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Memoirs of a Bastard Colonist
LADY KATHERINE 1879-1883
by
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LADY KATHERINE

1879

Saturday, 27th December

Osgood House Hotel, Kinghorn, Fife, Scotland

“Tonsillitis.”

“Tonsillitis?” Lady Agnes echoed, mystified.

“Aye, m’lady, tonsillitis,” Dr Abercrombie confirmed to his small audience, “and I recommend the young Lady Katherine remain in bed. Plenty of rest and liquid food,” he continued, packing his stethoscope into his box of medical paraphernalia.

‘Young Lady Katherine’, as the good doctor called her, lay in bed, looking forlornly from one worried face to another: to her mother, Lady Agnes Stuart Delaney, the thirteenth Countess of Chestermere; to her father, the Laird Ailbeart Stuart of Glenross; to her governess, Fiona ‘Nanny Fee’ McPherson and, of course, the hotel’s doctor, Duncan Abercrombie.

“But...” Lady Katherine rasped, her objection cut short by the pain in her throat.

“Lady Katherine,” chided the doctor, “not only is it horrid weather out there but you have a marked febrile disturbance and both of your tonsils are swollen.” He turned his address to Lady Agnes, “This tonic will assist, and gargling with warm milk or blackcurrant tea. Port wine is also good for convalescence but do not over indulge. Young Lady Katherine is only fourteen years of age, after all. Above all, rest. And no visit to Dundee,” he added, giving the teenager a stern look. And with that, the discussion was closed.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Ailbeart Stuart said, “the bairn will certainly follow your orders to the letter. Am I not right, Katherine?”

Lady Katherine nodded a reluctant ‘yes’.

“Come,” the Laird of Glenross continued, addressing the doctor, “I’ll see you out,” and ushered the older gentleman out of Lady Katherine’s room and through to the front door of their suite in the hotel.

“Mamma—” Lady Katherine pleaded but was cut short.

“Kateling, I know how much you wanted to see Sorcha but she will understand. Your health is most important. You heard Dr Abercrombie, no further exposure to this dreadful wind and cold, and plenty of rest.”

The laird returned and, immediately, Lady Katherine’s pleas were redirected to him, “Papa...”

They had the same effect.

“No, Katherine, my sweetling, you will stay here with McPherson and recover. Your mother and I will pass your Hogmanay wishes to your cousin, and to your Uncle Lachlan and Aunty Morag.”

Lady Katherine attempted a protest but the pain to her throat left her holding her neck and giving out a painful cough.

“Your mother and I will leave as planned tomorrow but we’ll return on Tuesday. We’ll see the new year in together. Here. With you. McPherson, it’s best you move into the suite and keep a close watch on Katherine until our return. She is not to leave this bed until Abercrombie says she can. Understood?” He gave both the governess and his daughter a look that would brook nothing but an affirmative reply.

“Aye, Glenross, understood,” Fiona replied in her broad Gaelic cadence. She was only too pleased to accommodate her employers and ‘family’.

Fiona McPherson had a great affinity for the laird and the countess, being a year or two younger than they. She had known their daughter Katherine from the moment she was born and she, as Fiona Cameron, had joined the Glenross household as a tweeny when she was just twelve years of age.

The laird of Glenross then was Ailbeart’s father, Donald, a staunch Catholic, a covert Jacobite and a strict but fair governor of family and servants. It didn’t take long for young Fiona to fall for Ailbeart even though she saw very little of him while she carried out

her day-to-day duties and even less when he attended Cambridge. He was handsome, lean and strong and, when he did speak directly to her, inordinately kind. No, it didn't take much for Fiona to daydream about being the wife of such a pleasing lad. When his engagement to another—an *English* other—was announced, she was shattered. It was then that the true mettle of the young man showed itself. Seeing the funk she had fallen into, Ailheart took Fiona aside and gently explained the whys and wherefores of this proposed union and, while he admitted to being fond of Fiona, he declared he loved the lady Agnes. And, he added confidently, Fiona would also like her very much.

And so it was. Not only did Fiona Cameron make an excellent impression on Lady Agnes, but Lady Agnes requested that Fiona become her lady's maid once the newlyweds returned from their honeymoon.

Not long afterward, little baby Katherine was born and she, too, captured Fiona's heart. Now, fourteen years later, she thought of her sweet Kateling as her own and Lady Katherine thought of her as her anchor. In times of need or comfort, young Lady Katherine would revert to her childish name for her former nurse and governess: Nanny Fee.

The morning of Sunday, 28th December 1879 was cold in Kinghorn but the storms and wild winds that had prevailed the previous days had fallen into an unexpected lull.

Breakfast and luncheon were taken in their suite and Glenross and the countess were in good spirits as they bade goodbye to their daughter, who was unwillingly ensconced in her sickbed.

"We'll be back before you know it, Kateling," Lady Agnes assured, kissing her daughter on the forehead. "Do as Fiona asks."

Glenross took his turn to give his daughter a kiss on the cheek and wish her a quick recovery and, as her mother and father stood at the door to her bedroom, smiling benevolently at her, young Lady Katherine's heart filled with love for her parents and a longing to go with them.

And in a moment, they were gone.

“It’s wonderfully calm out there,” Fiona said, laying the tea tray across Lady Katherine’s lap as she sat up in bed, “So different from yesterday. And they tell me the Forth and Tay are as smooth as glass. The ferry crossing at the Tay would have been very pleasant. But you know the laird, always sniffing out the new, he’s determined to give the new bridge a try. You’d never get me on that thing. No, not on your life.”

It was only small talk to keep her charge distracted from her ailment and missing her parents but there was an element of truth in her prattle.

“Now, Lady Kateling, wash the tonic down with some milk. Let the tea cool down a little and I’ve mashed the scone in some warm milk so it’ll be easy to swallow. Dinnae fash, lass, your màthair agus athair will be back afore y’ ken they’re gone.”

Lady Katherine felt miserable. This tonsilitis thing was a nuisance and a painful one at that. She had been so looking forward to seeing her cousin Sorcha again, as well as her father’s side of the family, the Stuarts and Campbells. Sorcha was the daughter of the laird’s younger sister, Morag and they had always spent Hogmanay together in Dundee—sometimes right up until Burns Night. She could not remember a time they hadn’t and they always had fun together, she and ‘Sooky’. Most of the other holidays were spent with her mother’s side of the family, the Delaneys. That is, her mother’s sister Mary, her husband Charles Norland and their two sons, Arthur and Edward. Of course, they were the more important side of the family, her uncle being the Duke of Bramwell. Their boys were her own age—one year older and one year younger—and, as much as she loved them as family, she felt far closer to her one and only female cousin, Sorcha.

The afternoon wore on with irritating monotony. The books, journals and sketch pads strewn across her bed no longer held her interest and napping was just as annoying. It was dusk when it became obvious to Lady Katherine that the gales had returned fiercer than before and it was pelting down with rain as well. The violent storm was well and truly taking out its anger on those below.

A feeling of panic overtook her. Perhaps this was God’s way of warning them that Sunday was a day of rest and they should not be travelling. She hadn’t been to Mass, or

Confession the day before, and the guilt of not honouring the Creator was pricking her conscience. Was this tempestuous weather the wrath of God?

Picking up the notepaper and pencil on her bedside table, she rang the little silver bell Fiona left.

In an instant, the governess was through the door and by her side.

“My lady, are you paining?” Fiona asked feeling the youngster’s forehead.

Lady Katherine scribbled a note and showed it to Fiona.

“Aye, the wind’s picked up again, and something fierce, but all will be well, dinnae worry, lass. The laird and Lady Agnes are safe in their first-class carriage and they must be close to Dundee by now.” She looked at the watch pinned to her apron. “Aye, it’s just gone seven. They are but a few miles from home.”

She tidied up Lady Katherine’s bed and tucked her charge snugly in, adding, “The laird said he would telegram you as soon as they reach Dundee Station. Dinnae fash. All is well. Rest now. I’ll bring your dinner at half-seven. And the telegram,” she added with a reassuring smile.

With that, Fiona turned down the gaslights and left Lady Katherine in the penumbra of twilight, giving her a final heartening smile as she closed the door behind her.

Outside in the sitting room, Fiona was not at ease at all. She was as much concerned as her charge, if not more, for Lady Agnes and Glenross’ safety. The wild storm was the worst she had ever experienced in her thirty-four years and she had heard from one of the hall boys that chimney stacks had been dislodged and rooves blown off. And not just here in Kinghorn. These storms were raging across the whole of the British Isles. Surely nothing calamitous could befall such a heavy vehicle as the locomotive, tender and carriages. All will be well, she reassured herself.

Surely.

Lady Katherine lay in bed, her eyes wide open and her hands covering her ears trying shut out the fury God was inflicting upon her. As the windows rattled and the rain persisted, she prayed that He keep her beloved parents safe and promised Him that she would attend Mass as soon as she could.

1879

Sunday, 28th December

Along the North British Railway Line, Scotland

The winter of 1879 was severe throughout Europe. The Seine and Loire in France were frozen and heavy snowstorms were experienced over a large portion of Southern Italy. Floods were spreading throughout Hungary with devastating results. In Great Britain, the Upper Thames was frozen and it was reported that 1879 had been a year of two winters and no spring or summer with the great absence of sunshine. There had been only ninety-two days on which the sun shone for more than two hours and snow fell in eight of the twelve months. Crops and vegetation were much retarded by the intense cold and severe frosts, and on ten days only did the temperature reach or exceed seventy degrees.

The records confirmed what the people knew: 1879 had been the worst year in living memory. With only four days remaining to Hogmanay, it seemed this relentlessly harsh and unforgiving weather was finally going to let up.

Leaving their hotel in Kinghorn, enveloped in layers of warm clothing, Ailbeart Stuart, the laird of Glenross and his wife, Lady Agnes, the Countess of Chestermere, accompanied by their valet and lady's maid, bundled themselves into the awaiting coach and began the short journey to Burntisland Railway Station to board the train from Edinburgh that would take them to Dundee.

It had been a beautiful morning, very cold but calm. Ailbeart was eagerly looking forward to seeing the newest engineering feat of engineer Sir Thomas Bouch, the rail bridge over the River Tay, the longest bridge in the world. It had been completed in February the previous year and after extensive testing was opened for passenger services on 1st June 1878. This had been Ailbeart's first opportunity to see and cross this modern

British engineering marvel. His business affairs with his brother-in-law, Charles, the Duke of Bramwell, had kept him in London and Chestermere for far longer than usual but it was worth it; their joint business enterprises were proving quite successful and profitable. During such extended stays, he would be accommodated at Abbotsford Hall, the duke's country manor, while Lady Agnes and Lady Katherine took their leave and visited Dundee or stayed in Delaney House, their London home, or Lilyfield Manor, their country estate. Lady Katherine would have most happily remained with her father and joined him and her uncle in their business conferences but Lady Agnes said it was not proper for a young lady to concern herself in matters financial—that was what a husband was for.

In the waiting room at Burntisland Station, Ailbeart looked at his pocket watch.

“Four minutes past five,” he announced, “it should be here anon.”

It was of concern to all in the room that the weather had changed and the winds were picking up again but not just breezily so, this was a persistent windstorm coming in from the west. In the distance, Ailbeart witnessed a sight that astonished him: the force of the gale was now so intense that it was pushing a fully laden coal tender along the track. He could not imagine what this gale would register on the Beaufort wind force scale but he could imagine the anemometer cups rotating so furiously that they would appear to the naked eye as a blur.

It was frightening but Ailbeart took a positive stance if only to give comfort to his worried wife and servants.

“All will be well, my dear. We will be in Dundee before you know it.”

The mail train from Edinburgh arrived on time and, at precisely at five-twenty p.m., Engine 224 with its tender, five carriages and luggage van pulled out of the station and headed northward with fewer than one hundred passengers and crew on board. The laird and countess enjoyed the luxury of the first-class carriage and had treated their servants to the same indulgence, as there had been plenty of seats available—and it was Christmas.

On the same line heading southward and coming from Dundee, the local shuttle train from Newport had left Dundee station shortly after six p.m. and had experienced a disturbing crossing of the Tay on the bridge. Their carriages had been pounded by the gale-

force winds blowing down the firth at right-angles to the bridge. Although they had made it safely across to Wormit Signal Box where the baton was given to Thomas Barclay the signalman, the passengers onboard reported they had experienced a most frightening buffeting and witnessed showers of sparks flying from the wheel flanges as they made contact with the running rails under the sideward force of the wind. They had been instructed to open their windows so that the carriages would give less resistance to the force, but it had still been a terrible experience.

Engine 224 from Burntisland reached Thornton Junction and it was only twenty-seven miles between it and the south end of the Tay Rail Bridge. The weather was worsening; the wind was driving the heavy rain sideward with unparalleled ferocity. The last station stop was St Fort and by seven-thirteen p.m., the train reached Wormit Signal Box. There, it slowed down to walking pace so that the fireman could collect the baton from the signalman in the cabin. The system of handing the baton over was to prevent a collision on the single track over the bridge and worked exceedingly well. No driver could proceed without the baton in his possession.

Seated next to his wife, Ailbeart held her hand, patting it reassuringly even though he felt quite agitated by the sideward movement of the carriage with every burst of the gusting wind.

“It will be all right, my love, it will be all right. We’re almost there...”

Lady Agnes was pale with anxiety and clutched her husband’s arm close to her; she could hear the trepidation in his voice even over the roar of the wind and the crash of the rain smashing itself against the windows but chose to say nothing. She looked behind her to see her maid and the valet were as anxious as she was. She gave them an unconvincing reassuring smile and turned back to hold Ailbeart even closer to herself.

After collecting the baton, the driver was given the all clear by the signalman Barclay and, opening up the regulator, the locomotive began picking up speed. It was on time and was expected to reach the signalman on the Dundee side by seven-nineteen.

“Ah,” Ailbeart commented a little shakily, “we’re now on the famous Tay Rail Bridge.”

At Wormit Station, Barclay, in the relative warmth and dryness of his cabin, sent the ‘train entering section’ signal to his counterpart on the Dundee side and logged the time in his journal: thirteen minutes after seven o’clock. He then turned to tend the fire, more for the comfort of the visiting surface man from the North British Railway Company, John Watt, who was there to keep Barclay company. Through the window of the cabin door, Watt watched the train gather speed. The train would take six minutes to cross and once completed, the fireman onboard would pass the baton back to the Dundee signalman.

Watt knew he would not be able to see the train reach the other side—it was a very dark night and the rain was extraordinarily heavy. The bridge was two miles long and had a deep bending curve on the approach to Dundee at the northern end. The bridge itself did have lights along it but these faded in the distance beyond the highest girders in the middle of the river.

The westerly wind was at hurricane force, howling down the waterway, whipping the Tay’s surface into a frenzy of waves and pushing all before it in its furious maelstrom.

In the first-class carriage, it became quite obvious to Ailbeart—and all on board—that the bridge was experiencing severe and unusual vertical and lateral vibrations. Were these caused by the wind or was the bridge unable to cope with this brutal force of Nature and the speed of the train upon it? To Ailbeart, the severe oscillation was singularly abnormal and he became alarmed. Drawing his wife of sixteen years close to him, he held her tight; she sensed his fear and her heart pounded, anticipating a catastrophe. Her thoughts immediately flew to Katherine.

