

THE RAVENSTONE HEIR

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Note:

In the spring of 2018 I offered the right to specify elements for a made-to-order story as the grand prize in a contest. This story is the result.

✿ Created with Vellum

*Written to order for Melinda Žvan with gratitude for her interest
in my work*

CHAPTER 1

Ravenstone Castle, Northumberland, 1827

Fletcher Graham's father left him a pittance, his name, and a thorny problem when the older man inconveniently fell into the River Blyth, took a chill, and died. Fletcher could ignore the pittance, having parlayed a much larger sum from his maternal grandmother into a growing commercial enterprise that left him far better off than his feckless relatives. The name, given as it was to a bastard his father might well have disowned, had been welcome. The problem, however, sat in sullen discontent across his grandfather's study, and threatened to drive him mad.

"I don't see why he didn't just come forward when grandfather died," Fletch's younger brother Gordon—the problem in question—grumbled. His complaint referred to their hitherto unknown cousin, the likely heir to the title Gordon had expected to inherit.

Their grandfather died in the summer of the ravages of age, and the estate's solicitors initiated a search for his oldest son, the heir apparent, who had left home thirty years

before. Their father, never one to allow inconvenient facts to interfere with his desires, moved into Ravenstone Castle and the role of earl with no fuss, happily ignoring efforts to find for his older brother. He even took over Grandfather's blasted bird, Hrafn, squawking in its cage in the corner of the old man's study. His brother Horace, he insisted, had died in the wilds of North America.

"The solicitors claim the heir didn't know. It took the investigators months to find him," Fletcher replied as he had the last four times Gordon made the same complaint.

"You shouldn't have fired our solicitors; they might have helped. You shouted at them, and then you sent them scurrying back to London." Gordon managed to make breach of manners sound like criminal activity.

In Fletcher's experience business progressed far more quickly when he dispensed with niceties. "They did nothing but grovel and propose delaying tactics—damned useless. My man in Manchester should arrive tomorrow," he responded.

"You mean you haven't frightened him off too like you did father's men? You frighten everyone," his brother glowered at him from the chair.

I wish I could frighten some sense into Gordon. If this stranger turns out to be Grandfather's true heir, my little brother will be out on his ear without a cent, and I'll have to pick up the pieces.

The incompetent family solicitors had arrived three days ago bearing letters from one of the most prominent law firms in London and the object they considered proof of his identity. Fletcher held it up to the sun streaming through the window and examined it again. He found no reason to doubt its authenticity. Horace Graham disappeared thirty years before, and he took the heir's intaglio signet ring with

him, the ring in Fletcher's hand. Mounted in gold, the onyx stone had been carved with the raven of the Grahams—the hrafn his father claimed came from their mythical Viking ancestors.

Fletcher had examined the ring under magnifiers and compared it to documents in the family archives. It matched in every detail. Even if a counterfeiter knew enough about them to get the bird right, he doubted they would notice that the object in his claw was not an acorn. It was, in fact, an image of the ring itself, the details so small only magnification revealed the truth.

"If you're not going to stop staring at that thing, I have better things to do. I'm going for a ride." Gordon heaved himself to his feet and strode to the door. He held it open momentarily and glowered at his brother who still studied at the ring. Neither man noticed the streak of orange fur that ran past Gordon's feet to hide behind the heavy drapes. "You should come, Fletch. A ride would do you good."

Fletcher glanced up at his brother, tempted. "Perhaps, but getting to the bottom of the correspondence waiting in my quarters will do me more. Business doesn't wait for family crises to resolve." Gordon slammed the door behind him, setting Hrafn off in a fit of squawks and feathers and causing Fletcher to wince.

"Well bird, I better get to it," he said. He glanced down at the ring and tossed it into a crystal bowl on grandfather's desk that still held pebbles worn smooth by the river and dragged home by their father on his daily walks. "Damned fool never could stay away from the river," he muttered as he let himself out.



THE ROOM FELL INTO SILENCE; even the raven sat hunched on his perch in the massive cage, momentarily at peace. It didn't last. The orange tabby behind the draperies poked cautiously out, peered up at the bird, and put a paw tentatively into the fabric. He followed it with another. Soon he had climbed almost level with the beady eyes of the raven; the bird glared back.

Perhaps the cat believed he could fly. Perhaps his claws began to flail in the drapes. Perhaps he thought the leap worth the risk. Whatever the case, his body sent the cage rocking when he hit it setting off a storm of feathers and squawks. He slid, pawing frantically for purchase, and dislodged the latch that held the door to the cage shut on his way down. He landed on the thick carpet unharmed and ran under a settee near the hearth.

When the cage door swung open the raven tilted his head to one side, eyed the cat's escape, and stepped to the frame of the cage door before gliding to the floor in pursuit. His beak fit under the settee, but the rest of him did not. After squawking in frustration for several moments he gave up.

The room provided little room for flight, and his circuit quickly ended when he perched on the pole above the windows. From there he surveyed the entire room, his beady eyes taking in every object until a shiny one caught his attention, and he glided to the desk. He walked across the blotter, turned his head so one black eye could examine the contents of the little crystal bowl, and began to root through the pebbles with familiarity. He picked up a pebble in his beak, dropped it, and latched on to the ring instead.

The cage rocked wildly when he flew into it like a shot, so wildly that the door slammed shut and the latch fell into place. Hrafn gave a raven-like shrug and dropped to the

bottom where a pile of pebbles identical to the ones in the bowl lay in a heap along one edge. He dropped the ring and used his beak to nudge it under the rocks before returning to his perch to glare balefully at the settee with the cat beneath it.

CHAPTER 2

Tea with her Aunt Effy gave Anna Hale an extra pleasure when she made her deliveries to Ravenstone Castle. Her aunt's position as cook had been a blessing to the entire family because it brought the opportunity to supply bread and sweets to the most prominent family in the shire; with it came the success of her father's bakery. The old earl loved Anna's apple tarts and had been kind to her. She missed him sorely. His son, gone so soon after, had been indifferent, but hadn't cancelled their business.

The women sat in the castle's tidy kitchen sipping tea and nibbling some particularly fine biscuits. "You mean Lord Gordon may not be the new earl?" Anna asked, astonished at Aunt Effie's news.

"The entire place has been in an uproar since some fancy gentlemen from London arrived three days ago mewling that they found the true heir in America of all heathenish places. Mr. Fletcher went into a rage, I can tell you. Called 'em incompetent. That one has no patience with folks that don't do their job."

