse's blessing.

"Speak now or forever—"

"Stop," a voice says, and every head jerks up.

The voice comes from by the stable.

Did some random passerby just happen to say "stop" at the worst possible time? Gray starts to rise, as if to go quiet whoever is there. He's halfway up when he freezes.

A man strides along the aisle, moving so fast that I don't catch his

face before he's past me. He's average height, well built, well dressed. What catches my attention, though, is his hair.

Dark auburn hair.

Please do not tell me this is the wayward brother come waltzing in at the last moment, playing a prank on his sister. Frances said Lachlan was charming. This is *not* my idea of charming.

I glance up at Gray, who stares at the man with . . .

Not outrage, which would be his expression if their brother interrupted Isla's wedding.

No, his expression is confusion, as if he thinks he recognizes the person but . . .

My gaze flies to the bride and groom. Isla's expression matches Gray's. Confused, as if this is someone she vaguely recognizes but can't place.

McCreadie only looks furious, his blue eyes flashing. "If this is a joke, sir—"

"You do not recognize me, McCreadie?" The intruder snorts. "No, you are playing at not recognizing me. Hoping to send me away so you can finally wed Isla?"

"I do not know who you are—"

"Your bride's husband," the man snaps. "I am Lawrence Ballantyne."

CHAPTER THREE

The minister, good man that he is, lunges as if to catch Isla when she faints. Except she doesn't faint. She stands there, staring at the man, and then her lip curls.

"You are not my husband," she says.

"You might wish it were so," the man says. "But I am."

"I mean you are not Lawrence Ballantyne."

The man steps forward, but McCreadie is faster, lunging between them.

"Isla is correct," he says. "I knew Lawrence, and you are not him. I do not know what game this is—"

"No game," the man says. "Just a wife who thought—hoped—I was dead, and now that I have returned, no longer the man she remembers, she dismisses me as a stranger."

"Because you *are* a stranger," Isla snaps.

Gray appears at the front. In my shock, I hadn't realized he'd left my side. As he approaches, the man turns, and I catch sight of his face, marred by scarring. The guests collectively gasp.

"Now do you see why she repudiates me?" the man calls to the audience. "Why she would rather marry this handsome fellow."

"Oh, bollocks!" That's Annis, now on her feet. "I do not know who put you up to this charade, but those scars cannot hide the fact you are *not* Lawrence Ballantyne."

"He is not," Frances murmurs, as if to herself. Then she looks past Annis to me. "He really is not."

Annis pushes her way down the row and heads to the front, tearing a verbal strip from the intruder as she goes. Frances follows and gets beside Isla, taking her arm and standing straight at her daughter's side, showing her support as part of this united family front.

"Are we certain?" someone behind me whispers to his seat mate. "He has the look of Lawrence."

"He is of a height," the woman whispers back. "The hair color is the same. And who can tell what he truly looks like with those terrible scars?"

That is the point, I want to snarl at them. I have no idea what's going on here, but if Isla's entire family says this isn't Lawrence, then it's not. The scarring means casual acquaintances might accept this is Lawrence. The Grays are not casual acquaintances. The man was once part of their family.

"Oh, enough of this nonsense," Annis is saying at the front. "Duncan? Hugh? Escort this person out. Pick him up and toss him if need be. My sister is getting married, and this hooligan is not stopping that."

"She cannot marry," the imposter says, backing up as Gray advances on him. "She is already wed."

"She is *widowed*," Gray says. "You are not her dead husband, and therefore you are not interfering."

"My brother will handle this," Annis says to the minister. "Carry on."

"Er . . ." the minister says, tugging at his collar.

"I said carry on."

"I am terribly sorry, Lady Leslie, but an objection to the wedding has been registered. It must be resolved by a legal—"

"Is there a barrister here? A solicitor?" Annis's gaze sweeps over the crowd, and I swear they all shrink back. Any actual lawyers probably duck.

"I cannot marry them today," the minister says firmly. "I hope to do so at another time, but this objection must be resolved first."

Chaos erupts. More accurately, Annis erupts, which is the same thing. She's all fire and brimstone, and I love seeing it on behalf of her

little sister, but I know it will do no good. Her mother knows that, too, and leaps in to keep Annis from terrorizing the poor minister.