From the cabin, Watt watched the train, mesmerised. It had not gone two hundred yards when sparks flew from the wheels on the east side, in the same way the Newport train had done, lighting up the black night with arcing scintillas and imposing the screeching of steel against steel upon the roar of the raging storm. The tall bridge and the entire train were being pummelled by the gale. The locomotive persisted, continuing to build up speed to dash across the two miles to the other side.

Inside the carriages, the passengers were jarred and jostled by the rocking caused by the turbulent wind. They held onto their seats and to each other, gasps and screams being expelled by children, women and men alike.

The hellish ride continued for three of the six minutes the crossing would take.

The train reached the high girders in the middle of the Tay.

From the signal box, Watt witnessed a sudden bright flash of light followed by another. In an instant, there was total darkness; the tail lamps of the train, the sparks from the wheels, and the mass of fire from the two flashes all disappeared instantaneously.

All that was left was blackness and the wail of the wind and rain.

“Mamma!”

The ragged scream echoed through the hotel suite and it felt like shards of glass had shredded her tonsils.

In an instant, Fiona McPherson was at Lady Katherine’s bedside.

“Kateling! What ails you?” The governess took in the horrified look of her young charge as she sat bolt upright, tears streaming down her face.

“Mamma...Papa...” she whispered hoarsely.

Fiona wrapped Lady Katherine in her arms, consoling her and doing her best to allay her fears.

“Shh, my sweetling, there’s nought to worry about. You must have been having a bad dream.”

How could she describe what her mind’s eye had just seen? Was it a dream?

The sounds and images replayed in Lady Katherine’s mind: her name being called...her mother...her father... panicked, fearful...tumbling...falling through the gloom...screams...the howl of the wind... the groan of twisting metal, then...

Darkness.

Nothingness.

Silence.

Lady Katherine's trembling sobs abated under the loving ministrations of her governess. All was quiet, save the incessant clamour of the wind and the thundering storm against the windows.

"Nanny Fee," she said between fitful breaths, her voice scratchy and almost inaudible, "it was so real. Mother and Father...they called out to me...they—" She couldn't bring herself to say that she feared they were dead. That they were calling to her from the other side. But it seemed that Nanny Fee understood and comforted her young mistress.

"Hush now, my sweetling. All will be well," she said with as much conviction as her doubt could muster, as she rocked her charge gently back and forth. "It's not gone half-seven yet but I'll go and send a wire to the Dundee station master just so that you can rest easy and assured that your mother and father have arrived safe and well."

With a plaintive look from her charge that made her own heart ache, Fiona disentangled herself from Lady Katherine and tucked her back into bed.

In the little ante room she had made her own, Fiona kicked off her carpet slippers and quickly tied on her Oxfords. Wrapping her shawl about her shoulders, she hurried down to the lobby.

It didn't take long to get a telegram off to the station master at Dundee. Direct in its wording, it asked simply to have first-class passengers, Mr Stuart and Lady Chestermere, on the five-twenty train from Burntisland, confirm their arrival to their daughter, Lady Katherine.

Fiona had determined to wait for the reply but it took far longer than expected—she had sent the telegram only a few minutes ahead of the train's anticipated arrival in Dundee but, she considered, there may have been delays because of the weather. She wavered between waiting to receive the good news there or to wait for it in the suite. She didn't want to leave Lady Katherine alone for too long and that made up her mind.

"Please have the reply brought up to Mr Stuart's suite immediately it is received," she instructed the hotel's telegraph operator, then turned and hurried back upstairs.

Lady Katherine's dinner was brought up shortly after Fiona's return—but no telegram. This was most disconcerting and it was obvious that her charge was becoming

more anxious with each passing minute. Fiona felt helpless and repeating hollow promises that all would be well sounded less and less convincing with each utterance. Why was the Dundee station master taking so long to reply?

Finally, the anticipated knock on the door.

“Ah,” Fiona said much relieved, “they’ve arrived. Finish your broth, my lady, and I’ll fetch you the good news.”

Rushing to the front door of the suite, Fiona opened it expecting to see the puckish face of the hall boy with the telegram in hand. Instead, there stood Dr Abercrombie, grim and serious.

“Dr Abercrombie, what brings you here? Lady Katherine fares well,” Fiona enquired hesitantly, checking the corridor for a sign of the tardy hall boy.

“Mrs McPherson, may I come in?” The doctor’s tone was sombre; it was then she noticed the telegram in his hand. Her heart sank.

“Of course. Of course,” she said with awful anticipation, stepping aside and closing the door behind him.

“Please sit down.”

“What is all this, Doctor?” Fiona was becoming quite agitated.

“Sit. Please.”

From her bedroom, Lady Katherine recognised the doctor’s voice but couldn’t make out what was being said. She wondered why the doctor had been summoned. Moving the bed tray aside, she pulled the bedclothes away and lurched onto her feet. She felt a quite woozy but that was most likely due to the tonic.

Propping herself against the door jamb, Lady Katherine saw her governess seated on the edge of the sofa, wringing her hands and looking up at the doctor. She had never seen such a look of worry and despair on her faithful Nanny Fee. Doctor Abercrombie stood over her, his demeanour was cheerless. His fist tightened around the piece of paper he held.

“I have your reply from Dundee,” the doctor began hesitantly, “There’s been an accident—”

“NO!”

1879

Tuesday, 30th December

Osgood House Hotel

She had not spoken a word in two days. It wasn't her throat that pained her; it was her heart.

There had been no news of her parents or of any of the passengers on that ill-fated train to Dundee, save for one poor soul. All on board had left this life without a trace.

Those distressing images she had had replayed over and over in her mind. Her mother and father gone. They said there was no hope of finding anyone alive. She prayed they were wrong. She prayed for a miracle. How could a benevolent God do this to them? To her? Why did He spare her? She should have been with them. Why? Why?

As she lay curled up in her bed, the door and windows shut to the outside world, all Lady Katherine wanted to do was lie there and fade into oblivion. Tears once more welled in her red, swollen eyes and sobs of grief escaped unrestrained.

“Kitty...please...don't cry. I'm here for you...we're here for you...” The words were gently whispered by the young girl who had wrapped herself around Lady Katherine, consoling her as they lay together.

“Sooky...why?”

There was really no answer to her cousin's question. Nobody knew what had caused the disaster that took Kitty's cherished parents.

“Only God knows why,” were the only words she could offer as she stroked Lady Katherine's hair. “Shh, Kitty, Papa is out looking for them. So are hundreds of other men. They'll find them—”

“Dead. What if they're dead, Sooky.”

“Oh, Kitty, don’t give up hope.” Sorcha hugged Lady Katherine closer to her and kissed her shoulder. “You and Nanny Fee will come and live with us. You won’t be alone. We’ll take care of you. I love you, Kitty.”

Lady Katherine’s shuddering breath brought a release of emotions that was only quelled by the unstoppable flow of tears and the final realisation that she would never see her parents again.

The knock on the door to the suite of rooms was gentle but persistent.

Fiona McPherson, dressed in black bombazine from top to toe, her face flushed and her eyes reddened, opened the door to an elegant English lady dressed in shades of mourning.

“Your Grace,” Fiona acknowledged with a slight curtsy, stepping aside to allow the Duchess of Bramwell to enter.

“Oh, Fiona...” the duchess, Mary, said choking back tears. It was obvious that Mary was suffering the sudden loss of her older sister and brother-in-law as acutely as her niece’s governess. “I am so sorry...so, so sorry...”

“Your Grace—” Fiona’s response got caught behind the lump in her throat. It was all she could do to hold back the tears that were threatening. Fiona didn’t know how to express her grief; the Countess of Chestermere had been more than her mistress; she had become a dear friend, and she loved Ailbeart like a brother.

Mary felt Fiona’s grief and it was equal to her own. The compassion Mary felt for Fiona was real despite the social chasm between them.

“How is the dear child coping?”

“Not well, Your Grace, not well, at all. None of us...We cannot fathom why...”

“It was a dreadful, awful shock,” she said, taking hold of Fiona’s hands.

Mary and her older sister Agnes shared the same aptitude in caring for the wellbeing of others and were both considerate of and generous to everyone they met. Lady Katherine had inherited all of these qualities as well as their elegance and charm.

“We will survive this, dear, in time and with the grace of God.”

The door to the main bedroom opened and from it emerged black-clad Morag Campbell, Ailbeart's younger sister and Sorcha's mother. She was a petite woman who looked far younger than her years.

"Mary," she whispered and rushed toward the duchess and embraced her. It was very obvious that she, too, had been shedding copious tears.

"Morag, dear Morag, I am so sorry for your loss," Mary said as she embraced her sister's sister-in-law.

"Mary...I am so sorry—" It was all too much for Morag and she broke down and wept for her brother, Ailbeart and Agnes, his wife. "Why? Why? Why did he have to cross that damned bridge? Why? Damned fool..."

Mary held her close and did her best to keep herself from weeping.

The afternoon tea was a sombre affair. The three women sat around the low table, their cups of tea going cold and their petits fours and sandwiches ignored.

Mary had gone to Katherine's room and saw her niece asleep wrapped in her cousin's arms. She appeared to be at peace but knew the turmoil she was in.

"Charlie is at Wormit with five of our men," Mary informed Morag and Fiona as she stared into the cup of cold tea she cradled in her hands. "He will leave them to help with the search and will join us this evening." She took a deep breath; what she was about to announce was not going to go down well. "We feel it's in Katherine's best interest that she stay with us until...until we know more."

Morag looked at Fiona. "But, Mary, would it not be better for the bairn to be with her cousin? They are like sisters."

"Morag, should the worst come to pass, Katherine will be the fourteenth Countess of Chestermere. She will need to take her place in Society and, eventually, take control of her estates. And she'll need to be presented at Court to take her rightful place there. I am in a position to sponsor her."

Morag felt deflated. Their social standing had never been an issue before. Mary, as a duchess, certainly had greater influence at Queen Victoria's court than she, a Scottish commoner even though she was the daughter of the former Laird of Glenross and, lately,

the sister of Ailbeart, the current Laird of Glenross. She immediately corrected herself; the ‘current laird’ would most likely be her uncle, as Katherine was still in her minority.

With reluctance, Morag agreed, “Yes. Of course.”

“Charles and I will act as Katherine’s guardians until she gains her majority.”

“Yes...”

Mary reached a hand out and held Morag’s reassuringly, “Morag, it doesn’t mean she can’t see Sorcha. As her Godparents, we want only the best for her and to make sure she has the best education and moral upbringing possible.”

Morag conceded that what the duchess proposed would be in Katherine’s best interest.

“Have you told the bairn yet?”

Mary sighed. It was all too much for that right now.

Nature’s wrath, having taken its revenge on humankind, had subsided by the time Charles Norwood, the Duke of Bramwell, and Lady Katherine’s uncle, was ushered into the Stuarts’ suite at the Osgood. Outside, the evening air was cold but calm. Here, it was warm and sombre.

“How is Katherine?” he asked of his wife, who met him at the door.

“Fearful. Any news?”

“None. Only one found, a domestic servant from Edinburgh. There’s no sign of Agnes or Ailbeart. The divers are doing their best. It’s feared some three hundred are lost.”

“Dear God,” was all Mary could offer.

Morag approached hesitantly, “Charles...”

“Morag,” Charles acknowledged apologetically, “forgive me. I am so sorry for your loss,” he said embracing her. “Campbell will be joining us shortly. How are you faring?”

“How does one fare when one wishes she should have changed her damned brother’s obsessions?” Her anger was awash with bitter tears of regret. “Poor Kateling,” she continued, “she is devastated beyond consolation. We should remove her from this place. It holds only nightmares for her. Come to the Caisteal for a spell. It’s not afar from Dundee.”

Charles looked to his wife, then back to Morag.

“There is no hope of finding Glenross and Agnes...alive. It is best she settle with us as soon as possible. She should begin the new year afresh. At Abbottsford Hall.”

1880

April

Abbotsford Hall, Hertfordshire

The Court of Enquiry into the causes of and circumstances attending the railway accident on the Tay River Bridge had moved from Dundee to Westminster to consider the engineering aspects of the collapse. Engine 224, after two failed attempts to raise it, was successfully salvaged and it seemed all hope of finding any more bodies, let alone survivors, had all but faded away.

Despite her protests, Lady Katherine finally agreed to leave Scotland and her father's side of her family and stay in England with her mother's side. She was as fond of her Aunt Mary and Uncle Charles as she was of her Aunty Morag and Uncle Lachlan but she did miss her cousin Sorcha terribly and wrote to her every day. Her letters were filled with heartache and fears of a future without her parents. She expressed her unreserved gratitude toward her Uncle Charles and Aunt Mary for the care and love that had so generously bestowed upon her but she promised her cousin that, once she was her own woman, she would be with her 'Sooky' the first chance she had and stay with her forever.

Her fifteenth birthday was approaching as was the new school term. The duchess' influence—and patronage—had secured Lady Katherine a place in Queen's College in London for the upcoming Summer term.

Up to now, the young girl had been schooled by private tutors and was well educated in art, literature, mathematics, French, German, Latin and Ancient Greek but she was eager to learn as much of the more useful modern sciences of law, political economy, geography, and many of the subjects taught to boys in public schools and universities.

Whenever the opportunity arose, she had enthusiastically participated in discourses when her father and uncle met to deliberate new business ventures and had once even

attended a meeting for a prospective merger. Her father and uncle had been excellent instructors in the world of finance and business.

Now, she was being sent away to college and to board there for three years!

Lady Katherine was despondent. She lost her parents, she was isolated from her cherished cousin and now she would be relocated to a school's boarding room in London. Her only glimmer of light in this dark future was that her beloved Nanny Fee would accompany her. Fiona doted on little Lady Kateling, the pet name she gave baby Katherine, and the infant grew to know two mothers: the beautiful Lady Agnes who taught her the ways of the aristocracy, and Nanny Fee who took care of her education and her every other need and whim. In time, Nanny Fee became her governess and, now, at Queen's College, would be her lady's maid.

Fiona Cameron became Mrs Fiona McPherson when she married Ian, Chestermere's head groom and together had a bonny son, George. All the while, other than during her own confinement, Fiona remained Lady Katherine's nanny and governess—something most unusual but such was the bond between the three that it was never a question to let the governess go. Nine years separated Lady Katherine and George but to her, 'Georgie' was her little brother and, once he was able to walk and run around, he followed his 'big sister Ladykate' everywhere. He even attended the same tutorials as she but usually played with his toys or napped. Lately, he had been showing keen interest in the lessons and was absorbing knowledge like a sea sponge.

That was last year. Now six-year-old Georgie was with his father in Lilyfield Manor while Fiona attended Lady Katherine in Abbotsford Hall. Recent legislation compelled children to attend school between five and ten years of age and gain their certificate. The little school in the nearby village of Rusby would see to that but Lady Katherine—and, indeed, her parents—had seen great promise in the boy and had discussed further education with the McPhersons. Lady Katherine was determined to see that commitment through but now was not the right time. Now she had to sort out her own life. She wasn't being petulant; she simply didn't want to attend boarding school.