Anna bit her lower lip. *Aunt Effy secured our contract to*

supply the castle in lieu of hiring kitchen assistants, but our quality has enabled us to retain it. I wonder if Fletcher Graham likes apple tarts. I know Lord Gordon does. What of the American, if indeed he proves to be the true heir? She sighed, knowing she could only control her own baking. "In that case aunt, we had best be about our own work," Anna said with a smile.

"Aye. I have dinner to prepare. Mr. Fletcher eats as much as Lord Gordon, and him still a boy," Aunt Effy laughed. "And thank you, Anna, for bringing that mouser of yours. The little pests have been a nuisance lately."

"From the looks of those horrid little bundles by the door, Rob Roy has done his job well already. Perhaps I'll take him home with me. We can't have vermin in the bakery." She looked around the kitchen and poked her head into the pantry, where she heard him last, but found no sign of the scourge of mice.

"Mayhap the little devil as after that bird again," her aunt said. "I found him in the office the last time you left him here, stalking around as if on the hunt."

"After the earl's great raven? That monster would rip him to shreds!" Anna replied. "I best go check on him." She gave her aunt a gentle hug and bid her adieu. "I'll see you tomorrow—it's ginger biscuit day," she told the older woman. She picked up her oversized delivery basket and set off.

When a tap on the office door elicited no response she gave it a shove until it moved on silent hinges, well cared for like all parts of Ravenstone. She pushed it open, relieved to find the room empty, but feeling like an intruder. "Rob Roy," she called softly, "Are you in here?"

The raven glared at her from his perch in the great iron cage. The old earl called him Hrafn, a Viking name for

ravens, and, he swore, an ancestral family one. Anna called him a great nasty beast. “You don’t intimidate me, you horrid bird,” she said.

Her eyes scanned the floor, and she peeked behind the desk and under the hems of the drapes, coming at last to the plush settee by the hearth. “Rob Roy?” she whispered. “Where are you?”

A faint mew answered her, and she dropped to her knees to reach under the settee. After a moment of fruitless groping her hand struck fur. She grabbed hold of a clump of it to drag the naughty creature out. Rob Roy glanced up at Hrafn and snuggled into Anna’s arms.

“Frightened you did he? The despicable bird?” She soothed her pet with one hand. Rob Roy snuggled into her arms. “Want me to hide you?” she asked him. Her lips twitched. The terror of mice wanted to be the scourge of birds, but cowered instead. When she put him into her basket, he rose up the side and poked his head out to gaze at the raven triumphantly.

Her amusement distracted her so that she almost bumped into the man coming through the door as she attempted to leave. He loomed over her, a full head and shoulders higher than her admittedly diminutive height, and glared down at her with eyes as black as the raven’s. She had never seen Fletcher Graham, but she had no doubt this was he, the previous earl’s bad-tempered bastard son.

Anna’s chin came up. He intimidated her as little as his ugly bird. “I am Anna Hale, your—”

“You aren’t my anything; this house is Lord Gordon’s, at least for now, and maids don’t belong here in the middle of the day. Make yourself useful by cleaning up the mess he left in the billiard room last night,” he growled. “And get

that creature out of the house,” he said pointing at Rob Roy and pushing past her.

She considered challenging him but decided against it; she didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize their business with the castle. Perhaps he would leave again, and she needn’t ever see him. She briefly considered ignoring his demand that the billiard room be cleaned, but that too might draw negative attention. She went to alert the housekeeper before returning home.



FLETCH COULDN’T GET the signet ring out of his mind. He had been a quarter of the way through his stack of business reports when it occurred to him he ought to have locked the blasted thing up. His American cousin would undoubtedly want it when he came to claim his estate and toss Gordon out. Fletch harbored little doubt the claim would prove legitimate, no matter how much convoluted paperwork the former solicitors tried to manufacture. They would have merely delayed the inevitable.

He lay business aside with a sigh and resolved again to return to Manchester as soon as he could manage it, dragging his little brother with him if he had to.

He expected to find the office as empty as he left it. Instead a cheeky woman with a cat—a damned orange cat—walked toward him as if she owned the place.

“I’m Anna Hale,” the chit said, as if he was supposed to know the name of every servant in his father’s house.

“Maids don’t belong here in the middle of the day,” he told her. A well-trained maid should know that; a man’s office should be sacrosanct. He sent her off to make herself

useful elsewhere. He hoped the new earl, whoever it turned out to be, had a word with his servants.

When she swept by him as if she thought herself a countess instead of a servant he saw what lay in her basket, yanked out his handkerchief and wiped his suddenly burning eyes. “Cat,” he muttered. The things always irritated his eyes.

The chit actually slammed the door behind her. *Not my problem*, he thought, once more determined to return to his comfortable bachelor quarters.

“Guawk.” Grandfather’s raven had an uncanny intelligent expression when he stared at a person. The cage, he noticed, was slightly askew on its hook. *Had it been that way before?*

“You don’t like cats either, do you?” he said straightening it.

He reached for the crystal bowl on his grandsire’s desk. *No ring*. He poked among the pebbles with one finger. There seemed to be fewer of them than there had been the week before. *I could swear I put the ring in here*. He lifted the papers he had left in the corner of the desk, the cup of pens, the lamp, and the edge of the blotter. *Nothing*.

“Guawk.” The raven looked as frustrated as Fletch who ran a hand through his hair, searching his memory. *I know I put it in that bowl on the desk when I left. There can be only one explanation. Someone took it*. And Fletcher knew just who that someone was.

He was out the door in a flash, but he saw no sign of a tiny blond woman with a basket over her arm. He let out a string of curses and began to shout the house down in search of a woman named Anna. The housekeeper and butler sent an army of servants to search the house, but swore they had no maid with that name.

A half-hour later Gordon returned from the stables to find the house in an uproar and cringed when he saw Fletch's face. To the boy's credit he didn't shrink away; Gordon never had let his brother's temper bully him, a fact Fletch held in the boy's favor.

"Why are you searching for this girl?"

"Intruder. Pretended to be a maid." *In honesty the girl had never claimed to be a maid, but if she wasn't, what was she doing here?*

"Odd that. Why do you want her?" Gordon asked.

"I don't want her. I want our cousin's signet ring. I left in that ridiculous bowl of pebbles on Grandfather's desk, and now it's gone. I saw her coming out right after it went missing," Fletch responded.

Gordon made a sour expression. "Damned ring again. I can't say I'm sorry it went missing." Fletcher glared at him, and he waved it away with a hand. "I know. The heir will expect to have it. Describe this girl you saw."