McCreadie has Isla, and he's talking to her in a low voice, holding her hands. Reassuring her that this will be fixed, even as her eyes glisten with tears. I hurry to the front, and nearly collide with Fiona, going to them as well, with Archie following. We nod to one another and then hover near Isla and McCreadie, ready to help if needed.

As for the man at the center of all this, he's having it out with Gray. And the guests are all fleeing as fast as they can. Finally, the imposter storms off, shouting that we'll be hearing from his lawyer.

Gray follows the man, as if to be sure he's leaving. A moment later, he's striding back to me just as a figure strolls around the stable, carrying a box with an absurdly large bow. He's about forty, tall and slender, with wavy dark hair and a mustache.

Seeing him, Gray lets out a long sigh. "Lachlan."

"I did not miss the wedding, did I? My train was dreadfully delayed." He looks at the faces of those standing at the front. "I feel as if I have missed something, and it is not the wedding. Say, did any of you see the fellow who charged out of here, the one with the scars? Gave me quite a fright. For a moment, I thought it was Lawrence, back from the grave."

A collective growl rises from half those assembled.

"What?" Lachlan says. "Yes, I ought not to mention Lawrence on Isla's wedding day but—"

"Come inside, dear," Frances says, walking to Lachlan and taking his arm as he kisses her cheek. "And please do not say another word."

We are gathered in the parlor. The door is closed. Mrs. Wallace, Alice, Simon, and Jack all insisted on returning to their duties immediately, and Isla tried to dissuade them, but Frances led her away and Gray said that yes, if they could keep any well-wishers out and perhaps bring tea, he will make up for their lost day later. I'm sure the lost day is the least of their concerns, but he'll still want to acknowledge it with a promise to repay them.

Jack and Alice have already brought the tea, along with plates from the wedding breakfast. Only Lachlan has tucked into the food.

The rest of us sip tea and talk. For my part, I sip tea and stay in the back corner. Lachlan has glanced over a few times—no one has introduced us—but I only nod and turn my attention back to the conversation. I'm perched on a small chair, with Gray at my side, his hand on my shoulder, which Lachlan has not failed to notice.

So far the conversation has consisted mostly of everyone being very clear that they do not even remotely suspect that the intruder could be Lawrence Ballantyne.

Lachlan may not have left the best impression with his entrance, but I'll give him credit for falling over himself to be clear that he didn't think it actually *was* Lawrence. Everyone agrees that while the man was roughly the same size and had the same hair color, it is definitely an imposter.

"So how do we prove that?" Frances asks.

The answer should be simple. DNA. Except that isn't a thing here. Dental records? Also not a thing. The death certificate for the real Lawrence Ballantyne? It'd be easy to claim that's a forgery or a mistake, especially when it was issued by a faraway country. The imposter can just claim his identification was lost overseas. It's not as if he needed a passport to get from Africa to Scotland.

"Hugh?" Isla says, her voice gentle.

"Of course," Frances says brightly. "We have a criminal officer in our midst. Surely he will know how to disprove this claim."

McCreadie's gaze shoots to mine.

"Why is he looking at her?" Lachlan says. "And who *is* she?"

"Duncan's fiancée," Annis says.

"We are not—" I begin.

"Fine, fine. Future fiancée."

"His what?" Lachlan says.

"Miss Mallory Mitchell," Gray says. "Mallory, this is my brother, Lachlan, as you have no doubt surmised. Now as for the question, do either you or Hugh know how this man's claim can be disproved?"

"Again, why are we asking her?" Lachlan says. "I mean no disrespect, miss."

"Because she is a detective," Annis says. "A private one, like your brother."

Lachlan blinks at Gray. "You?"

"Do you have another brother?" Annis snaps. "Dear lord, that is

the last thing anyone needs right now, discovering Father sired yet more—”

Frances clears her throat.

“Since when is Duncan a detective?” Lachlan asks. “I know he does science things but . . .”

“Did you read the letters I sent?” Isla says. “The ones that explain who Mallory is. That she and our brother have opened a consulting detective business. That they are renowned as detectives, with their adventures being serialized for publication and read by the queen herself?”

Lachlan squints at her. “This seems a very odd joke.”