“Sweetling,” cajoled her aunt for the umpteenth time as they sat together on the sofa in the morning room, “your uncle Charles and I will be in London as well. We are not deserting you.”

“But Aunt Mary, why can’t I stay at Norwood with you and Uncle? It’s not far from Harley Street. I can travel by omnibus—”

“Out of the question, Katherine. It’s unseemly and far too dangerous—”

“Nanny Fee will be with me—”

“And subject her to the same danger? I think not. And you must stop calling her ‘Nanny Fee’. She is your maid, not your nurse. You must address her as ‘McPherson’.”

“But—”

Mary’s back stiffened and her face hardened. The stony countenance stopped that course of argument. There was only one other road for Lady Katherine to take, she was almost fifteen, after all.

“Then I shall stay at Delaney House,” she stated with as much stiffness and obduracy as she had received. Delaney House was her parents’—she corrected herself—*her* London townhouse; Norwood her aunt and uncle’s.

“Mayfair is shut up,” the duchess countered.

“I shall open it.”

They had reached a stalemate. Each peered at the other down her long, aquiline nose—a shared familial trait—neither giving an inch.

The duchess softened and was the first to speak, her tone conciliatory.

“Kateling, I understand what you are going through. I, too, have lost two people whom I loved dearly—”

“I don’t believe you, Aunt. You haven’t shed a single tear...” Pent up emotions came to the fore and tears welled in her eyes.

“My darling,” Mary whispered, wrapping her arms about her niece, “you cannot know how many tears I have shed for my precious sister and brother-in-law. Only in my own rooms and only ever with Charles. We have shed many, many tears of sadness and regret together.”

Lady Katherine, tears staining her cheeks, looked into her aunt's eyes. They, too had welled up. Unvoiced questions were answered by her aunt.

“We must be seen to be strong, my darling. We must not show the failings that uncontrolled emotions bring forth. If we wailed and beat our breasts in desperate anguish, such as our hearts do truly feel, it would cause those in our care equal or more distress. We must be strong for their sake. You must be strong, my darling.”

With a love that only a mother could give, Mary embraced her niece once more.

“Kateling, your heart, like mine, will hold your Mamma and Papa forever. Grieve for them but know that Charles and I will always be here for you. We love you as our own.”

Lady Katherine's words could scarcely be heard between her muffled sobs.

“I'm so sorry, Aunt. Please forgive me for being so cruel.”

Just before Easter almost the entire household, including Lady Katherine, had relocated to Norwood House in Park Lane, a little earlier than usual. The Season had not yet begun but Mary and Charles wanted to settle in early so that their orphaned niece could prepare for the Summer term at Queen's College. Their two sons, Arthur and Edward, would be attending Eton accompanied by their respective valets and would remain at Abbotsford Hall until their terms began.

This translocation also gave the Duke of Bramwell easy access to his trusted solicitor, Mr Angus Hollingsworth, who had chambers near the Royal Courts of Justice. The Duke had already instructed Mr Hollingsworth, on Lady Katherine's behalf, to begin the process of her claim to the title. He was to petition the Lord Chancellor for a writ of summons to the House of Lords for the next session of parliament. Normally, this would not have been a difficult process as there were many among the aristocrats who knew Lady Katherine and her parents. Certainly, Lady Katherine could prove that her parents had been legally married and that she had been born after that marriage. And, while she was a devout and practising Roman Catholic, with special resolution, this would not preclude her from

gaining the title as had all her predecessors. They proceeded with the petition, citing special and tragic circumstances

The difficulty the lawyer foresaw was that this process always took place after the funeral of the predecessor, in this case, Lady Agnes. But there was no funeral; as yet, there was no body and the Court of Inquiry into the Tay River Bridge disaster had not yet published its findings or, in fact, completed its inquiry.

1880

April

Queen's College, Harley Street, London

The room at the college's boarding facility was ample and well-appointed. Certainly, the fees charged for this accommodation were out of reach of the average student's family means but Lady Katherine would still have to share the room with another girl, such were the rules. She hoped that, whoever her co-boarder was, she would keep to herself. She was in no mood to socialise with any garrulous vacuous youth that so many of her age seemed to be—Sorcha excluded, of course.

The floor was cluttered with an oddment of baggage, much of which was filled with Lady Katherine's mourning clothes. It was a little more than three months since the terrible tragedy on the Tay River. The bodies of those who fell victim to Nature's fury were still being recovered and reported daily. Only three had been found so far in that April month—apprentice grocer, 15-year-old James Peeble; 20-year-old iron turner Thomas Ross Annan and, only a few days earlier, the body of Margaret Kinnear, seventeen, a domestic servant. These unfortunates brought the total to under forty-five. Her parents and their retainers, and so many others, were still missing, presumed... She didn't want to acknowledge that they would never be seen again. Being compelled to wear mourning garments proclaimed to everyone that they had died, but to admit it to herself was to give up all hope of finding them alive. Her aunt had conceded to allow Lady Katherine to wear shades of grey rather than cold, hard, dead, finite black.

The young girl sat at her desk forlornly staring out of the window into Harley Street, her thoughts meandering from one bleak situation to another.

“This is the first time I’ve been to college,” announced McPherson in an exceptionally frivolous manner, “D’you think I’ll like it, my lady?” She was doing her best to lift her charge’s spirits.

“Probably more than I will, Nanny Fee,” was Lady Katherine’s despondent reply.

“You mean, ‘McPherson’, d’you not, my lady?”

“Aye. McPherson.” Lady Katherine looked at her lady’s maid, newly elevated from governess, busily unpacking her trunks and cases and gave her a smile, “You’ll always be Nanny Fee to me.”

“Well,” McPherson announced looking about the room upon completion of her task, “I believe that’s that. And I believe this pull-cord is attached to a bell in my room in the servants’ quarters. If you need anything, you only have to tug.”

“Don’t go.”

Lady Katherine’s plea plucked at McPherson’s heartstrings. “Of course, sweetling. I’ll stay for as long as you need.”

Lady Katherine felt the need to be close to someone. She took the few steps towards her maid and wrapped herself around the older woman, taking McPherson by surprise. McPherson understood her charge’s need and enveloped her in her arms, gently rocking her back and forth.

“All will come to pass, my wee bairn.”

The door swung open, startling the maid and the young lady.

“Ah! You must be my new bedfellow,” she said sweeping into the room with her arm outstretched, “not literally, of course,” she laughed. “Winifred. Winifred Lucrezia Montague Carlisle. Lady. Second daughter of the Marquess of Carlisle. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” She took Lady Katherine’s hand in her own and shook it ferociously leaving the countess dumbfounded.

“Kath—”

“Oh, I know who you are, my lady. I may call you ‘Katherine’, mayn’t I? We will be spending the next three years together in this quaint little hovel. Have you been shown around yet? I expect not. School term won’t start until Monday and only a few of us ‘Queenies’ are back. And who is this?”

Both Lady Katherine and McPherson were thunderstruck by the impertinence of this little whirlwind who appeared to be of the same age as the young countess but had none of her inhibitions or decorum. She certainly was well-presented and well-spoken and very attractive but, in Lady Katherine's opinion, would be more so if she learned to control her tongue and behave as a lady should.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Lady Winifred," the maid offered, "McPherson, Lady Katherine's maid."

"Ah! Scotch. Good-o. My Hadleigh will show you the ropes. Four to a room. No male visitors and breakfast at half-six sharp. You may leave us."

Lady Katherine was astounded that this impudent youngster would dismiss her Nanny Fee thus and was about to remonstrate when McPherson asked of her, "Will that be all, my lady?"

"Em...yes. Thank you."

With a glance toward the bell-cord and back to her charge, McPherson left the two girls to get acquainted—or to have it out.

Once the lady's maid left the room, Winifred flopped herself onto her bed and stared at the incredulous young countess before her.

"Do you have a beau?" Winifred pried.

"A beau? No, of course not." Lady Katherine was most put out.

"You're quite attractive, you know, even with your Roman nose."

Was there anything that this young woman would say that wouldn't further irritate Lady Katherine?

"Oh, don't pretend you don't know, Katherine. You must own a mirror. I don't have a beau. In fact, I don't intend getting married ever. I shall be husband-free, child-free and carefree, despite my parents' devious plans. What about you? What have your parents in store—oh! My apologies. I'm so sorry for your loss. What do your guardians have planned for you? Some duke or prince? I hear Prince Leopold is having difficulty finding a wife—"

"Please!" interrupted Lady Katherine, "Please stop. I...I...em—"

“Oh!” Winifred cried, rising from her prone position, “I do apologise. I can be such a battering ram at times. I don’t know what comes over me. I just have so many words and thoughts that spill out over everything. I don’t mean to be a bore or to discomfort you—”

“Stop.” The word was uttered softly and followed by a deflation that caused Lady Katherine’s shoulders to slump. “I’m tired, Winifred. Perhaps we can resume this intercourse after dinner.”

“Of course. Are you certain you—”

“I’m certain. I shall go for a walk now—”

“I can join you—”

“No! No...thank you. I need to be alone.”

Lady Katherine quickly found her coat and restrained herself from running out of the room and away from the incessant barrage of meaningless chatter and into the welcomed noisy ambience of Harley Street. She shouldn’t have gone by herself, she chided, and she should have found Nanny Fee to accompany her, but she had to get away and quickly. Wandering along the busy thoroughfare, dodging pedestrians and carriages, her mind swept all the verbal refuse away so she could clearly hear her own thoughts again.

Three years of this! How was she going to cope?

By the time she completed her promenade, she had determined to concentrate on her studies and ignore the verbal tawdriness of one Winifred Lucrezia Montague Carlisle. Lady. Second daughter of the Marquess of Carlisle.

There were twenty-six girls in her year; she was the newest and the highest ranking. All the others were either daughters of Lord and Lady Such-and-Such, or of wealthy businessmen, bankers or foreign diplomats. Very few were there on a scholarship grant. She didn’t insist on being called ‘Lady’ Katherine but most of the girls knew their place and were remarkably deferential toward her. Lady Winifred, on the other hand, treated Lady Katherine like an old chum and, much to Lady Katherine’s displeasure, began calling her ‘Kathy’, a name she was beginning to abhor.

While Queen’s College was a parochial school, it accepted all faiths beside Church of England. And not only Christians. Lady Katherine was aware of several girls who were of the Jewish faith in the senior years ahead of her. They were excused from attending

Sunday services as was she. Her Aunt Mary had written a letter to Headmistress Hay requesting that Lady Katherine be permitted to attend mass at the Roman Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Mayfair. It was granted so, every Sunday, Lady Katherine and McPherson climbed into the carriage her uncle provided, celebrated mass, proceeded to Norwood for luncheon with Aunt and Uncle, then returned to the college.

Well into the second month of the three-month summer term, Lady Katherine had settled into a well-paced routine, all the time keeping her head buried in her books. These were a welcomed distraction from her melancholy and she was enjoying the lectures, the tutors, and the variety of subjects. She was certainly getting her sixty-five guineas' worth, plus extras. One of the several extras paid for were dance lessons. With no boys as dance partners, the girls took turns at leading and following, which was initially most confusing for her but she came to realise that she wasn't as awkward as she thought she was. She revelled in bouncing along in a frantic polka or gliding along in a serene waltz. As well as the most popular dances, the Dance Master insisted on teaching some of the old-fashioned dances: the quadrille, gavotte and schottische, and varsoviana—all which kept Lady Katherine in good form both physically and mentally. She even found that she quite enjoyed having Winifred as her dance partner. Winnie was her usual talkative self but an excellent leader and quite graceful. Lady Katherine was warming to this exuberant, impulsive young woman and was even beginning to appreciate her companionship.

“Oh, my feet ache,” Lady Katherine complained as she and Winifred returned to their room after the final class of the day—dancing.

“I warned you about wearing new shoes,” Winifred replied as each girl found a place to sit. Lady Katherine removed her shoes and rubbed her feet.

“I should have listened.”

“Let me,” Winifred offered, crouching down and taking up a foot. The massage was strong and brought forth moans of ecstasy from the young countess. “You're very graceful, you know, Kathy. Any man would gladly knock over his comrade to get a twirl with you. How does that feel? Present the other. You know, your big toe is longer than the rest. Mine

isn't. My first toe is. You have such slender feet." She abruptly ceased producing words and looked up at Lady Katherine who sat with her eyes closed in obvious enjoyment of the ministrations to her feet. "You haven't told me to stop prattling."

"Hm...?" Lady Katherine looked down at Winifred.

"Anyway," the girl continued, "next time, wear your old shoes. You don't need to impress anyone, least of all me. I'm already impressed. There you go. How do they feel now?"

"Better. Thank you."

Winifred stood and returned to her side of the room. It was time to get ready for dinner and their maids would be up soon to help them dress. Lady Katherine watched her intently, questioning her feelings for this brazen young aristocrat. She had never had a friend before who wasn't related to her. She loved her cousin Sorcha dearly and missed her terribly but Winifred was something different. Before she could think another thought, Winifred broke the silence.

"You know, your timing's not right," she announced, taking a few steps towards Lady Katherine and surprising her with the non sequitur. "You tend to rise when you should fall. Stand up. I'll show you."

Doing as commanded, Lady Katherine was taken aback when Winifred assumed the waltz stance and pulled the countess into it, wrapping her arm about her waist.

"Put your hand on my shoulder. Relax, Kathy, you're stiff as a board. That's better. Now. You rise on one and glide on two three. Ready? One, two, three, one, two, three. That's it."

Lady Katherine was receiving unpaid private tuition on how to execute the waltz correctly. They turned around the shared room, increasing the tempo and giggling with the fun of it all. They had made three circuits of the floor when Winifred tossed out another non sequitur.

"Have you ever been kissed?"

The pace lessened, then abruptly stopped.

"Pardon?"

"I mean kissed by a boy?"

“Yes, of course. My cousins...”

“Someone who wasn’t related to you, silly. A real kiss. A love kiss.”

“A... ‘love’ kiss?”

“Yes. Where he holds you tight and you can feel...everything. And then he kisses you—on the mouth—with such passion that you almost swoon. And then you feel his tongue—”

“Oh! Please! Stop!” Lady Katherine disentangled herself from Winifred’s hold and stepped back. “That’s grossly disgusting.”

“But have you been kissed?”

“No. Not like that. My cousin Sorcha kissed me on the lips once. But that was by accident, she didn’t mean to.”

“How did it feel? I mean, if it hadn’t been your cousin and if it had been a boy, how would you have felt?”

That question flummoxed the countess. How would she have felt? How did it feel at the time, even though it was unintentional?

“Nice,” she quietly admitted.

“Yes, it is nice, isn’t it? And because a girl did it—even inadvertently—didn’t make it any less nice, did it?”

She owned to herself that the thoughts she had after that inadvertent kiss had set her mind agog and had her body reacting in a way she had never felt before. She laughed it off, her nervousness showing through.

“But it’s wrong. Girls shouldn’t kiss girls like that—love kisses—and boys shouldn’t kiss boys.”

“Says who?”

“Says the Bible. Says the law.”

“And what does your heart say, Kathy? Love is love, isn’t it? Follow your heart and you’ll be happy.”