"Little chit. Came up to my cravat. Hair like spun silk, all golden." Gordon laughed out loud at the fanciful description and Fletch felt his face heat. "She had a cat with her," he finished, feeling foolish.

"Cat? Why didn't you say so? Probably apple-tart-Anna. Ask Mrs. Hale."

"Apple tart? And who is Mrs. Hale?"

"The cook of course. Anna is her niece. The cat's a famous mouser."

When Fletcher set out for the kitchen, Gordon followed. "I hope she brought apple tarts," he said with a sigh of rapture.

CHAPTER 3

N ightfall and Gordon's insistence that he wait delayed Fletch's pursuit until the following morning. "Mr. Hale runs a respectable business. You can't go blundering in like an ox and waking the entire village," the boy had insisted.

Fletch remained skeptical how "respectable" the Hales might be, in spite of the assurances of their butler and housekeeper that "Miss Anna" would never do something as horrid as steal. The image Gordon conjured of him "blundering in like an ox," caught his attention, however.

"I am not an ox," he ground out in response.

"Of course not. I didn't say you were. I said you oughtn't to act like one." Fletch let go of the old anger that had seized him. Gordon couldn't know boys in public school had taunted him as "Graham's Great Ox," because of his size when they weren't going on about his birth. His brother meant nothing by his comment other than a call to treat the village with respect. He had waited until morning.

The delay and the ride to Little Ilderdale cooled the white heat of his outrage, but did little to soften his deter-

mination to confront the woman he believed had his cousin's signet ring. He found the place easily enough. A building in the center of the village's commercial street had a finely painted sign that proclaimed *Hale Family Fine Baked Goods*. The sign and the line of people stringing out the door and down the street were enough to draw anyone's attention.

While Fletch secured his horse, he took in the façade. The building and sign appeared well-kept and gave every sign of a prosperous enterprise. *Prosperity comes easy enough when you supplement your trade with thievery*, he grumbled to himself, striding to the door.

"You can't just barge to the front! Who do—" A man near the door stopped his complaint when he took a good look at Fletcher who couldn't be certain whether the fellow recognized him as the earl's son or simply fell back under the force of his frown.

"What is all this?" he asked waving a hand to take in the line, the crowd, and the bakery.

An elderly woman spoke up. "It's ginger biscuit day; everyone knows that." A flash of recognition lit her eyes. "At least them as stay hereabouts do. Word mightn't reach Manchester."

Fletch acknowledged the hit with a nod of his head. "I should think not. Since I'm not here for the ginger biscuits, might I pass by?" Several people grudgingly moved to the side so his great bulk could go through the door.

As soon as he stepped inside a waft of ginger—sweet, with a hint of cinnamon and cloves—overwhelmed his senses and momentarily brought him to a halt. *Some folks I know would stand in line for the scent alone*, he thought. He had to shake his head to clear it.

Resentful glares from those who stood at the front of the

line marked his progress to the counter. "I've come to see Anna Hale," he said without preamble.

"I am William Hale. Who might you be to demand to see my daughter?" the man behind the counter retorted, narrowing his eyes. Of middle years with greying hair, the man wore a clean apron over what appeared to Fletcher's expert eyes to be a first quality shirt and cravat. Shelves full of fresh baked bread and pastries lined the wall behind him.

No, the Hale family does not lack for money. "Fletcher Graham of Ravenstone," he replied without hesitation. He didn't often invoke the family name, but it ought to matter at least in Little Ilderdale.

The eyes softened, but only a bit. "Anna handles our contract with the castle, but you'll have to wait."

Irritation welled. No business associate in Fletcher's world would dare tell him he had to wait. A snicker behind him, caught his attention, and he turned around.

The skinny man who was third in line gave him a cheeky grin. "Ginger biscuits first guvner," he said.

Fletcher glared back at William Hale. "My business is important; it will take but a moment," he snarled. *Unless I have to shake the truth out of her.*

Hale's mouth tightened, but he didn't reply. He took three steps and peered back into the kitchen, returned to the counter, and smiled at the crowd. "It won't be long." He spoke to the crowd, but Fletch got the message.

Interrogating "Miss Anna" in front of half the village seemed like a bad plan even to Fletch. He breathed in deeply and gave in. "Where would you have me wait?" he asked.

Soon he was seated at a tiny table a dozen feet from the counter and the people waiting in line. A young lad

summoned from the kitchen brought him a steaming mug of tea, one far finer than the pottery he drank it from.

Hale hadn't lied. Before very long the woman he sought came out of the kitchen carrying a heavy tray of ginger biscuits. She smiled at the first man in line, one old enough to be her grandfather, and the man seemed to grow taller under the light of that smile. Hale quickly wrapped a biscuit, took the man's coin, and whispered something in his daughter's ear.

Anna Hale flicked a troubled glance at Fletch before responding to a friendly greeting from the next in line and disappearing back into the kitchen. Moments later the lad reappeared with a plate containing three warm biscuits for Fletch. He bit into the first and closed his eyes to savor the heaven unleashed in his mouth. The woman had talent, he'd give her that. He popped the entire rest of the biscuit into his mouth just as she came back out with another tray. His overfull mouth watered, but whether at the delight it contained or the sight of Anna Hale's slender form, bright smile, and warmth, he couldn't say.

Again she left, but Fletcher minded the wait less. Two more trays and half-hour later, the shop emptied. He sat back with his legs stretched out in front and crossed at the ankles and watched through the kitchen door while she washed her hands and began to untie her apron. He didn't mind the wait one whit. Hale for his part, counted the till.

Fletch studied her when she finally walked toward him, noticing how her simple day dress flattered both her form and coloring. His long experience in the cloth trade told him the fabric surpassed any that a servant might wear by a far distance, and he chastised himself for ever mistaking the matter when he first saw her. The dress might be simple and suitable for work, but it wasn't shabby.

"You wished to speak with me?" Anna asked. Her eyes had a hint of fear. Guilt will cause fear; he hardened his heart.

"Kindly sit Miss Hale. We have a problem."

When she did, her eyes widened in what he could only call alarm. "Has our work be deficient in some way?" she asked. "We will make whatever adjustments the castle requires," she went on earnestly. Her hands, he noted, clenched tightly together on the tabletop.

He glanced down at the crumbs on his plate. Deficient? Hardly! They had been the best ginger biscuits he had ever eaten. He shook his head. "This isn't about your work, madam, but about your behavior."