Isla sighs. “Do you read *any* of my letters, dear brother?”

“Er, yes, sometimes, when they find me, but I feel as if I have missed a great deal.”

“Yes,” Frances says dryly. “That can happen when you only come home every few years and do not read the letters sent by either your sister or your mother. I even included copies of Duncan and Mallory’s adventures in the last package.”

“So . . . that is not a joke?” He peers at me. “You are indeed a detective? You look a great deal like the house maid that was here the last time I visited. Katie? Katherine?”

“Can someone please take our dunce of a brother out of the room and bring him up to date?” Annis says.

“Not if he cannot bother reading our letters,” Frances murmurs. “Sit down and listen, Lachlan. As you are far from a dunce, I know you will piece it together. For now, hush, please.”

“And let the adults speak,” Annis says. “Back to the question. Hugh, Mallory, Duncan, anybody? How do we prove this man is not Lawrence?”

“Any chance we have Mr. Ballantyne’s finger marks?” I ask.

McCreadie snaps his fingers. “Of course. They must be somewhere. On something of his.”

“I mean officially,” I say. “If we only have something he touched, it would be impossible to prove the chain of evidence.”

“The what?” Lachlan says, only to be silenced by a glare from his older sister.

“To prove the finger marks are his.” I glance at Gray. “We can do blood typing. Would we know Mr. Ballantyne’s? Anything like that

might not definitely prove he isn't Mr. Ballantyne, but could reduce the possibility."

"What about handwriting?" Frances says.

Gray clears his throat. "That is, I fear, not foolproof." He hastily continues, "But we can add it to the list."

Annis throws open the door. "Jack!" She waits and then says, "Bring a paper and pen. We need you to take notes."

"Who is Jack?" Lachlan says. "I thought the groom's name was Simon."

"Jack is the house maid."

"Who is also the secretary?"

"No," Isla says. "But she does write Duncan and Mallory's chronicles. She is an expert at note taking."

"The house maid writes these adventures? And she is named Jack?"

"Because she sometimes dresses as a man," Annis says. "Keep up, Lachlan."

"Does she?" Frances says. "Oh, that is delightful. I have a friend who does that. Well, no, my friend *always* dresses as a man. But it is a similar thing, I suppose?"

Jack comes in with her paper and pen.

"We are making a list," Annis says. "Of all the ways we can prove that man is not Lawrence so that Isla may be a widow again and wed Hugh."

"She'd be a widow again if we kill him," Jack says.

Isla sighs. "Jack . . . I know you are joking, but my mother and brother do not. Please be careful."

Jack flutters her lashes. "But of course I am joking, and apologies to Mrs. Gray and Mr. Gray." She lowers her voice theatrically and leans toward Isla. "But if you need the job done, I know a fellow."

"I see this family has not gotten any more normal in my absence," Lachlan murmurs. "In fact, it may have gotten even odder."

"Isn't it marvelous?" Frances says, beaming. "All right. Now, let us begin the list and if that does not work . . ." She leans toward Jack. "I might take the name of that fellow."

. . .

I'm upstairs in Isla's laboratory, watching while she fusses with a chemist order that didn't need to be filled until after her honeymoon. Everyone else is downstairs, divvying up the tasks on that list. I'd be there, too, if Isla hadn't asked me to help her.

When Isla said she needed to go to her laboratory, only Annis had objected, snapping that Isla had better not feel any obligation to work. Lachlan had seemed confused. The rest of us understood. Isla needed to get away and focus on something completely unrelated to the fiasco of her wedding day. Even McCreadie had only kissed her cheek and murmured that he'd be here when she came down.

Alice's Scottish wildcat Freya snuck in before we shut the lab door, and now she wends around Isla's ankles, purring and trying to get her attention. Isla doesn't seem to notice. I scoop up the three-legged kitten. She grumbles, as if knowing I'm not the one needing comfort, but eventually settles into my arms.

"No one has followed us?" Isla says, still measuring some powder into a beaker.

Carrying Freya, I go to the door and check. The hall is empty.

"We're good," I say.

She presses her palms to the table as she leans against it, eyes shutting. When she opens them, I've put Freya down and I'm right there, waiting for what I know is coming.

"May I cry now?" she says.

I nod, and she falls into my arms.