“Not if you’re incarcerated for pursuing that love. Not many would be happy in prison.”

“Anyway, I’ll be pursuing my own happiness. Husband-free, child-free and—”

“Carefree. Yes, I know, Winifred, and I wish you all the best in your endeavours. I do hope you will have enough income to sustain you through your husband-free life.”

“I’ll get by. You’ll see.”

The sound of a gong being struck brought the conversation to an end.

“Ah! The dinner gong. Time to change for dinner. I do hope they’re not dishing up that awful stew again. They must have cornered the market on mutton shanks and turnips. I much prefer minted lamb with succulent baby carrots and potatoes swimming in a rich gravy, followed by...”

Winifred’s babbling echoed through the room but Lady Katherine wasn’t absorbing any of it. It did feel nice when Sorcha kissed her and she had wondered at the time if it really had been accidental. She did love Sorcha but now, after Winifred’s view of love, what sort of love was it that she had for her cousin? And what did she feel for Winifred? Again, she examined how she felt when Winifred swept her into her arms for the waltz. It felt...nice. Very different from the way she felt when Nanny Fee comforted her. Different also from her aunt’s or uncle’s hugs but somehow very similar to how she felt when Sorcha held her.

She looked over to Winifred and wondered.

1880

July

Queen's College, Harley Street, London

Mr Rothery's Report of the Court of Enquiry on the Tay Bridge Fall was finally presented to both Houses of Parliament on 30th June. In effect, it was a confluence of structural errors, building defects and Mother Nature herself that caused the death of an estimated seventy-four or seventy-five persons. This report did not ameliorate any grief suffered by those who lost part of their family in this disaster. All, including Lady Katherine, still grieved their tragic and premature loss.

The End of term was looming on the July horizon and it wouldn't be very long before there'd be a six-week summer break from school. And the London Season with all its parties, theatres and social events threatened to relieve the pain in her heart. While she wasn't a particularly social creature, she did like to attend new concerts and plays, and visit the galleries and museums. Lady Katherine had expected that she'd be eager to rid herself of this verbal Gatling gun named Winifred but she was actually saddened to know that she wouldn't see her for six weeks. She would be leaving Queen's College and staying at Norwood with her aunt and uncle. Her cousins, too, would be there from Eton. Normally, she and her parents would have ventured to Scotland for a fortnight with the Campbells but Aunt Mary was set against allowing her niece to revisit the place that would bring back so many distressing memories.

It was Saturday and a lazy day for both Lady Katherine and Lady Winifred as they lounged in their room. The morning post had just been delivered. Sorcha's letter brought her cousin news of Scotland and with it, much happiness.

“Damn!” The expletive brought Winifred to Lady Katherine’s surprised attention only to be followed by a repetitious, “Damn, damn, damn!”

“Language, Winnie! What is it?”

“Mamma and Papa are going abroad and they’re insisting I accompany them.”

“That’s wonderful. Travel broadens the mind. You should be glad of the opportunity.”

“Canada? What’s in Canada that could possibly broaden my mind? They only want me to go because I’d be otherwise left alone.”

“Your siblings not at home?”

“Married. Every foolish one of them.”

“You can’t stay with one of them?”

“I won’t stay with any of them.”

“Oh, I see. You do have a problem.”

Each went back to her missive and reread the contents. It dawned on Lady Katherine that there was plenty of room at Norwood and that Winifred probably wouldn’t be such a bore after all.

“Winnie,” she began tentatively, “would your parents consider your staying with me and my aunt and uncle in Mayfair while they were in Canada?”

Winifred appeared to be genuinely surprised and, for once, lost for words. Lady Katherine continued.

“Uncle Charles knows your father and can put the proposition to him on your behalf. If you like.”

“You’d do that for me? I didn’t think you liked me all that much.” She gathered momentum. “I mean, I know that I can be a little chatty at time, gushing even, but I’m no gossip. Have you ever heard me say a bad word about anyone? I just like to—”

“Winnie!”

“—talk.”

“Winnie, stop. Let me speak to my uncle first. Tomorrow. After mass. All right?”

A big smile lit up Winifred’s comely face, followed by an impulsive rush to hug Lady Katherine.

“Thank you! Thank you, thank you.”

Lady Katherine, smothered as she was by Winifred’s gratitude and clinch, hoped that she had not made a huge misjudgement. Time would tell.

While Queen’s College had been operational for thirty-two years, this year was only the second in its history that an end-of-year gathering was to be held. The other was the year before, in ’79, when the first ever was called. All previous years had the principal deliver the address and results by way of a written annual report to the appropriate parents or guardians.

This year would be, and certainly was, a grand affair, attended by all the tutors, lady residents and the hundred and fifty-two students who ranged from twelve-year-old girls to twenty-year-old ladies. They, and other illustrious ladies and gentlemen, family and friends, absorbed the formal but happy atmosphere, taking in the mandatory speeches by the principal, Mr J Llewelyn Davies, the Dean, Henry Craik and the Headmistress of the School Hay, which were somewhat long-winded but otherwise warmly received.

No prizes were given out, only Certificates of Proficiency to young ladies upon completion of their studies. These made it possible for any matriculating student to pursue a University of London degree. It had been written into the charter of 1848 by the theologian and author Frederick Denison Maurice, that Queen’s College preclude both rewards and punishments. Mr Maurice disapproved of competition, and wanted his school for ladies to be run along the lines of a regular college.

Lady Katherine sat in awe of those young women who had newly obtained their Certificate and she made the decision, then and there, in the audience seated between her aunt and uncle, to gain a place in the newly established ladies’ college in Cambridge—Girton. After all, had not her father and uncle attended Cambridge University? Was this not there where her father became acquainted with young and dapper Charles Dunmore Norland, next in line to the Dukedom of Bramwell, and there where they formed a strong fraternal bond? Nor was it happenchance that saw them each marrying a Delaney sister. There should be no reason, therefore, other than her lack of determination or learning, that

would deter her from achieving that goal—and she was not about to lessen her drive or commitment toward that goal.

The young countess posed the proposition of entertaining Lady Winifred for the summer break to her uncle. Charles was reluctant at first but, with the urging of Mary, who saw this as an excellent opportunity for her niece to form a friendship with an exuberant young lady and to bring her niece out of her melancholy, finally agreed but only if the girl's parents unreservedly approved. He would not cajole, bribe and try any sort of persuasion to obtain this agreement. He wanted their consent to be without any form of hesitancy or inducement. With this understanding, the Duke of Norwood met the Marquess of Carlisle at their shared club and put forth the proposition. The Marquess pondered the proposal and took all of two seconds to accept. The Duke reported to the Duchess that the Marquess appeared most relieved by the offer.

Thomson, the under-butler, made all the arrangements and, without much ado, Lady Katherine and Lady Winifred, and their maids and belongings, were relocated to their respective rooms at Norwood House.

Six weeks would prove to be, for some, an extremely long time and, for others, not long enough.

“Do you like your rooms, Winnie?” Lady Katherine asked, foolishly expecting a single-syllabled reply.

“Oh, yes! They're marvellous. Exceptional. Simply gorgeous. So much space. We could take a few turns at the polka in here and not bump into anything! Kathy, I love it! Thank you so much for inviting me to spend the summer with you. I could easily get used to living here. I hope Mamma and Papa stay in Canada forever. Oh! I mean to say, I don't expect you to keep me forever. Goodness me, no! I would never presume that. What I meant was, that I really, really, really like my rooms. Even Hadleigh was impressed by her quarters. She has heating in her room and there's running hot and cold water in the washroom. Imagine that! For servants! And I can't wait to meet your cousins! They sound simply adorable. Especially Arthur. When will they be here?”

Lady Katherine was swamped by Winifred's exuberance and took a moment to catch up.

"Em...Saturday." Yes, she mused, it would be fun with her cousins, Arthur and Edward—they were good sports—but her mind drifted to Dundee and her other cousin, Sorcha and how she was already missing being there with her. It took only a turn of the page and her thoughts once again fell unbidden upon the visions she had experienced that awful night less than six months prior. Winifred couldn't help but notice the change to her friend's demeanour and immediately wrapped Lady Katherine in her arms, burying the countess' head in her shoulder.

"Oh, Kathy, don't put on a marriage face," Winifred whispered in Lady Katherine's ear. "I know I'm no substitute for your dear cousin Sorcha but we will have fun, I promise. And I'll even try to stop being so gabby. I think it comes from wanting to be liked. Or believing that everyone is interested in what I have to say. I don't know. Perhaps I'm just thinking out loud. If that's the case, then I must be careful in what I think—" Winifred stopped her monologue when she felt Lady Katherine tremble in her embrace and was very afraid that she was the cause of her friend's sobbing. "Kathy," she said, disentangling herself and looking into the countess' eyes, "Kathy, I'm so—"

"Winnie," Lady Katherine chuckled, "you're incorrigible."

"And here I was thinking you were crying."

Lady Katherine looked at her friend standing so close to her, her arms still about her waist...what was this feeling that overtook her? She looked into Winifred's eyes then to her lips—lips that were no longer moving, then back to her eyes. Was Winnie feeling the same warmth as she? She couldn't read the expression in Winnie's eyes but there was something different there. The moment stretched to a silent awkwardness until Lady Katherine shook the thoughts out of her head and smiled clumsily, "Come, let's take a turn around the park. I'm sure Hadleigh and McPherson could do with the fresh air as well."

Lady Katherine and Lady Winifred, resplendent in their fitted bodices and skirts that reached mid-calf, were as fashionable as the ladies they passed. A small bustle and a cuirass gave them that 'hourglass' form that was so admired. Topped by a wide-brimmed

hat, their hair was stylishly pinned away from their face and left to fall loose down the back. While Winifred preferred bright, conspicuous colours for her *ensemble*, the hues of Lady Katherine's costume were sombre but less morose than before. The duchess had selected subdued greys and lilac for her mourning niece.

With parasols held high, the two girls strolled arm-in-arm across busy Park Lane and into Hyde Park followed closely by McPherson and Hadleigh. It was a beautifully warm and sunny mid-summer's day and many Society folk were out and about enjoying the amusements the park had to offer. Rotten Row was cluttered with uniformly clad ladies and gentlemen of the highest rank atop their perfectly groomed mounts. The Carriage Drive was swollen with lines of sumptuous equipages drawn by the finest coach-horses money could purchase and occupied by some of the best dressed and most beautiful women in London. Along the fenced-off pathways that bordered the gravel road, perambulators, filled with newly minted aristocrats, were being pushed along by their doting nannies, evading doddering older gentlemen being held up by their attendants and *inamorati* holding each other up most inappropriately.

Birdsong and chatter filled the aural senses, and the fragrance of perfumes, roses and horse dung vied for prominence in the olfactory ones. It was a splendid day and Winifred prattled on faster than a galloping horse about everything and anything that came to mind. Lady Katherine listened patiently and politely, allowing her friend her head. Behind them, their maids chatted amiably about the cost of this or the state of that, or their personal history.

"I shall travel the world," proclaimed Winifred, "and see all the wonders. Pompeii, the Acropolis, the Sphinx. I shall scale the Matterhorn, sail through the Suez Canal, go aloft in a hot air balloon. I shall plumb the depths of Neptune's realm in diver's suit. Ride a camel. And more. Much more. Everything." She took a deep breath and turned to her companion. "And you, Kathy, do you have ambition to travel and see the world?"

"No, Winnie. Once I have attained my Bachelor of Arts from Girton College, I shall continue Papa's business enterprises with Uncle Charles," declared the young countess with quiet confidence.

“If your uncle permits,” warned Winifred, “besides, that will be up to your husband to decide. That’s why I’m not going to fall into that trap. Most definitely not. I’ve seen how wedlock transformed my sister from a happy girl to a glum harpy in a matter of a few short years. Children didn’t help, either. Little scoundrels and rascals, every single one of them. Absolutely not. I shall remain a spinster. You, my dear, my beautiful, wealthy dear, won’t have a choice. You must produce a 15th Earl or Countess of Chestermere.”

Lady Katherine grimaced at that thought. “I’ve never imagined myself as a mother. Or married, for that matter.”

“The title.” Winifred was horrified, “What will become of the title?”

“I suppose it will go to Aunt Mary’s eldest, Arthur. Presuming she passes before I do. And presuming he, too, doesn’t pass before I do. Then it should go to his legal issue. Oh, it’s just too difficult. And besides, why would it matter to me when I’m dead and gone?” She turned to her friend with an idea, “If you married Arthur, you could be the 15th Countess of Chestermere. Or the Dowager Countess of Chestermere!”

“Have you not been listening? I shall not be marrying anyone.” Winifred’s tone was both annoyed and angry. Within a few more paces along the pathway, her disposition had softened. “Well,” Winifred tentatively postulated, “if you’ve never considered marrying and I’m never going to marry, we should set up together as did Lady Eleanor Butler and the Honourable Sarah Ponsonby.”

“Who are they?”

“Were,” corrected Winifred, “two ladies who ran away together and settled in Wales. A hundred years ago.”

“Winnie, I’m not about to run away from my responsibilities. Uncle Charles is looking after my estates now but there will come a time that they will be in my care. My estates, and my dependents. I can’t just pull up stakes, pack my tent and disappear.”

“Well, then,” Winifred surmised, “I shall come and live with you. We shall be known as ‘The Ladies of Chestermere’.”

Lady Katherine didn’t understand why that *sobriquet* was pronounced by Winifred with such self-satisfaction.

“Elanor and Sarah were known as ‘The Ladies of Llangollen’,” Winifred explained, “Quite famous, actually. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of them. Lord Byron visited them, as did Wordsworth, Shelley and Sir Walter Scott. Even the Duke of Wellington! You’ve really never heard of them? They lived together for...for...forever! And without any husband to rule them.”

Their jaunt brought them to the new Knightsbridge Barracks, completed only a few months earlier. The party of four stopped to gaze at the impressive façade of the palatial building that overlooked Rotten Row and accommodated the Household Guards. Each was enveloped by her own thoughts while taking in the red brick and Portland-stone dressings, sculptured decorations pointed with black mortar. Lady Katherine mused over thoughts of never being married and, as a consequence, never experiencing that which her mother and aunt had: children and the love of a devoted spouse. Could she survive without that? Perhaps Winnie was right. Perhaps having the companionship of another—albeit a woman—would be sufficient. Wasn’t a spouse otherwise a companion for life? She looked at Winnie and wondered.

McPherson’s clearing of her throat brought Lady Katherine back to the present.

“M’lady, it is coming onto tea time and I promised your aunt to have you back by then. Shall we return?”

“Of course, Na—McPherson.”

While the way back seemed shorter than the way there, both Winifred and Lady Katherine remained silenced by their inner thoughts.

Arthur and Edward arrived directly from Eton and quickly made friendly acquaintance of the second daughter of the Marquess of Carlisle. Both boys were tall and dashing like their father but Edward, the younger of the two, had a sprinkling of the more feminine and impish aspects of his mother. Arthur was the more reserved and found Winifred amusingly entertaining while Edward, prone to pranks, found her to be the perfect foil. Together, the four adolescents amused themselves throughout the school hiatus by boating on the Serpentine, horse-riding in the park, attending numerous exhibitions at art galleries and museums and, every now and then, when permitted, attending a church fête or fair. A

particular favourite amusement of the group was attending a magic lantern show, sometimes given in a lecture hall where the subject was invariably educational, or at a theatre, where it was a little more raucous and amusing. They were also permitted, once vetted by the duchess, to attend a matinee performance at the theatre—bawdiness was strictly forbidden. This year it was *H.M.S. Pinafore* at the Opera Comique in Westminster. This operetta had been heartily received and all four were becoming great admirers of the exceptional talents of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan.