The chit just relaxed! She cares about her business, but not her person? He frowned at her, an expression known to reduce his clerks to tears.

"Mr. Graham your fierce expression does not intimidate me. Kindly tell me what you think I've done, and we will clear up the problem," she said.

Grudgingly impressed with her no-nonsense attitude, Fletch spit it out. "You stole something that belongs to my family."

"I beg your pardon!" Outrage tightened every line of her face and shoulders. She glared back at him. "I have done no such thing. What exactly has your family misplaced?"

Misplaced? Did I? He had been positive he had not misjudged where he put the ring, but her insistence rattled him.

"When I left my grandfather's office yesterday, I put a ring in a bowl on the desk. When I came back some thirty minutes or more later, I encountered you leaving the room. The ring was gone."

Her eyes flew open wide. "Oh my. I can see why you

thought I might know what happened.” She did not, he noted, say *you think I took it*. Her lips pursed in thought. He did not interrupt, too fascinated by the sight when her pink tongue darted out to lick her lower lip, flicking at something that looked suspiciously like sugar in the corner.

“I saw no sign of anyone leaving the room when I came up the hallway,” she said at last, “and no one occupied the room when I went in to fetch Rob Roy.”

“Who is Rob Roy?” he asked.

Her face lit up, and the smile Fletch had so admired when she flashed it to customers turned its power on him. “My cat, fierce mouser and terror of ravens, or so he would like to believe. I think that great horrid bird terrifies him, but he likes to tease it when it is safely in its cage.”

“Your cat ran free in the office?” he demanded.

“It did,” she replied.

“Do you think it might have climbed up on the desk? I saw no sign of it, but—” he shrugged.

“He likes to climb, so I suppose he might have. I found him hiding under the settee, however,” she explained.

Fletch studied the crumb littered plate. *If this woman is a liar she’s a damned good one*. He came to a decision. “Fetch your cat, Miss Hale. We’re going to take another look at the scene of the crime.”

CHAPTER 4

Anna cast a resentful glare at Fletcher Graham who insisted on taking the reins of her wagon. She would much rather have walked, the distance to the castle being slight and the seat of the cart being miserably uncomfortable. The brute hadn't asked. He simply tied his horse behind, put Rob Roy in his box in the wagon's bed, grabbed her waist in his two big hands, and sat her unceremoniously next to him. His titled relatives treated her with considerably less high-handedness than this sprig off the Graham tree.

She clamped her jaws shut for a full five minutes. She had planned to deliver biscuits to the castle in any case, or she would have told the pushing male that he could find the ring on his own.

"What makes this ring so blasted important? Is it horribly valuable?" she asked at last when they cleared the village streets.

"Not valuable in itself. Important nonetheless." He kept his eyes forward and let more minutes pass. "If that cat of

yours swallowed it, he best pass it in a day or I'll have it out one way or another."

"That's ludicrous! He would not eat a ring. Have you never owned a cat?" she demanded.

"No and I don't plan to. The damned creatures make me itch," he spat.

"You probably make them itch as well," she mumbled under her breath. "And you didn't answer my question. What makes the ring important?"

He shot a glance at her, but didn't answer.

"Does it have to do with the mysterious heir?" she asked reasonably enough.

"Who told you that?" he demanded.

"Servants always know; soon the village will as well." At his ferocious scowl she held up a hand. "Not from me. You can no more stop gossip than you can stop the Blyth from flowing."

He ran one hand through the thick black hair in frustration. "That's why I don't have servants," he said.

"None?" He had piqued her curiosity.

"My secretary doubles as a butler. A woman comes in to clean," he said before he broke off in irritation. "If you know that much you may as well know about the ring. It is the Graham heir's ring, well over a hundred years old. It disappeared with my father's brother Horace thirty years ago."

Anna blinked fast. She could see his problem. "It was used to identify the American heir." He nodded to acknowledge her insight. She swallowed, hesitating on the next bit, but plunged in anyway. "Have you considered that someone might prefer to destroy it?"

He stopped the cart. "Are you accusing my brother of dishonesty?" he growled, glaring down at her.

"Goodness no. Lord Gordon wouldn't do that. He loves

the estate, though, and people like him. Perhaps someone wishes to keep him here.”

His brow furrowed. “Possible,” he said, “But I can’t think who.” The determined expression returned. “Besides, you are the only person who went into that room.”

“The only one we know about,” she retorted. As they neared Ravenstone she studied his profile. Upon a close examination he appeared sad and slightly harassed rather than ferocious. She counted his fierce defense of his brother, who was, after all, still a boy, in his favor. The young man would need his brother’s help if the mysterious heir forced him to leave Ravenstone.

She had little time to reflect on it. He pulled the wagon to the stable, called for a groom, and reached up to lift her down. He picked up the box with the cat and cupped her elbow to lead her to the house.

“Wait!” she said, yanking away. She reached into the wagon and pulled out a basket covered with a cloth. She answered his questioning frown. “Ginger biscuits,” she said lifting the basket.

He rolled his eyes and hurried her inside.



I HAVE a crisis on my hands, and the chit worries over her ginger biscuits. Fletch kept one hand clamped on her elbow and urged her toward his grandfather’s office until she insisted on stopping a footman to carry her basket to the kitchen. I don’t object to getting rid of the benighted basket, but couldn’t she have offered me one first? He yanked her forward, irritated at his own weakness, and shut them in the office.

Fletch put the box with the cat in the corner of the room, pulled out the old shawl Anna had used to make a

bed, covered the top, and lay books over two corners to keep the shawl in place. All the while, Anna stood in the center of the room, slowly turning in a circle as though she cataloged every corner of the room.

“Where did you find the damned feline?” he demanded, drawing a frown. “If you’re going to take offense at my language, we’ll never finish this.”

She rolled her eyes and meandered to the settee where she dropped to her knees and leaned over to look beneath it. “Under here,” she said, her voice muffled where she peered under the thing.

Momentarily immobilized by the view of her posterior, Fletch could only stare.

“I see nothing there,” she said, rising to her knees.

“It would make more sense to lift it up, don’t you think?” he responded, setting action to words. He easily lifted one end of the settee so they both had a clear view of the floor underneath. No ring.

The woman looked crestfallen. She appeared to honestly expect to discover that her cat had dropped the signet in his lair. “He comes to irritate your beastly raven, I understand. Perhaps...” She circled the cage but found no ring on the carpet.

“He would have had to have climbed onto the desk to get it. I see no footprints,” Fletch mused.

“True. Perhaps this carpet rubbed his paws clean before he did.” She repeated the search Fletch had done the day before, lifting and moving every object on the desk to no avail. “He might have dropped it though,” she said, leaning down to look.

Fletch joined her and the two of them circled the desk on hands and knees, patting the floor as if the ring might not be easily visible in the carpet pattern. He came around

the back of the desk to find her coming around the other side. She scooted under the desk in the space where the chair usually went, and Fletch sat back on his heels, waiting.

You really ought not ogle a woman's derriere, Fletcher Graham, he chided himself to no avail. His mind went begging, and it occurred to him her hair had been equally unforgettable.

She startled him out of his reverie when she spoke. "I see something."

"The ring?" he asked.

"I can't tell. It is over in the corner behind the drawers."

Fletch pushed in next to her, his hip next to hers. *This whole debacle is not wise* was his last coherent thought. The scent of cinnamon and ginger made custard of his wayward thoughts.

"Do you see it?" she asked, pointing to her right, on her other side.

Fletch leaned over, his head brushing hers at the same time. "I see something shiny, but it isn't very big. Can you reach it?"

"I've been trying, but it—" She stretched her arm into the awkward spot, forcing her body against his at the same time and unleashing an entirely inappropriate reaction. "Oh," she whispered, breathless from her exertion. "It's only a stray pen nib." She sagged and began to back out. The sound of the door opening stopped her in her tracks; Fletch put one hand on her arm to keep her there.

"He isn't here! That footman said my brother came in just a bit ago. Perhaps you'd care to wait, while I fetch him?" Gordon sounded genuinely puzzled.

Another voice responded. Fletch couldn't make out the words, but he knew the voice well. It belonged to Amos Walker, his solicitor from Manchester, a Methodist of

abstemious habits, whom Fletch knew to be generally disapproving of the upper classes. Fletch cursed silently. Finding his employer under the desk with a woman Walker would draw the worst possible conclusion.

“Make yourself comfortable in that case,” Gordon said.

There was nothing for it. They couldn’t stay hidden behind—not to mention under—the desk for long. *I’ll have to brazen it out.*

“I have a better idea,” Gordon said before he could rise. “Let me write a note and have the footman deliver it. I can explain the situation while we wait.”

He was around the desk before Fletcher could do much more than back out. His brother had no warning and blurted out the first thing that came to his mind.

“I say, Anna! What are you doing under the desk with Fletch?”

CHAPTER 5

Anna's face burned, and she bounced her forehead off the carpet, mortified. She wanted to crawl further into her hiding place, but knew that was not possible. Fletcher Graham, the louse, backed out.

"Miss Hale kindly offered to help me search for the missing object." His voice, deeper than before, rumbled through her and echoed in her rib cage. She felt his hand grab one elbow and tug until she came out and faced his brother.

"Hello, Lord Gordon," she said, peering sheepishly at the kind-hearted young man. "We didn't have any luck." The stranger on the settee frowned back at her.

"Amos, thank you for responding to my request so quickly," Fletcher Graham said. The stranger didn't soften his expression. Her tormenter put her hand over his arm when she failed to take it and escorted her toward the settee as if they were guests at a tea rather than partners in a criminal investigation. She longed to ask him to explain his actions, but she plastered a smile on her face instead.

Perhaps if she was polite she could escape back to the bakery.

"Miss Hale, may I present Mr. Amos Walker, my solicitor?" Graham said, explaining that much. "Amos, this is Miss Hale, a, ah, neighbor."

Mr. Walker rose at their approach and gave a proper bow. He did not smile, nor did he speak. Graham, the rat, gestured Anna to the settee next to the glowering Walker, and pulled up a chair. "Sit with us, Gordon, and help me explain our situation to Walker." When Gordon hesitated, he went on, "Miss Hale already comprehends our problem."

In his typical fashion, Fletcher did so, spelling out in blunt terms their father's rush to take the title and the search for his older brother. He retrieved a wad of papers from the desk and showed them to Walker saying, "This came several days ago."

Anna sat rigid in place while Walker read the official notice, avoiding Gordon's eyes only to find his brother staring at her intently. She felt like an intruder in this family drama.

"And the proof they refer to?" Walker spoke for the first time.

"My uncle's signet ring, the hereditary heir's ring, disappeared with him thirty years ago. They provided it as proof."

"Have you verified it?" The solicitor asked.

"Fletch did. He matched it to sealed documents in the family archives," Gordon put in.

"Indeed the ring was authentic," Fletcher Graham said. Anna felt downhearted. If Rob Roy destroyed the thing it would be a great pity.

"You say *was*?" Amos asked.

Fletcher glanced nervously at Anna. "The ring has

disappeared. I left it on the desk, and it is gone. We believe Miss Hale's cat may have misplaced it."

Gordon's bark of laughter broke through the tension. "Your cat, Anna? The ferocious mouser? That's famous."

Amos Walker looked less amused.

"We were searching for it when you arrived, Mr. Walker," Anna said.

Walker examined Anna as carefully as he might a problematic legal document, turned to Fletcher, and pursed his lips. "May I assume this woman is your betrothed?"

Anna swallowed a gasp, momentarily unable to breathe well enough to protest. Fletcher Graham recovered more quickly. "Why yes," he said, "How clever of you to guess." His eyes pleaded with Anna to go along.

She did, all the while imagining ways she could make him pay for it. Gordon for his part narrowed his eyes at his brother once the initial surprise wore off. When Fletcher ignored him, he raised one brow to Anna as if to ask a question. She pretended not to notice, absorbed in Fletcher's next words to Walker.

"I asked you here for two reasons, Amos. One, of course is to get your opinion on these papers."

Walker blinked. "The papers appear to be in order. If, as you say, this ring is genuine, and are prepared to swear to it, I see no reason to doubt that this American, Daniel Graham, is the proper heir and owner of the title, the castle, and whatever entailed estate goes with it."

"As I believed. The other reason I asked you here is to ask advice and assistance for my brother. He has a small portion from his mother's marriage settlements, but little else."

Anna's heart went out to Gordon, who looked a bit lost, but not shocked. He and his brother must have been

prepared for this outcome. When a scratch at the door interrupted the conversation, Gordon shrugged. "I ordered a tea tray," he said.

Fletcher seemed relieved by the interruption. Walker went to lay out the legal papers on the desk, and Anna took the opportunity to hiss, "Betrothed? Are you mad?"

"Trust me for a bit," he whispered back, and then their opportunity evaporated.