When not out and about, they happily attended afternoon teas and entertainments provided by their friends, proving themselves most formidable at charades and whist and finding much fun in playing Russian gossip, which worked wonderfully well in such large groups.

But it was the evenings at home, when the Duke and Duchess were attending balls and dinner parties, that pleased the four adolescents most.

Ensclosed in the family sitting room, they would play cards and parlour games, or take turns at Arthur's new American 'Parlor Bagatelle Table' or tell each other silly jokes that would have them falling about in fits of laughter.

Every now and then, Winifred caught Arthur glancing at her. While she was flattered by his attentions, she wasn't about to entertain them. Lady Katherine, too, saw the surreptitious gazes and felt bothered by them. Was she jealous? If so, was she jealous of Winifred or Arthur? She certainly had no designs on Arthur, he was, after all, her first cousin. So...?

"I know!" cried the youngest, Edward, "Let's play Postman's Knock!"

"Yes! Let's!" replied both Arthur and Winifred almost in unison.

Lady Katherine didn't know that game.

"I know how to play Blind Postman but there aren't enough of us to play that properly. How does one play Postman's Knock?" she innocently asked. This brought on a round of giggling and snickering.

"I'll show you," Arthur gleefully volunteered, instructing his brother, "Edward, you're postman."

With that, Edward left the room and closed the door behind him. “Ready?” he called from behind the door.

“Ready!” replied Arthur.

With that, Edward knocked on the door twice. Arthur opened the door to him and asked, “Postman, for whom do you have a letter and how many pennies are due?”

Edward, brash as ever, announced, “Arthur. Tuppence.”

Winifred let out a squeal of surprise while Arthur grimaced with repugnance, then followed Edward out, closing the door behind them.

Lady Katherine took all this in with extreme confusion and was even more perplexed when she heard Arthur’s disgusted cry from the corridor.

The door swung open and Edward flounced in with a huge grin while Arthur stood at the doorway wiping his mouth. Lady Katherine was no more the wiser.

“Your turn,” announced Edward to Arthur, closing the door on him.

Arthur knocked twice. Edward opened the door and asked, “Postman, for whom do you have a letter and how many pennies are due? And it can’t be me!”

Arthur looked at the two girls, one smiling and the other quite confounded.

“Winnie. Thruppence.”

Winifred squealed again and jumped up from her seat. “Must be special delivery,” she announced and ran to the door, virtually pulling Arthur behind her and slamming the door shut.

This round seemed to take a little longer than the one before and, when the door was opened, both Winifred and Arthur were conspicuously flushed and coy. Lady Katherine finally realised what was going on behind the door.

“Your turn,” Edward instructed Winifred and closed the door on her.

A gentle knock on the door had Edward open it and, once again, ask, “Postman, for whom do you have a letter and how many pennies are due?”

Winifred stood in the doorway and looked at each of her friends, taking her time to decide.

“Mm, let me check my satchel,” she teased, pretending to rummage through her invisible bag and retrieving an unseen envelope. “The Right Honourable, the Countess of Chestermere. One penny.”

Both Edward and Arthur guffawed with delight. Lady Katherine didn’t more.

“Katherine, that’s you.” Arthur giggled, nudging his cousin, “You must go to the door and pay the postman.

“But—”

“One penny,” insisted Winifred. “Don’t you want your letter?”

Reluctantly, Lady Katherine followed Winifred into the corridor and Edward dutifully closed the door on them. There, Winifred took Lady Katherine’s hands into her own and smiled at the petrified look on her friend’s face.

“Don’t be so scared, Kathy, it’s only a kiss. Pretend I’m your cousin,” Winifred eased then added with an impish smile, “Sorcha, that is.”

Winifred gently drew Lady Katherine closer then touched her own lips to the stunned countess’. Lady Katherine didn’t move except to close her eyes and absorb the warmth and softness of Winifred’s lips upon hers. The kiss lasted an eternity, or so it seemed, and it was both pleasurable and astounding and, when Winifred broke away, Lady Katherine felt abandoned.

“You can breathe now,” Winifred whispered teasing the innocent countess. “Did you like it?”

Before Lady Katherine could reply, the door swung open.

“How long does it take to pay a penny?” asked a most annoyed Edward.

“Sorry, Eddie,” Winifred replied, “we were having a chat.”

“I don’t want to play this anymore,” Edward announced, “there aren’t enough of us. What say we play Old Maid?”

“Kathy?”

“Em, no, Winnie,” Lady Katherine demurred, “it’s almost dinner time and...please excuse me.”

It wasn't more than ten minutes when a gentle knock to Lady Katherine's bedroom door brought her out of her reverie. She had shut herself away in her room overlooking Park Lane to deliberate on what had just happened between her and Winifred and how it made her feel. She was confused; she shouldn't be feeling that way—not for another of her own sex. But she couldn't help herself. That kiss was purposeful, not accidental. And she liked it. Very much.

The gentle knocking on the door repeated.

“Come in,” Lady Katherine invited as she rose to meet her visitor.

McPherson entered the room and closed the door behind her.

“My lady, you weren't with the boys. Are you ailing?” enquired the maid.

“Nanny Fee...” Lady Katherine shakily began, signalling to her maid that, indeed, she was troubled.

“What is it, Sweetling?”

Lady Katherine threw herself into her former nanny's arms and held her tight burying her worried face into McPherson's neck.

“I think I'm going to be condemned to Hell. Or prison,” Lady Katherine muffled.

“What have you done to deserve that? Och! Lady Winifred was not about! You have not done her in!”

Lady Katherine involuntarily chuckled at that absurdity and looked earnestly into her maid's eyes. “No. But I think I may be an affront to God.”

“Hm, that does sound serious. Is it because you don't eat your greens?”

Lady Katherine looked to her Nanny Fee puzzled. “No?”

“Is it because you don't close the inkwell or clean your pens when you're finished?”

“No.”

“Is it because you've fallen in love with Lady Winifred?”

That sudden revelation took away Lady Katherine's breath.

“Sweetling, there is not an ounce of devilment in you that would see you in Hell. Or prison.”

“But—it's against Nature.”

“Hm, perhaps. Come. Sit.” McPherson led her young charge back to the window seat and sat her down. “In my time, I’ve seen many a thing that some would query as natural. Do you recall the swans on the lake back home? The pairs in the rushes near Rusby village? Swans mate for life, you know. Did you know one pair are both cobs? They have never had a clutch but there they are, together. Forever, it seems. And the other swans? They dinnae seem to be bothered. You’ve seen them.”

“I never noticed.”

“And why would you? They all seem happy enough being the way they are. I’ve seen this with pigeons, too. What is Nature and natural if not these creatures of God? My darling Lady Katherine, dinnae be a-fearing your feelings. It is Man’s laws that give us pause to query ourselves, not God’s.”

“But the bible says—”

“Aye, I ken that the bible says much about everything and every man takes from it what he will to please himself.”

This only left Lady Katherine with more confusion.

“Kateling,” continued McPherson, “you are not committing any of the seven deadly sins, are you? Or a mortal sin? Remember what it tells you in Genesis. God created heaven and earth and on the fifth day?”

Lady Katherine’s confusion brought up a questioning reply, “Em...fish in the sea...and birds—”

“Aye, God created the winged fowl. Sparrows, falcons, ducks and geese. And swans. He was happy enough with what the birds got up to. You and I came after the winged fowl. And He declared that everything He had made was very good. He was happy with all He created. Including the likes of me. And you. So long as you are good. And you are, my dear, dear, bairn, you are good.”

She enveloped the young countess in her arms once more, comforting her with soft words.

“I know you dinnae do away with Lady Winifred. But I dinnae think that Lady Winifred is for you, sweet Kateling. However, that should not stop you from having these feelings for her. Some may not understand. Some may even be upset with you. It’s best to

be discreet. Which, with a lass like her ladyship, may be a little difficult, I must own. I saw her kiss you in corridor.”

Lady Katherine disentangled herself from her maid’s embrace, her cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

“Come, my lady, let me dress you for dinner.”

Dinner was the usual formal affair, even though only the four young aristocrats attended. The butler and two footmen were obliging to the company which became a little more disorderly than would have been had the overseeing eyes of Arthur and Edward’s parents been present.

That night, after a long and emotionally draining day, Lady Katherine was glad to find comfort and solace in her bed. Incessant words and images paraded themselves through her tired mind as she struggled to accept—indeed, comprehend—her feelings for Winifred. If it was God’s will to have these feelings for Winnie, as Nanny Fee said, then why did she have to be discreet? Surely God’s will trumped any of Man’s laws. And did Winnie feel the same way about her? She certainly had eyes for Arthur and he for her. Was she trying to make her jealous? Could she and Winnie live together as Lady Eleanor Butler and the Honourable Sarah Ponsonby had, exclusive of husbands, and be accepted by all? What would her aunt and uncle say if she did? Would she be disowned by them and her family, and her cousin Sorcha? Would she lose all her friends and, far more importantly, would the men of business and finance find her repugnant if they were told of her unusual coalition? Contrarily, if she gave up everything—her title, her wealth, her estates—would Winifred remain true and loyal to her? They both would be poor and living by the grace of benevolent relatives.

All these scenarios and questions ran through her thoughts on a constant loop but they were all mere conjecture based on improbabilities; Winifred had made no such commitment to her other than in her incessant chatter and probably wouldn’t even remember what she had suggested. Lady Katherine convinced herself that she was reading phantom messages. Winifred was exuberant, she owned, and she had shown a decided interest in Arthur. Maybe Nanny Fee was right, maybe Winnie was not right for her.

With that disheartening thought, she closed her eyes, determined to find some peace in the arms of Hypnos. She had barely shut one eye when a gentle scratching on her door drew her attention to it and, before she could ask who was there, the door opened and quickly closed behind the figure that stepped in.

Lady Katherine sat up in bed, wide awake and surprised by the intrusion.

“Kathy,” whispered the approaching figure.

“Winnie! What are you doing here?” she whispered back.

“I was worried sick about you. Do you mind if I sit on your bed? Thank you. You were not yourself at dinner. Was it something I said? I hope not. I would never do anything to hurt you, you know. Never. Are you all right? Is something bothering you?”

Lady Katherine didn't quite know what to do. She wanted to sleep. She wanted to think about the words her Nanny Fee had said. She wanted to be alone. And she wanted Winifred to stay.

“Winnie...” Lady Katherine faltered, “Winnie, how do you feel...what do you...do you—?”

Winifred stopped the stuttering with a finger to Lady Katherine's lips.

“Shh, Kathy. Don't speak. Let me kiss you.”

This caught Lady Katherine by utter surprise. While it was what she desired—for their first kiss had been so...pleasing—it was shocking to her that Winifred would be so forward. Winifred leaned in and tenderly touched her lips to the terrified girl's. What began as a gentle caress of lips deepened and became more passionate, leaving Lady Katherine breathless once more. When she broke from the kiss, Winifred smiled with self-satisfaction at seeing the effect she and that kiss had had on her ‘Kathy’.

“Did you like it?”

Lady Katherine's ‘yes’ was almost inaudible.

“Would you like another?”

An imperceptible nod was all the young countess could deliver. Without invitation, Winifred lifted the coverlet and slid in beside Lady Katherine, gently easing her to lie down.

“We’ll be more comfortable like this,” Winifred said, as she caressed her friend’s face, shoulder and arm. “You are beautiful, you know. You have beautiful brown eyes and such soft, warm skin and your lips are so delicious—”

“Kiss me,” the plea was more a command borne of desperation.

The night was long and innocent. Both girls were content with kissing and cuddling, even though Winifred was the more outgoing, she had not done anything more than kiss and cuddle with any of her former special friends, boy or girl. Lady Katherine found the sleep she craved, enfolded in the arms of her newly found purpose.

It was that time just before luncheon when the household seemed to be in a state of hiatus. The servants had completed their morning chores and had finished their dinner, relaxing before the pandemonium of luncheon for the family.

The Duchess of Bramwell was in the morning room completing her correspondence and the four youngsters were out and about for the day, accompanied by Hadleigh and a footman. McPherson had taken the opportunity to catch up on some mending and was passing by the morning room with some clothing from the laundry when she caught the eye of the duchess.

“McPherson.”

“Your Grace?”

“Come in, please. I’d like a word.”

Lady Katherine’s lady’s maid complied and stood beside the desk at which the duchess, Mary, sat.

“My niece appears to be in better spirits,” Mary stated as a query.

“Aye, Your Grace, Lady Katherine certainly is happier than she has been these last seven months.”

“How do you find Lady Winifred?”

“Your Grace?” McPherson had an inkling of what was coming but didn’t want to assume anything.

“Lady Katherine seems to be quite fond of her. You know both girls better than I, Fiona. Is Lady Winifred...em, how should I say? Too exuberant for my niece?”

“Your Grace, I must own that the young Lady Winifred is quite the fire-cracker, but she means well. And she is a good salve for what ails the bairn.”

“She is quite fast with my boys. Yet I’ve heard her speak of remaining a spinster and encouraging my niece to do so as well.”

“Your Grace, they are only fifteen. They have their whims and fancies. My son, Georgie, is only six and he dreams of being a pirate, bless him. As they mature, life will show them the way.”

“I certainly hope so. Lady Katherine has a duty to her title and to her dependents. I don’t want any silly prattle to sway her from her destiny. Will you see to that, Fiona? Will you make sure she finds the right path?”

“Of course, Your Grace. Lady Katherine’s happiness is what I want for her as well.”

And so, the summer of 1880 proceeded most convivially for the four young aristocrats, spending all their time together. It seemed obvious to all who knew them—their friends and the parents of their friends—that Arthur and Winifred made an excellent match, and that Lady Katherine and Lady Winifred would be fast friends forever. They agreed that, in the girls, one’s personality balanced the other’s and would be a *force majeure* in Society when they both came of age. Lady Katherine followed McPherson’s advice and kept her special friendship with Winifred clandestine and confined to moments when they were alone. She urged the spirited Winnie to do the same—a far more difficult task for one so excitable.

1880

September

Queen's College, Harley Street, London

The beginning of September brought the autumn chill and the Michaelmas term, the beginning of a new school year. The boys returned to Eton and the girls to Queen's College and to the room they shared.

Business and estate dealings had the Duke return to Abbotsford Hall, travelling between his estates and those of Lady Katherine's to oversee the needs and matters that their respective estate managers brought up. The Duchess remained at Norwood House in London to manage any requirements her niece may have and to ensure that the unoccupied Delaney House was maintained in good order.

Lady Winifred's parents had duly returned from their extended excursion to Canada and both seemed rather pleased with the introductions they had received there. Canada was a young and emerging nation where there were many opportunities for business ventures, especially since the Marquess was a distant relative to the Governor General, His Grace John Campbell, 9th Duke of Argyll. His introductions to the leaders both business and political of the newly confederated British nation made for exciting times for any entrepreneur and the Marquess saw many opportunities there both commercial and personal. Large, shrewd investments would increase the family's fortune and standing, which, due to some recent unfortunate turn of events, had seen a decline in the former.

But Lady Winifred was not interested in the least in listening to her father's rapturous acclamation of this foreign nation and its people. Her main interest rested in one Lady Katherine, whom she knew she had won over.

Lady Katherine's deep friendship with the Marquess' youngest, unmarried daughter invigorated her and, while she would never forget her mother and father and still mourned

their loss, she found new purpose in Winnie. She consumed her lessons with ravenous determination so that, should the situation turn for the worse, Winnie would not go without. Lady Winifred, on the other hand, was her usual ebullient self, happy to float along on the tide of her Kathy's successes. Her ambition was not to gain a certificate or entry to a university, her ambition was to be with her Kathy. They shared everything: lectures, meals, entertainments, free time...and a bed.

It was during these times, in bed, that they made their plans for a long and happy life together, setting up house, touring the world, and being the benefactrices of contemporary worthies as had been Eleanor and Sarah with theirs. They, undoubtedly, would become known as the "Benevolent Ladies of Chestermere".

The months progressed in a most pleasing manner. It was now coming toward the end of the Michaelmas term and this particular week had been a long and seemingly endless round of ancient Greek, Latin, geometry, poetry, literature, *et cetera*. And, For Lady Katherine, this particular Saturday afternoon had been another busy cycle of catching up on correspondence and then absorbing as much as she could of her subscription publications: *The Englishwoman's Review*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *The Queen* and, of course, *The Money Market Review*. Winifred amused herself with the likes of *Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion*, *Punch* and *Monde Élegant*.

Finally, dinner had been consumed and the two young aristocrats found themselves relaxing in their room, in their nightgowns and ready for bed.

During the day, Lady Katherine noticed a subtle change in Winifred's demeanour; nothing extraordinary—Lady Winnie was flighty at the best of times—but today, she caught her capricious friend giving her surreptitious glances and knowing smiles, particularly during their evening meal. What roguery was she planning?

It was to become quite clear to Lady Katherine what Lady Winifred had had on her mind once they had extinguished the light and climbed into their bed and snuggled together.

"I love you, Winnie," Lady Katherine whispered in the darkened room as she lay cuddled close to her soulmate. "Do you love me?"

“Of course I do, silly,” Winifred murmured, “How many times do I have to say it?” she giggled as she tickled Lady Katherine beneath the bedclothes, “I love, I love you, I love you.”

After the laughter and squirming subsided, Lady Katherine looked earnestly into Winifred’s eyes and pleaded, “Kiss me.”

“My pleasure.” That was the invitation she was waiting for. Winifred smiled as she captured the countess’s mouth with hers and gently rolled her onto her back. Her free hand began a meandering path down Lady Katherine’s body, stopping to pay particular, delicate attention to her breast, eliciting a moan of pleasure from the young countess. Encouraged by the reaction, Winifred’s hand continued along its downward journey and along her friend’s thigh. There, her fingers gathered up the nightgown in a ruche until she had reached the hem.

Reaching the first stage of her manoeuvre, she broke the kiss to whisper, “I do love you, Kathy,” and, boldly resuming her kiss, she resumed her predetermined strategy. Her hand slipped under the gathers of the nightgown and slid up the naked thigh of the unsuspecting girl until it reached its objective.

Lady Katherine recoiled, pushing Winifred away.

“What are you doing?”

“Shh, my darling, relax. Trust me,” she whispered as she resumed her position. Lady Katherine didn’t know what to make of this intrusion of her very private parts. “I want to make you feel good. Have you never made yourself tingle all over?”

The young countess’ heart was beating rapidly as Winifred’s hand slowly made its way back to the apex of Lady Katherine’s thighs. That sensation was something she had never felt before. A warmth radiated from her groin and spread.

“Let me show you,” Winifred whispered almost inaudibly. “I won’t hurt you, I promise,” she assured as her fingers parted the downy hair, searching for their objective. “You’ll feel wonderful, I promise...there!”

Immediately, Lady Katherine’s back arched. The spot Lady Winifred had so gently touched sent an electric shock up to her navel. She expelled a gust of breath and gasped.

Winifred smiled at the reaction that slight touch had.

“And that’s to begin with,” the brazen girl added. “The ending will curl your toes.”

The next morning, bright sunlight pushed itself through the slightly parted curtains and church bells called to the faithful. An incessant tapping on the door brought both girls out of their languid inertness.

“Goodness me! It’s nine o’clock! Winnie! Get up!” urged Lady Katherine as she scrambled over the sluggard that was her bedmate.

When she and McPherson arrived at Norwood House after mass, the flush to Lady Katherine’s face did not go unnoticed, they had arrived late for the service so took their place in the last pews rather than make their way to the front to sit with her aunt and uncle.

The service over, their carriages returned to the Mayfair mansion together and, upon alighting, the Duchess immediately noticed her niece’s rosiness.

“Dear me, Katherine, are you unwell? Is that why you were delayed?” Mary asked most concerned as she touched the back of her hand to her niece’s forehead. “Your face is glowing.”

“No, Aunt, I’m quite well,” Lady Katherine stuttered, trying to cover her guilt. “Perhaps it was the Reverend Father’s sermon. The seven deadly sins,” Lady Katherine excused, rather unconvincingly. “He...he seemed to be particularly vocal about lust.” She gave her aunt and her maid a glance each. “I’m ravenous,” she proclaimed sheepishly, “is luncheon ready?”

She left McPherson and the duchess puzzling in her wake, hoping they couldn’t read her mind or feel the heat emanating from her nether regions. She begged her body not to betray her any further. It was enough that God knew what she’d been up to and had censured her through His priest.

1883

The intervening three years saw a great change in young Lady Katherine. Now almost eighteen, the mid-calf skirts of her teen years lengthened and, while no longer in mourning, she still preferred subtle pastels to the more vibrant colours that her Winnie favoured. McPherson styled her lady's long brown hair twisted into the latest chignon, another indication that the girl had become a woman. Her love for Lady Winifred firmed into a bond they avowed would last forever.

She had to mature much faster than any eighteen-year-old would have had to under normal circumstances. With the Chestermere title she inherited came Lilyfield Manor set in a vast estate of more than nine thousand acres of excellent farming and grazing lands, a castle in the county of Angus which her aunt and uncle Campbell occupied, and the London mansion, Delaney House, and, of course, the buildings and tenants of the village of Rusby.

Her father had had a number of business ventures with her uncle and, these, too, she inherited. They were now equal partners in enterprises that encompassed steel mills in Scotland, coal mines in Wales, manufactories in Manchester and Birmingham and shareholdings in various companies listed on the London Stock Exchange.

Her Uncle Charles oversaw and guided his niece along every decision she had to make, explaining the pros and cons of those decisions and, ultimately, ensuring Lady Katherine made the right choices.

When school permitted, she accompanied her uncle on his frequent visits to her own Lilyfield Manor to confer with her new estate manager, Mr Glanville, on the running of the estates and what needed to be done to make sowing and reaping of the harvests more fruitful and profitable. She was not restrained in adopting the newest advances in veterinary sciences to keep the herds and flocks healthy or in ensuring her farmers, shepherds and villagers and their families were content. Her uncle—and father—had always maintained

that the most important asset in a profitable estate was the health and contentment of its dependents.

Keeping abreast with the latest innovations, too, was important and, again when school permitted, Lady Katherine eagerly accompanied her uncle—as her father had done before her—to the many local and international exhibitions of the latest in farming and commerce.

She was thirteen years of age when she attended her first exhibition, and a grand one it was, as well. She, her parents, her aunt and uncle Bramwell and their two sons, had spent two wondrous weeks in Paris attending *l'Exposition Universelle*—they being a small number of the thirteen million who attended. There, the world was on display: its ethnic diversity; its fine arts and crafts; and all its mechanical wonders of modernness. They marvelled at the gigantic head of “Liberty” displayed, which, when the statue was completed, would be a gift of the French people to those of the United States of America. At night, the avenues were transformed by the installation of electric arc lamps. And the ‘phones’! A megaphone, telephone and phonograph were all demonstrated as a way of delivering sound over long distances. Such amazing curiosities!

Subsequent exhibitions which Lady Katherine attended with her uncle, the Duke of Bramwell were not as grand but she was still awestruck by the scientific and technological advancements that built one upon the other.

Of course, all of this had to be done without interruption to her studies, for she was determined to gain entry to Girton College when the time came.

When other young ladies would quiver with excitement at the prospect of purchasing the latest in fashion of a pair of shoes or gown, Lady Katherine was thrilled to see the gratitude of her farmers when the newest of ploughs or reapers arrived, or when she arranged for an architect to renovate some of the more dilapidated cottages in the village.

These measures were undertaken with the guiding hand of her uncle and their mutual accountant. Lady Katherine was a quick study and easily came to understand budgets, balance sheets and profit and loss statements, impressing both the accountant and her uncle.

When these endeavours were being undertaken, Lady Winifred was left at a loose end. She wasn't in the least bit interested in business, accounting, acquisitions or mergers. Her focus was on Lady Katherine and felt bereft of her company when the countess went on these 'foraging expeditions', as she called them. During those times, Lady Winifred would reluctantly return to the family seat and to the haranguing of her mother and sister to find a beau, become engaged and marry. She sorely missed her 'Kathy' but was comforted in knowing that, when the school term recommenced, she would be in Kathy's company and arms once more.

But bad news was on the horizon; the idyll would soon change forever...

1883

June

Queen's College, Harley Street, London

It was nearing the end of Summer term at Queen's College —the final term of their final year. Both Lady Katherine and Lady Winnifred were eagerly anticipating the end-of-year gathering at Queen's College and collecting their Certificates of Proficiency. Other more exciting events were on the horizon. Lady Katherine's eighteenth birthday anniversary was only a few short weeks away, coming three months after Lady Winifred's and arrangements were well underway for them both to be presented at Court in Buckingham Palace during the third of Queen Victoria's four Drawing Rooms of the Season.

In preparation for these, and because of the class of student at Queen's College, the girls in their final year were given special instruction by the Dance Master on the correct way to curtsy while being presented. Not one's ordinary bob and bow as in a minuet or gavotte, no. The correct and only way to show obeisance to the monarch upon presentation was a rigid set of steps, undertaken much as in a dance, ending with a deep genuflection and a bow of the head. It was mandatory that this be performed in front of each and every member of the Royal Family present. The court curtsy was practised *ad infinitum* until perfected and no one stumbled or lost her equilibrium. Instruction on court etiquette was also given. A girl's future in Society depended on how she comported herself at this important occasion.

Lady Katherine's aunt and Lady Winifred's mother both had been presented in their time, so, when the date of the third Drawing Room was announced, the Duchess and Marchioness applied to the Lord Chamberlain, submitting the names of their charges and, as expected, their summonses soon arrived. Preparations were now in full swing and were

progressing well. Their *couturières* also had almost completed their white silk and satin full court dresses.

The Duchess of Bramwell and Marchioness of Carlisle had arranged to hold a joint ball in honour of their *débutantes*’ coming out and preparations for this were advancing at a hectic pace. The ball would be held in Norwood House as it was the larger of the two townhouses and the guest list had grown to almost two hundred. Of course, with so many *débutantes* being presented—upward of nine hundred this season—there would be so many balls around town so not all of the invited guests would stay for the entire evening’s programme of dances and supper. It would nevertheless be a full house of exuberance and gaiety.

The remaining days of school also meant a huge change in the future of the two aristocrats. Through her uncle, Lady Katherine had made enquiries about entry to Girton College but Lady Winifred, as expected, had shown no desire to continue her studies. While her Kathy attended lectures at Girton, Winifred would be the ‘stay-at-home’ at the flat they intended to share in Cambridge. This would allow them to spend their spare time, evenings and Sundays together.

“I shall run the household like a sergeant-major!” proclaimed Winifred as she thumbed through the latest catalogue from Liberty’s East India House. “We shall have a housekeeper, a maid-of-all-work and, of course, Hadleigh and McPherson. And a footman, of course. But not just any footman, mind you, he must be at least six feet tall and not more than twenty-six years of age. You do like Japanese *objets d’art*, don’t you?”

They were lounging in their room, awaiting the dinner gong and their maids.

“Winnie, you may decorate as you please. I shall be too busy to notice, I’m sure. And I don’t think the flat will be big enough to accommodate five servants,” Lady Katherine chuckled.

“How big is the flat? Will we have room for these Satsuma jars? They’re three feet tall.”

Before Lady Katherine could reply, a gentle rapping on their door drew their attention to it.

“Enter!” commanded Winifred, assuming the role of Lady of the House. Hadleigh, Lady Winifred’s maid, stepped in with a letter on a silver tray.

“This just arrived from Lady Carlisle, my lady,” Hadleigh said offering the sealed envelope to her charge. “Ronald said it was urgent.”

Winifred took the envelope and quickly opened it. What could be so urgent that her mother had their footman deliver this to her? It didn’t take long to scan the brief note and for her demeanour to change from jovial to apprehensive.

“Ronald was instructed to wait for your reply, my lady.”

Lady Winifred seemed lost for thought and word.

“Winnie, is everything all right?” Lady Katherine’s concern was real. “Has there been an accident?”

“Hm? Em, no. Everything is...Father has returned from Liverpool and he and mother want to see me tonight.” Winifred laughed unconvincingly, “They simply can’t bear to be without me. Hadleigh, tell Ronald to arrange a carriage to collect me at eight. And prepare my blue *ensemble*.”

“My lady,” Hadleigh confirmed with a slight curtsy and left the room as quickly as she had entered it.

“Winnie—”

“No. Everything is splendid. Simply splendid. I may spend the night at the townhouse so don’t wait up for me.”

As forewarned, Lady Winifred did not return to the campus that night, nor the following day. She and Hadleigh did not return until the third day, giving both the young countess and McPherson cause for great concern.

When Lady Winifred did return, it was during lectures and to an empty room. Upon returning from her classes, Lady Katherine found a greatly troubled Winnie forlornly peering out of their window into Harley Street.

“Winnie! What became of you? No word!”

Winifred turned to Lady Katherine and put on a brave face.

“Kathy—” was all she could say. She wanted to say so much but couldn’t bear what undoubtedly would follow. They stood looking at each other: Winifred not wanting to say and Lady Katherine not wanting to ask.

“Well,” Lady Katherine puffed, finally breaking the silence, “lectures are done. What say you to a brisk walk to clear our heads?” Without waiting for a reply, Lady Katherine pulled the bell cord to summon McPherson.

Lady Katherine did not want to insist that Winnie tell her what was troubling her. She knew that her dear Winnie had a rather calamitous relationship with her parents. Winnie was headstrong and not one to give way once her mind was set. No doubt, her parents saw things differently—whatever it was they were looking at. All this would pass, Lady Katherine assured herself as they strolled along Harley Street toward the river.