ANNA HALE SERVED tea with the well-trained grace of a lady. Fletcher admired the way her gentle hands passed a cup to Amos and another to Gordon with a smile he might have called motherly. He barely had time to chide himself for that bit of nonsense when she handed one to him. Her eyes shot daggers in his direction rather than any kind of smile; he would have work to do digging out of the hole he put them in.

He needed to explain to Anna his fears that Walker's disapproval of upper class behavior might cause him to refuse the request Fletch called him here to make. Gordon needed a profession. Explanations would have to wait. He just hoped she didn't upset the applecart. He also hoped her ginger biscuits would soften old Walker a bit.

"As I was saying, my brother will have to make his way in the world," he began again.

"Surely there is time for that!" Anna interrupted. He turned with irritation in his heart, but something in the compassion she directed at his brother brought him up short. Gordon looked utterly defeated. Anna handed him another biscuit.

"Fletch is right, Anna," Gordon said between nibbles. "If

this American cousin takes it all, I'll have to find a way to support myself."

Fletch nodded. He hated seeing the boy so down, but the sooner they found a way forward for him the better. "We discussed various roles he might take in my own businesses, but neither the cloth trade nor shipping appeals to him."

"I haven't your head for business, that's certain," Gordon murmured.

"I thought perhaps the law might do," Fletch told them, ignoring his brother's wide-eyed shock, and Anna's frown. He had hoped a surprise attack might be effective. "I know you recently lost two of your clerks."

Amos cleared his throat, and glanced from brother to brother. "Mr. Graham, your brother is gentleman," he said.

That makes one of us—but it won't feed the boy, give him pride, or make a man out of him either. "I fail to see the relevance," he said out loud.

"My clerks come from gentry, but Lord Gordon has a university education in front of him. He might better set his mind on the bar."

"A barrister, Mr. Walker?" Gordon asked. "Don't they clerk?"

"You'll want some university study and then apprenticeship at the Inns of Court, not some provincial solicitor's office."

"You're sharper than any fancy London firm I ever approached, Walker," Fletch growled. "I want him to learn from the best."

Walker bit his lower lip. "Might be uncomfortable all around, but it could be done."

"No." Gordon's denial came out loud and emphatic. The other three around the tea tray stared at him, Anna looking sympathetic and Walker offended. Fletch's mouth drew into

a tight line. He wanted to shake sense into the boy. Insulting Walker would not help their cause.

"I mean no I don't want to impose on Mr. Walker's generous offer. I don't want the bar either. I haven't any affinity for the law. Hell, Fletch, I've been trying to tell you. I've had enough of the university—all those prosing fellows and books. It isn't for me." He reddened and murmured, "Sorry for my language, Anna."

"How precisely do you plan to earn your living, Gordon, when all this goes away?" Fletch gestured as if to encompass not just the office but the earldom as well.

"Been considering that. I don't need Grandfather's title. Don't need this drafty pile of stone either. That was father's dream, not mine. I'll miss the land though. The people and the land, yes."

Fletcher tried to sort through his brother's words. *The estate encompasses all of that. What is the stripling thinking?*

"I know more about the farms, the woods, and the wildlife than our esteemed father ever did, Fletch. I would make someone a good steward. I can look for a position, maybe as an assistant first to learn the business."

Steward. Someone else's steward. Respect dawned in Fletch's heart, and hope as well.

"Do you mean that?" Anna asked, reaching over to touch Gordon's hand. "Do you think you could find such a position?"

Gordon shrugged. "I'll need help with that, but Father had friends, and Fletch's contacts might lead to something." He peered at his brother hopefully.

Fletch found himself smiling back. He did indeed know people who might help; a few of them owed him favors. The boy showed every sign of maturing.

From the look on Walker's face, he was impressed as

well. “Well said, my lord. Have to earn your bread one way or another.” He cleared his throat again, a sign Fletch knew meant he had another pronouncement to make. “That settled, I’d like to study this paperwork a bit more carefully. There may be a loophole we’ve overlooked.” He rose and picked up the sheaf of paper. He peered at Anna under bushy eyebrows. “Perhaps you’d like to take your betrothed for a walk in the garden while I do.”

CHAPTER 6

Anna bobbed her head when she felt her cheeks heat. She prayed the little man believed her to be overcome with demure innocence rather than what she actually felt—outrage at the highhanded scoundrel who took her hand in his and said, “Excellent notion Walker.” Gordon’s dancing eyes didn’t help.

Fletcher Graham will pay for this. A quick glance told her he wasn’t as sure of himself as he sounded. It amused her to see him squirm; she planned to make him grovel. Her heart had softened toward him when she realized how much he cared for his younger brother. Lord Gordon could be utterly lost between his father and grandfather’s deaths and the unexpected appearance of another heir, but Fletcher wouldn’t let him flounder. Her heart had softened, but not enough to tolerate this betrothal business; she looked forward to getting him alone.

Fletcher tugged her toward the door, but a loud yowl made her pull back. “Rob Roy!” she cried.

He hesitated before relaxing his hold. “Very well. We probably should find a more secure place to confine the

blasted feline. If he swallowed that ring, he may give it back in day or so.”

Anna gasped. If Rob Roy accidentally swallowed the ring, it could make him ill or worse. If it got stuck it might kill him. She ran to the box and ripped off the shawl confining him. The cat lunged over the side and ran past her to the drapery before she could grab him. Lord Gordon ran after him, but Rob Roy slipped under the heavy drapes. *At least he's still healthy enough.*

Gordon kneeled to peer under the hem, and his brother strode to stand above him. “The vermin has climbed the curtains,” Fletcher spat just as the cat hissed at Hrafn. The raven for his part dropped his head, eyed the cat with one black eye, and squawked loudly.

“Get the creature, Graham. I can’t work with this racket,” Walker demanded.

Fletch grabbed Rob Roy around his middle and pulled, but the cat clung tenaciously. Anna started to warn him, but he had already dislodged one paw and pulled on the other. When he yelped in pain she could only think the lout deserved it.

“Let me, Mr. Graham,” she said pushing his bleeding hand away, and running soothing fingers over the cat’s back.

“That beast scratched me!” Fletcher shouted. She looked down to see Rob Roy had done a thorough job of it.

“Any creature will defend itself when manhandled,” she retorted, gently coaxing the cat from the drapery. Soon she cuddled him close. “I apologize for the inconvenience, Mr. Walker; we will leave you in peace.”

She raised her chin and paraded, cat in arms, toward the door with as much dignity as she could manage. Fletcher followed, wrapping a handkerchief around his bleeding

hand and grumbling; she heard Gordon's chuckle trailing behind them.

As soon as the door closed behind them she spun on her supposed fiancé and opened her mouth to lay into him. He put his unscratched hand to her lips, tipped his head toward the door, and whispered, "Not yet; not here."

He turned to his brother. "Gordon, can you take the terror of ravens here and lock him in the pantry?"

"No," Anna said, drawing a glower from the arrogant man. She handed the cat to Gordon, who scratched his ears, and gentled him. "Put him in the cellar. He finished clearing the pantry yesterday."

Gordon grinned. "I'll check with Mrs. Hale. Anywhere but the wine cellar. Can't have him upending bottles." He trooped off with a suddenly placid Rob Roy.

Now that the moment had come, Anna found herself staring after the boy, unable to look Fletcher Graham in the face. *Betrothed? How are we going to fix this?*

"Miss Hale, shall we find a private place where you can give me that ferocious scold you are holding in before you explode?" His deep voice, lightly laced with amusement, rumbled through her chest, and caused heat to pool in her belly.

"I should think we had enough time in a 'private place,'" she retorted, but she followed him to an empty parlor.

"Haven't you caused enough of a disaster, Mr. Graham? What are you going to do about it?" she demanded, carefully pushing the door open as wide as she could.

His sheepish expression when she turned to look surprised her out of her irritation. The blood seeping through his handkerchief distracted her entirely. She reached instinctively to pull his good hand away and take the injured one in hers. "Rob Roy outdid himself this time.

Those scratches are deep,” she said. “We need to see to them before we talk. May I suggest the kitchen?”

“I don’t relish hearing your dressing down in front of servants,” he said trying to pull his hand back. She held it firmly examining the scratches.

“This time of day, only my aunt will be there. She’ll hear about our betrothal soon enough, and I’d like to correct the idea as soon as we can.”

“How would she know?” he demanded.

“Servants always know these things, Mr. Graham, and what the servants know, the village knows. I have a business to protect; you can appreciate that, can’t you.”

Something warm and appreciative in his expression made her long to lean toward him. She pulled herself upright, wrapped the cloth around his wounds and led him to the kitchen. She might have called the manner in which he followed as “meek,” but that would be a ridiculous way to describe Fletcher Graham. Yet, with every step they took, she lost her grip on her righteous indignation and something much more agreeable wrapped itself around her instead.



A HALF HOUR later Fletch sat with a neatly bandaged hand and watched Anna lean toward her aunt to again assure her that she was not actually affianced to the old earl’s bastard grandson, the one with his hands deep in the ungentlemanly pursuit of commerce. Of course she didn’t say those words. She merely patted the woman’s hands in that gentle way she had and assured the woman she was not betrothed.

The rest of it hung in Fletch’s heart, however. It always had. When Gordon prodded him about why he had never

married, he'd said he never found a woman he wanted. It was true enough. His background and education warred with his business life. He'd never met a woman among business associates with enough of the sort of conversation his background demanded. The delicate flowers of the upper classes could stomach neither his parentage nor his chosen pursuits.

No, he'd never met a woman who suited him. Until now. *What did Anna say? 'I have a business to protect.' She might just understand.* He'd like to find out, if he could get a word in edgewise between the two women who cooed over each other.

"We'll simply have to correct the misunderstanding," Anna said to Mrs. Hale.

"Do you want Amos Walker think I'm a liar?" Fletch demanded, taking devilish delight in her startled gasp.

"You did lie though," she sputtered.

What has she said? *Any creature will defend itself when manhandled. Is that what I did to her? I have much to repent.*

He shrugged. "He's the one who assumed it. I let merely allowed him to think it. The damage is done, though. We'll have to carry on with it at least until he leaves."

Her frown deepened. "Will it hurt your business terribly?"

He paid Amos Walker enough to mitigate the man's moral outrage. Now that the situation with Gordon was clarified Walker's help wouldn't be needed anyway. Anna didn't have to know that, and Fletch couldn't resist stretching out their so-called betrothal a bit longer.

"It might," he said as mournfully as he could manage. "What about yours?" He peered at her under his lashes.

Aunt Effie spoke up. "Anna, assuming word reaches the village, and it will, people might be pleased for you,

marrying into the big house.” She darted a glance at Fletch and continued, “If they discover it was all a hum, they’ll be disappointed for certain. Your reputation will be in shreds, and it will reflect on your father.”

Anna’s shoulders sagged. He suspected her concentrated frown meant she tossed around for an argument and found none.

“Miss Hale, I fear I’ve put you in a bad position. I will not abandon you to gossip.”

“Don’t you dare make me an offer now out of some misguided sense of honor, Fletcher Graham,” she exclaimed. “Neither your business nor mine requires that.”

She threw him into a jumble. *Misguided? No. Of course not. I wasn’t going to— Was I?*

He reached over and took her hand. The graceful fingers he had so admired when she served tea curved over his, but her eyes had the look of a trapped rabbit. He kissed the lovely fingers. “Of course not, Miss Hale. We hardly know each other.” *That’s true enough.* However, the need to get better acquainted with this woman had a firm grip on him. “I was merely going to suggest we maintain the charade a bit longer. You may cry off—find we will not suit after all—in due time when I return to Manchester.”

“Charade,” she repeated cautiously. She did not, he noticed, pull her hand from his.

“At least until Walker leaves and the new heir arrives. He’ll give the shire much more excitement, and we can quietly part ways.”

He didn’t realize how badly he wanted her to agree until she whispered, “Yes. I’ll do it—but what about my father?”

He thought quickly. “Could he keep a secret from the neighbors?”

Mrs. Hale laughed heartily. “Never! You best keep him in

the dark, Anna. You can explain things to him if you decide to cry off as Mr. Graham says.”

Anna bit her lower lip—one Fletch found rather luscious looking—and he feared she would refuse the entire sham betrothal. When she agreed to keep her father in the dark for now, he almost sighed in relief.

“Then permit me to begin acting as your betrothed ought,” he said rising and pulling her up with him. “May I escort you home, Miss Hale? Or should I call you Anna?”

CHAPTER 7

Anna's father had been in the vicar's parlor when he discovered his daughter had been found in a compromising situation with the elder son of the former earl. The third footman's cousin had been at Ravenstone and hurried back to the village, the proud bearer of the momentous news. The news did not please William Hale.