For the first time since she met her friend did she utter monosyllabic replies. Not even a diversion to Liberty’s along Regent Street cheered her up. While something certainly appeared to be bothering Lady Winifred, Lady Katherine knew whatever it was, was not of her doing; they hadn’t had any disagreement or falling out. But she did want to help her friend climb out of that deep funk into which she had fallen.

“Is there something I’ve done, Winnie?” the countess solemnly asked, “You’re not your usual self.” It was true, it was as though all her friend’s effervescence had fizzed away.

“Hm? No, my darling Kathy,” Winifred glumly replied, “you could never do anything wrong. I’m sorry. It must be the thought...of being presented...” Her voice trailed off with a long sigh and her attention reverted to whatever it was that had been occupying her thoughts.

“It’ll be over and done with before you know it,” Lady Katherine assured her with an encouraging smile, “then we’ll all be back to normal again. Come, let’s take an ice-cream.”

The mournful look that Winifred gave her friend was most out of character.

1883

Early August

Norwood House, Mayfair, London

The day of the Drawing Room was almost upon them. The senior and junior grand ladies of Bramwell, Chestermere and Carlisle were working feverishly with the final touches ensuring all would be in readiness for the magnificent event: the Presentation of the Ladies Katherine and Winifred to Her Majesty Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace.

The senior ladies had all of their households in a state of flux and flurry finalising gowns, menus, carriages, provisions, orchestras, lighting, additional footmen, maids and cooks, and floral decorations while still maintaining the unflappable decorum expected of persons of their rank.

Gowns were tried and adjusted to accommodate the difficult curtses, and hairstyles practised until they had been fixed to withstand a hurricane if necessary. The gentlemen with good sense kept their distance. They gladly stepped back and had little to do with the preparations save dressing in their court attire on the day and financing the event.

The Duke of Bramwell had decided to remove himself from the whirlwind of activity at Norwood House and settled into a comfortable armchair at his club. And the snifter of brandy couldn't have been more relaxing as he caught up on the latest news in the evening press.

“Charles! I thought it was you.”

The Duke turned to greet the Marquess of Carlisle. “Alistair! Dear fellow, do join me.”

Taking an armchair, the Marquess made himself comfortable and ordered a glass of whisky from the waiter.

“Escaping the madness?” the Duke enquired. “Thank goodness I only have one niece.”

“Yes, yes,” the Marquess replied rather hesitantly. “Actually, Charles, I need to speak to you on a rather...how shall I say...delicate matter.”

“Oh? Please, unburden yourself.”

“I—that is, the Philomena and I, thank you for suggesting a joint ball—”

“Don’t thank me, old chap, Mary’s the culprit. She can’t help herself. Once she has an idea and is let loose with it, she’s like an avalanche and sweeps all before her.”

“Yes, yes,” Alistair conceded, then continued, “The thing is, Charles, I may need to beg your indulgence. I...I’m a little strapped at this moment.”

“Sorry to hear that, old chap. Didn’t you pull out of that risky enterprise in Liverpool?”

The Marquess sank into his chair, lowering his head, “My timing was off.”

The Duke let out a sympathetic sigh. “I see. Alistair, don’t concern yourself about the ball. We can work something out in due course. Meanwhile, if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“No,” the Marquess replied with a grateful smile, “I have it in hand, thank you, Charles. I just need a little time.”

“Take all the time you need.”

1883

Early August

Norwood House, Park Lane, Mayfair

The day of the Drawing Room finally arrived.

Her Majesty Queen Victoria had not only approved of the presentation of Lady Katherine by the Duchess of Bramwell, and of Lady Winifred by the Marchioness of Carlisle, but also of some two hundred other young *débutantes* of both noble and common birth on this day, the third Drawing Room of the Season.

At their separate family townhouses, Lady Katherine and Lady Winifred and their sponsors were frantically making themselves ready for the important event and the ball to follow. While it was a great honour to be presented, it was also the most nerve-racking and dreaded of times for all concerned.

At Norwood House, Lady Katherine was being dressed, primed and prepared for her ‘coming out’ by a horde of hairdressers, seamstresses, crispins and maids-of-all-sorts, overseen by a frazzled McPherson who was, in turn, directed by a lively but dictatorial Duchess while she, too, was being dressed, primed and prepared.

Lady Katherine’s costume was elegance in its simplest form and followed precisely every detail, to the last feather, the full court dress as prescribed by the Queen herself through her Lord Chamberlain.

The voluminous skirt, made of lustrous white *glacé* silk, fell to the floor flat and smooth down the front with the bulk of it gathered at the back over her modest bustle. The low-cut bodice and short sleeves were of the same gleaming fabric with the only hint of colour being the clusters of silken larkspurs about the *décolletage*. Laced as tightly as possible, her whalebone corset gave the young countess the hourglass figure that was so fashionable but so debilitating.

The mandatory train, made of the best white satin to be had, was three yards in length and fifty-four inches wide. McPherson carefully stitched it to Lady Katherine's bodice at the shoulders, further securing the seams with a small platinum clasp to each side. Once the presentation was over, and guests at the ball duly welcomed, the train would be detached to facilitate dancing.

Jewellery was permitted but Lady Katherine decided that further embellishments should be kept to a minimum. A fine platinum necklace, earrings, and a bracelet worn on her right wrist over white opera gloves, were studded with diamonds and sapphires the exact shade of the larkspur.

Her mass of shiny dark brown hair, washed with a mixture of lime-juice and glycerine and thoroughly dried, was parted down the middle and swept up into a tight chignon at the back of her head, allowing the sides to swag over her ears and frame her face. The only adornment to her hair were the mandatory white Prince of Wales ostrich plumes. As she was unmarried, she would wear only two while her Aunt Mary would wear three. Queen Victoria insisted that the feathers be not inconsequential and that the middle one be higher than those on either side. This arrangement was worn toward the left-hand side and held in place by a matching glittering diamond and sapphire hair clasp. Under this was fixed a white tulle veil, cascading behind her left shoulder. Hers was well short of the maximum forty-five inches allowed.

Fresh bouquets of summer flowers patiently sat in the cool of the wine cellar waiting to make their appearance in court, their fragrance matching the rose perfume Lady Katherine wore and the violets of her aunt's.

Neither Lady had had anything to eat or drink all day—being 'caught short' in the palace was not to be contemplated. There would be simply too many people for the very limited cloak rooms to be able to accommodate. And *bourdaloues* were no longer considered polite in these circles.

McPherson was scrutinising the finishing touches being applied to Lady Katherine's face: a light dusting of face powder and a smudge of rouge to the lips and cheeks, just enough to enhance her healthy glow and an already beautiful face.

Almost all was in readiness—and ahead of schedule. The duke’s carriage would be waiting for them in a matter of minutes.

“You are magnificent!” chimed Mary, entering Lady Katherine’s dressing room followed by an entourage of maids.

“Aye, Your Grace, that her ladyship is,” beamed McPherson.

“My darling Kathrine, you will set every bachelor’s heart aflutter when you enter the throne room. And by this time next year, you’ll be wed to the most worthy of them.”

Mary was so excited by the prospect of her niece marrying well that she didn’t read the subtleness of Lady Katherine’s defiance. That was not what the *débutante* wanted. She wanted to follow her heart and be with her Winifred for the rest of her life. This is what they had planned. This is what they had promised each other. This is what they would do. How could she explain this to her aunt? Sharing a flat in Cambridge was the first step. Explanation would follow when necessary.

“Come, sweetling, the carriage and your uncle are waiting. McPherson, the cloak. Emma, Lizzie, help Lady Katherine with her train. Careful now.”

1883

Early August

Buckingham Palace

Pall Mall and the streets around Buckingham Palace were jammed with the most exquisite carriages of every shape, size and colour, buffed and polished to radiant brilliance and most of them emblazoned with the *paterfamilias*' coat-of-arms on the door. Inside each was a matronly sponsor and her nervous *débutante*, accompanied by a doting father, uncle or, indeed, husband, and attended to by superbly liveried coachmen and footmen.

They had been advised to arrive early to escape the crowd but it seemed that everyone had heeded this advice and had arrived *en masse*. Throngs of curious onlookers filled the streets outside the gates of the palace and craned their necks to catch sight of the Upper Crust as the coaches disgorged their elite onto the palace grounds.

Deftly navigating the coach and four to the appointed gate, the Bramwell coachman finally stopped at the allocated entrance.

Leaving their cloaks, coats and shawls in the carriage, the Duchess and Lady Katherine, with their trains folded carefully over their left arm, and bouquets and fans in their right hand, made their way along the gallery, obediently followed by the Duke of Bramwell, toward the antechamber where they would await their turn for presentation. There, in the corridor, Lady Katherine left one of her two cards with the page in attendance and the three aristocrats were ushered into the large waiting hall.

The chatter and clamour of scores of women young and old filled the airless room which, nowhere near capacity, was already muggy. Lady Katherine searched the flushed faces for a glimpse of her Winnie or the Marchioness. It was a fruitless quest.

The room continued to admit more until it was a babbling sea of wall-to-wall white, bobbing with plumes on rosy-cheeked maids and matrons. It would be a long wait with

neither refreshments nor relief available. Fans were the only form of ventilation and each lady—indeed, even some of the few gentlemen—winnowed her face most violently.

Eventually, the appointed hour arrived and the two doors to the Presence Chamber opened. The clamour subsided and decorum once again ruled the crowded room. One-by-one, little groups assembled and shuffled toward a door ready to make its entrance, sponsors scrutinising and adjusting their *débutantes* and *vice versa*. As rank had no precedence in this situation, Lady Katherine and her escort patiently awaited their turn. Inching closer to the door, Lady Katherine listened intently for Lady Winifred's name to be announced if, indeed, she had entered the throne room before her.

Her turn arrived and still no sign of Winnie. Letting down her train and handing her second card to the official at the door, she waited for the lords-in-waiting to spread her train as the official handed the card to the Lord Chamberlain. The Throne Room was filled with an audience of imposing ladies and gentlemen clad in their finest regalia, there to witness the coming out of the country's finest young women.

Lady Katherine's heart was pounding fiercely when she set eyes upon Queen Victoria in her widow's weeds, for she was still mourning the passing of her beloved Albert some twenty-two years earlier. She sat in all her majesty in an ornately decorated chair on a slightly raised dais at the top of the room. Standing to her left were the Prince and Princess of Wales, and Prince Leopold and his wife Princess Helena.

'*Five curtseys,*' Lady Katherine thought and took as deep a breath as her corset would allow.

Once the preceding *débutante* and her sponsor had made their obeisances to the Royal Family, and withdrew through the opposite door, it was Lady Katherine's turn. She prayed she would curtsey as perfectly as her foregoer and, followed by the Duke and Duchess of Bramwell, tentatively took her first measured steps forward.

"Lady Katherine Agnes Stuart Delaney, the Right Honourable, the Countess of Chestermere," announced the Lord Chamberlain reading from the card.

All eyes turned to her and a gentle susurrations swept through the assembly. With her heavy satin train dragging along the carpet behind her, Lady Katherine's thoughts flew about her head in random succession as she took the few steps on the long, long road to the

dais. *Breathe...where's Winnie...glide gracefully...she must be delayed...step and face Her Majesty...is that a smirk of the Prince of Wales' face...the Queen is looking straight at me...is that a smile...weight on the right foot...circle left foot behind...bend both knees...sink to the ground...head slightly forward...don't overbalance...rise...*

Grateful that she didn't fall, Lady Katherine leaned in so that Queen Victoria could kiss her, as was the custom. Only peeresses or daughters of peers were awarded this honour. All other presentees kissed the Queen's hand instead. Queen Victoria *was* smiling—very slightly, but a smile nonetheless. Lady Katherine returned the compliment and moved to face the Prince of Wales.

Definitely a smirk, she thought, and a flirtatious one at that, and with Alexandra standing next to him!

She felt annoyed that he would be so bold...and disloyal. *Promises of love and faithfulness should always be kept, she asserted to herself, otherwise one shouldn't make them in the first place.*

Putting her disappointment in Prince Albert Edward aside, she proceeded with a deferential curtsey then moved along the line of Royalty with a deep curtsey to each with the Duke and Duchess behind her bowing and curtseying in unison.

Having reached the egress, the next *débutante* was announced. The attending lords-in-waiting carefully gathered up the two ladies' trains and, well-practised in this movement, slipped them over the ladies' left arm. Lady Katherine's ordeal was over once she stepped through that doorway; she had been presented to Her Majesty the Queen.

1883

Early August

Norwood House, Park Lane, London

After a fruitless search for Lady Winifred and her mother at Buckingham Palace, Lady Katherine and her entourage returned to their carriage and were soon on their way to Norwood House to rest and recover from the hot stuffiness of the rooms at the Palace and take some refreshments—the first of the day.

It had been a long arduous day filled with jostling and anxiety and it was a relief to be in the airy carriage approaching Park Lane. Pulling up alongside the front door, the Duchess was pleased to see the red carpet cascading down the steps and an awning erected over them, ready for receiving their guests.

The footmen jumped down and opened the carriage door to the Duke as he alighted and assisted the Duchess and countess then stood at attention on either side of the carpet. As they made their way up the steps the front door was opened by Thomson who found it difficult to suppress a smile.

“Your Grace,” he said performing a deep bow.

Upon entering the portal, they could see why he had that fatuous grin: all the servants, from housekeeper to scullery maid, valet to hall boy, and McPherson, formed a guard of honour for Lady Katherine, welcoming her with a curtsy or bow as she passed. Tired as she was, she was touched by the sincerity of their esteem and couldn't help but return the smiles bestowed upon her.

The Duke followed the countess and his wife then turned to address his staff.

“Thank you. On behalf of Lady Katherine, I thank you for making her presentation an unqualified success. And thank you in advance for this evening. I know how hard each

and every one of you has worked to make this house and this evening the best it can possibly be. Now rest, for tonight will be a long one for us all.”

The staff had, indeed, worked feverishly throughout the day putting the final touches to every detail. The floral decorations were fresh and perfect, every speck of dust had been rounded up and discarded, every brass and silver decoration had been polished to within an inch of its life.

Two rooms on the ground floor had been prepared as cloak rooms—one for receiving the gentlemen and the other for ladies and each would be staffed by a footman or maid to assist with any requirement a guest may have: tobacco, smelling salts, toilet water in various fragrances, a maid for sewing those inevitable snags and tears, cleaning and polishing apparatus for both body and apparel—all would be available at a moment’s notice.

On the first floor, the panelled walls between the main dining room and its adjacent withdrawing and smoking rooms had been folded back to make the ballroom as spacious as possible. Superfluous furniture was removed and the sumptuous Moroccan carpets had been rolled up and taken away to reveal the polished parquet floor to make dancing as pleasurable as possible. Two smaller rooms were set aside for tea and refreshments and for card-playing while another was prepared as a supper room.

And the *sine qua non* of any ball was an outstanding orchestra. The Duchess had not only procured an excellent quintet but had arranged it to be placed on the balcony over which a specially constructed hut had been erected. The door-frame to the balcony had been removed, allowing the orchestra to be heard and seen but not intrude upon the floorspace.

All was in readiness.

Lady Katherine made her way to her rooms on the third floor, weary and worried. Winifred had been acting quite uncharacteristically quiet of late and she wondered if her dear Winnie had succumbed to a dreadful ailment. She found McPherson already in her dressing room after scurrying up the service stairs.

“Och, my lady, you look quite forlorn,” McPherson commiserated. “Perhaps this may cheer my lady up,” she said offering a letter on a silver platter. “I’m thinking it’s from a lass in Dundee.”

Lady Katherine’s face brightened as she opened the envelope and read the contents. Within a few sentences, her shoulders slumped and her face dropped again.

“It’s from Sorcha,” she said dispiritedly, “she’s engaged to be married.”

“Och, that’s wonderful news, my lady. Is it not?”

No, not for Lady Katherine. While she knew that her dear Scottish cousin would wed one day, she had hoped that day would be far into the future. For a woman, marriage meant forfeiture of freedom and Lady Katherine would sorely miss being alone with her cousin. She was already feeling the loss.

“Lady Katherine...Sweetling...?”

“Hm? Oh, yes...yes, it is wonderful news,” Lady Katherine replied climbing out of her dejection; she should be happy for her cousin and not feeling so despondent. “The fellow is the son of one of Uncle Lachlan’s acquaintances. He’s in trade. Shipping. The antipodes. Quite successful, apparently,” she said, trying to sound happy but failing.

“When are the nuptials?”

“Nuptials? Doesn’t say. I shall write to Sorcha tomorrow wishing her the best of luck and much happiness.” Her demeanour belied the gladness of her words.

Rested and refreshed, the entire Norwood household staff, augmented by most of the staff from the Carlisle house, were dressed in their finest livery and primed to receive the scores of guests for the ball. It was customary for these guests to be met at the door by both *débutantes* and their sponsors before making their way to the rooms especially prepared for the event. The quintet was in position and tuning up; there’d be soft background music until all of those invited had arrived. Then, at the Duchess’ signal, the orchestra would strike up the first dance of the evening’s programme and the *débutantes* would take to the floor with their dance partners.

Half-past nine and the first guests were arriving but no sign of Winifred or her parents.

“What could have happened to her?” Lady Katherine’s plea to her aunt was whispered in worried tones between greeting their guests.

“Kateling, please do not worry. I’m sure she’ll be here soon. I’ve heard nothing to the contrary.”

“Can we send Thomson—?”

“My Sweetling, we cannot spare even a hall boy at the moment. Do not fret. We would have heard.”

In the kitchens, the activity was an organised shamble. Kitchen maids frantically chopping, cutting and arranging platters of savouries and sweets; Cook barking out commands; footmen scurrying about with trays of food, bumping into everyone like the balls in Arthur’s Bagatelle Table.

McPherson was as busy as the rest of the staff, preparing light sandwiches under Cook’s supervision when she caught Emma and one of the Carlisle maids huddled in a corner in obvious conspiracy.

“Emma, lass,” she called out above the din, “if you’ve naught to do you can help me. Come now.”

“Sorry, Fiona.” Emma apologised, pushing her way through the chaos, “Nellie was telling me that Lady Winifred was in a state, weeping her eyes out.”

“Was she now? And why would that be?”

It was a relief to all, but in particular to Lady Katherine, when the Carlisle landau finally pulled up at the red carpet.

“They’re here!” Lady Katherine announced relieved and overjoyed that her Winnie had not taken ill. But when Winifred alighted, Lady Katherine could see that all was not well with her. She appeared withdrawn and pale, and her eyes puffy.

The Marchioness and Marquess made their measured and dignified way up the few steps to the front door to be greeted amiably by the Duchess.

“Philomena, Alistair, welcome. We were becoming quite concerned.”

“Our sincerest apologies for being *en retardé*, Mary,” the Marchioness explained, kissing Mary on the cheek, “We’ve had a...well, I shall explain anon. We have wonderful news. Katherine, my dear, you look lovely.”

Lady Katherine curtsied and accepted the compliment, glancing at Winifred.

“Thank you, Lady Philomena.”

As Winifred’s parents made their stately way to their respective cloak rooms, Lady Katherine took Winifred aside and was appalled to see how distressed her Winnie was.

“What is the matter, Winnie? You look positively drained. Where were you? I was worried sick. You didn’t send a message. Are you ill? You look awful. Have you been crying?”

Winifred snorted at the verbal barrage and role-reversal but her smile was pained as she looked plaintively into Lady Katherine’s eyes. She was on the verge of tears.

“Kathy...” It was obvious Winifred wanted to explain but could not bring herself to voice the words that certainly would destroy her friend. “Kathy...I—”

“Winifred!” Her mother’s call startled Winifred, “Come along, dear, the ballroom awaits.”

Lady Winifred meekly complied leaving Lady Katherine to wonder what was causing her soulmate such distress.

It was well past ten o’clock when the first dance of the ball was proclaimed. The Marquess, as guest of honour, led Lady Katherine onto the floor as the Duke took to the floor with Lady Winifred. The orchestra struck up a lilting waltz and, with this, the ball began.

After one turn of the dancefloor by the two couples, most of the remaining guests joined in and before long, the floor was crowded with the synchronised rise and fall of elegance and wealth as it swirled around the room. Lady Katherine found her partner to be an excellent dancer and understood where Winifred obtained her grace but even the ease with which she found herself waltzing with Winifred’s father, Lady Katherine found it difficult to concentrate. Winifred’s obvious distress caused her much concern. The cheerfulness of Strauss imbued everyone except herself.

Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity of three-quarter time, the music stopped.

Lady Katherine had lost sight of Winifred on the crowded floor. With reluctance, she was led by her partner toward the sideline where her aunt was in animated conversation with the Marchioness and a well-dressed middle-aged gentleman whom she had not met before.

As Lady Katherine and the Marquess approached, the Marquess puffed out his chest and pasted on a welcoming smile, extending his hand in greeting.

“Lord Jeffrey! So glad you found the time, my dear fellow,” he clacked a little too stridently for Lady Katherine’s liking. What was this show all about?

“Lord Carlisle,” he returned coolly, clasping the offered hand. Turning his attention to the young countess, his attitude changed. “And you must be Winifred’s dear friend, the Lady Katherine,” Lord Jeffrey fawned. “I’ve heard so much about you,” and kissed her gloved hand.

She didn’t like him. Not one bit. Smarmy and unctuous. And insincere. Who was this ‘Lord Jeffrey’?

As the dancefloor crowd thinned, from the other end of the room the Duke smiled at Lady Winifred.

“You are an exceptional dancer, my dear Winifred,” he complimented as he hooked Lady Winifred’s arm in his. “Shall we?” he said, indicating his objective: his wife and niece, and took the first step to join them.

Winifred took in the group and balked.

“Your Grace...could we take a refreshment?”

“Of course, my dear. The punch is excellent.”

Winifred gave a worried glance over her shoulder to Lady Katherine as the Duke led her to the tearoom.

Lady Katherine’s attention was anywhere but with the smug fellow in front of her who seemed to be trying so hard to make a good impression—and failing.

“Katherine?” Mary said, drawing the countess’ attention back to the group. “This is Lord Jeffrey Morgan, son of Viscount Morgan. The viscount is attached to our Canadian

Consulate,” she explained and gave her niece a look that, put into words, would have said, ‘*Be nice*’.

“Pleased to meet you, Lord Jeffrey.” Lady Katherine wasn’t pleased at all.

“Have you heard?” Mary announced with sincere delight, “Winifred is to be married.”

Lady Katherine’s world stood still. Did she hear correctly? Winnie? Not Sorcha? Winnie?

“Winnie...?”

“Yes. To Lord Jeffrey. Philomena and Alistair will make the announcement shortly.”

“Yes,” interceded the Marchioness, “And he’s been appointed in his father’s place when the Viscount retires next year. The wedding will take place a month before that and then, off they go to Canada! *Merveilleux, n'est-ce pas?*”

Lady Katherine paled by the utter shock the news brought. All she could do was stare blankly in disbelief, lost for words, devoid of understanding how she could be so betrayed by the person who proclaimed undying love for her.

“Aunt Mary, Lady Philomena, my Lords, if you will excuse me. I’m feeling—” Lady Katherine broke away and left the group and the ballroom but the devastating news followed her.

Entering the sanctuary of her private rooms, Lady Katherine closed the door behind her, screwed her eyes shut and wept for herself, for her future, for being such a fool. It all made sense now. Winifred’s reticence, detachment, her lack of communication—

“Sweet Kateling, dinnae weep...”

McPherson’s soft voice was a welcomed balm for her distress, and her comforting embrace a haven from the desolation she was feeling.

“You know...?” Lady Katherine sobbed in her nanny’s shoulder.

“Aye. One of the Carlisle maids.”

“How could she?”

“I dinna think she had much choice, Sweetling.”

“We had made plans. Promises. I believed her when she told me she loved me.”

“I truly believe she did love you.”

The door to Lady Katherine’s room opened and Lady Winifred quietly closed it behind her.

“Kathy...” Winifred’s voice betrayed her desperation.

Lady Katherine wiped the treacherous tears away and turned to face the one who betrayed her.

“Kathy, please...let me explain—”

“How long have you known?”

“Papa—”

“How long?”

“Since the summer break. When I went home. I did everything to—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t. I did everything to get out of it.”

“You are so vocal, so headstrong. You could have come to me. We could have found a way. Lived together. Why agree to marry that...that...Why?”

“Papa would have lost everything! Everything! Even my brothers and my sister. They would have lost all. Papa made some very bad business choices. He put the family in debt. Deep debt. He was duped, Kathy. He was taken for a fool—”

“I know how that feels.”

“Kathy, please. This was the only way to save the family. I didn’t want to do it, Kathy, but I couldn’t...the family...This was the only way. Please understand...I still love you. We can—”

“What? Carry on as before? You’ll belong to him. He’ll demand his marital rights. I won’t share. I won’t be anyone’s...mistress. And you’ll be in Canada,” she scoffed. “You should have told me.”

“Kathy...please—”

A coldness gripped Lady Katherine’s heart.

“It’s ‘Katherine’. ‘Lady Katherine’. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Kathy...”

1883

The Next Day, August

Norwood House, Park Lane, Mayfair

Lady Katherine had had a dreadful, sleepless night, tossing and turning, ruminating on the distressing revelations of the ball and the events of the past three years. She had evaded Winifred for the rest of the night as well as that awful Lord Jeffrey. That had been the most devastating night of her life since...Her thoughts flew to her parents and *that* night and she missed them now more than ever. It had been three years of heartbreak, happiness and heartbreak again. How was she going to cope?

“Lady Katherine...Kateling...”

The gentle intonation of her pet name brought Lady Katherine out of her slumber. She had finally fallen asleep and it was now late morning. McPherson’s tender insistence, and the opening of the window shutters, brought the young woman to a reluctant consciousness.

“What time is it?” she mumbled as she stirred.

“Half ten, my lady. Did you sleep well?” McPherson asked cheerfully as she stood by her charge’s side, dressing gown at the ready.

“Eventually, Nanny, but not long enough.”

“Your aunt and uncle will be at late breakfast and have requested you join them.”

“Nanny, I’m not in the mood...”

“Come now, lass, you canna mope. You must be strong. You’ll see, this, too, will come to pass.” Her words were softly-spoken but McPherson was adamant that Lady Katherine not stew in sorrow; the poor girl had had enough of that already. And self-pity

was unbecoming. “Your bath is drawn and awaits your pleasure, my lady,” she added with a smile.

“That Liverpool debacle almost sent Carlisle to the wall,” The Duke confided to the Duchess as he turned the page of his newspaper at the breakfast table. “Him and his family.”

“It’s a sad state of affairs when one’s daughter has to be sold off to pay one’s debts,” the Duchess added joylessly as she sipped her coffee. Even though she thought of Winifred as mercurial and capricious, she had actually entertained the possibility of having her as a daughter-in-law. “And to someone so much older than she. He must be thirty-five if he’s a day.”

“Any word on him from the Cronos of Kensington?” the Duke asked flippantly, referring to the wealthy gossips who inhabited that area.

“Only tattles, dear,” Mary returned with a censoring look. “One claims that Lord Jeffrey has had much difficulty in finding a spouse, no matter how much ‘incentive’ was offered to the prospective family. Apparently, rumour has it that he can be quite brutish when inebriated.”

“The bounder!”

“I also overheard someone say that he was seen dallying about, on more than occasion, at nineteen Cleveland Street. They seemed quite shocked by that.” The Duchess looked to her husband for enlightenment.

The Duke was reluctant to elucidate but added, “A house that provides services to... males...em...practising...em...criminality upon youths.”

Mary was appalled. “Dear me! Poor Winifred if that is true.”

“I heard at the club that he would not be appointed as his father’s successor in Canada if he remained a bachelor. It appears that this proposed union will benefit both families. One saved from the brink of the financial ruin and the other from shame and ignominy.”

“Oh, I do feel for poor Winifred. I fear that little spark will be quelled in no time.”

Lady Katherine didn't mean to eavesdrop but the last sentence felt like a dagger had pierced her heart. As much as she felt betrayed by Winifred, she would never wish any harm to come to her.

“Good morning, Katherine!” The Duchess' greeting was far more chirpy than was warranted, given the preceding conversation.

“Good morning, Aunt. Uncle.”

“Katherine, do try the Welsh rabbit. It's still hot. Cook has outdone herself,” Mary announced.

“Uncle, I should like to return to Lilyfield Manor as soon as possible.”

“Ah! The Glorious Twelfth!” the Duke proclaimed jubilantly, referring to twelfth of August and the beginning of the shooting season. “Red grouse of the land, beware! Do you intend shooting, my dear?”

“No, uncle. I want to rest before beginning my term at Girton.”

“Very pleased to hear it. It is appalling to me that we set a date to go out and slaughter our wildlife.” The Duke was a man apart from those of his rank and gender. He abhorred wanton life-taking and had closed down all his fishing and hunting lodges, putting an end to the competitions his predecessors had set up. He only allowed his gamekeepers to cull the deer, fowl and fish on his estates and those animals were given to his tenant farmers or the villagers. Royalty had long since abandoned any hope that the Duke would invite them to visit and ‘murder’ his animals.

“What is your reason for returning to the country so early?” Mary asked, “There are many young men here who are anxious to call on you,” she stated, worried that her niece would shut herself away. Lady Katherine had, after all, received word that both her beloved cousin and cherished friend were to be wed and Mary feared that her dear niece would feel abandoned.

“Aunt, I want to finish my studies at Cambridge before any thought of marriage. You understand this, Uncle, do you not?”

The Duke hesitated, glancing from his niece to his wife.

“Katherine...em...your first duty is to God and it is His wish the human race be perpetuated—”

“It can perpetuate through someone else. I am going to Lilyfield and I am going to Cambridge with or without your consent or assistance.” Her petulance was borne of weariness brought on by a sleepless night, of rejection, of anger and betrayal. She vowed to herself, then and there, under the gape-mouthed astonishment of her aunt and uncle, that she would never let anyone tear apart her heart and soul ever again. She *would* go to Girton College; she would live by herself in the flat in Cambridge; she would assume control of her mother and father’s estates and enterprises; and she would carry out her duties as charitably and responsibly as possible. What she would not do ever again is give her heart to anyone.

Until that pivotal day in September, 1905.