Whatever Graham—or Fletch as he insisted she call him—said to Papa behind closed doors, Papa appeared mollified, if not happy about the supposed engagement.

Her father allowed them a few moments alone in the parlor of the Hale's snug little house on the edge of the village, and for the privacy, at least, she had been grateful. She had words for the overbearing brute.

"You had no business shutting the door to me," she spat as soon as they were alone.

"Your father appeared angry enough. I owed him the courtesy of explaining my intentions man to man," the wretch replied.

Intentions indeed. An eye-roll was her paltry response to

that bit of masculine idiocy. That her father probably agreed did little to sooth her.

The following day her erstwhile fiancé arrived just as she began a batch of bread. He didn't appear distressed to see his intended elbow deep in dough. He found a comfortable seat by the window where he could observe her and made free with the inventory while he waited for her to finish. His eyes on her through the kitchen door gave her a case of the nerves. When her father poured himself a cup of tea and the two of them settled in like a pair of old friends, she had to fetch the shells of three eggs out of a batch of cake batter where she had dropped them.

Papa, perfectly content with dear Fletcher after that, insisted she hang up her apron and walk out with the man when she finally ran out of excuses to extend the morning baking any further. The only things she liked less were the knowing smiles on the customer's faces and old Mrs. Nettleby's gushing declaration about what a treasure Mr. Graham had in "our Anna." The old woman's wink behind his back had been worst yet.

Anxious to avoid the avid faces of the neighbors, she suggested they turn at the first lane and walk toward the fields beyond the village. Fletch obliged. By the time they cleared the farthest house they had exhausted the weather and the superiority of Anna's baking, a topic on which she found his rhapsody to be somewhat too excessive to be believed. A few steps later he spoke, and she tripped.

"Your feline friend has failed us," he said, getting to what she suspected was his point in calling on her.

I'll have it out one way or another, he had announced when he blamed Rob Roy for stealing his cousin's ring. *One way or another*. She choked. "You wouldn't harm him!" Her plea held more hope than confidence.

“Of course not. What do you take me for? I may not like cats, but I don’t harm helpless—” He paused and held up his bandaged hand. “Or even not so helpless animals. Besides, Gordon doesn’t believe he swallowed it. He thinks we would be seeing signs of distress; we are not. Your mouser prowls the cellars, which are now devoid of vermin; several mice and a mole have turned up dead since yesterday.”

“He’s a champion mouser.” That bit of pride earned her a grunt. “What will you tell the heir when he arrives?” she wondered.

“The truth, if we have to. There has been no sign of it since I tossed it in with my father’s river pebbles.” He appeared troubled by that, but she had no idea what to do about the missing signet ring.

“Will you kindly tell me about the bakery operation? I will happily describe my enterprises as well,” he suggested.

Anna’s brows shot up. “You want to learn how to run a bakery?”

“I want to learn about you. Isn’t that what betrothed couples do?”

She had no answer for that, so she obliged him. When they arrived back home an hour had passed in companionable conversation. They had even laughed together more than once. He took her leave with every sign of reluctance, promising to call again the following day.

The next morning however, a footman arrived from the castle with a missive expressing his regrets. The heir, it seemed, had arrived early.



TWO MORE DAYS passed before Fletch could travel back to the village. When he did, he brought the Ravenstone carriage to escort the woman who had haunted his days and nights to dinner with the new earl. When delightful apple tarts had appeared at luncheon the day before, he had wondered if she had come to deliver them, but Mrs. Hale told him a boy had made the delivery.

Lights glowed in the windows when the carriage stopped in front of the Hale house and Fletch stepped out. In his experience ladies liked to keep a man waiting, but that seemed too coy for his Anna. Their dealings had been marked by plain speaking, promptness, and efficiency, businesslike qualities he admired in a person. He wasn't disappointed. She waited with her father in the parlor when the maid of all work answered the door.

Businesslike ended there. The vision in front of him wore a fashionable gown of a fine blue fabric shot with golden highlights that flattered her color and hugged her curves hinting at treasures underneath. It wasn't the gown of a duke's daughter, but superb for that of a baker. Her hair, which he had always seen pulled back in a practical bun, was held up with tortoise shell combs that left curls cascading down her neck, her long graceful neck. His mouth went dry.

"What sort of man is the heir?" she asked him when the carriage lurched forward to begin their journey.

"Well enough." The dozen things he meant to share with her disappeared, and his tongue felt tied to the roof of his mouth. He could laugh and share with his Anna the businesswoman, but couldn't think what to say to the glorious creature who rode with him. He couldn't tell if the slight frown on her face originated from nervousness about the

earl or irritation at his silence. They arrived before he could puzzle it out.

When he led her into the withdrawing room where they assembled for dinner, Anna found the newcomer and Gordon in companionable conversation. She curtsied to the earl who seemed to find it amusing. "Daniel, please, Miss Hale," the man said with a twinkle in his eyes. "I'll never get used to all this bowing and my-lording." When her eyes flashed to Gordon and back, he chuckled. "I see you noticed the resemblance."

"What do you think Anna?" Gordon said. "All that fuss about a ring when no one who looks at him next to me could doubt we're cousins. Almost look like brothers." He grinned at his cousin, and Fletch felt a sharp pang of jealousy. He did not plan to share his only brother with a stranger from Missouri, even one who had treated the boy with a blend of respect and apologetic kindness when they had swiftly established the man's credentials.

Anna smiled at the newcomer. "You've heard about our mystery?" she asked.

Fletch took her hand and kissed her fingers when her smile at the earl sent an even bigger jolt of jealousy through him. "My fiancée believes her cat may be the criminal, but Gordon begs to doubt it."

When he said 'fiancée' her face clouded. "Where is Mr. Walker tonight?" she asked looking around.

"Walker scampered back to Manchester as soon as the papers were signed," Gordon told her.

Fletch did not like the expression on her face nor the tightness in her voice when she said, "We need to talk later."

Gordon, oblivious to the byplay, took up the subject of her cat. "Rob Roy looks fine, Anna. I made sure to feed him, and Mrs. Hale did as well."

“I did indeed hear about the miscreant cat. I gather the fellow hasn’t shown any sign he ingested a piece of jewelry — at least he hadn’t as of this morning. Perhaps we ought to check on him,” Daniel suggested. His raised brow resembled Gordon so much even Fletch began to soften toward him.

The major domo announced dinner, preventing them from acting on the suggestion. When Fletch winged his arm to lead Anna in, Gordon reminded him that, as host and highest ranking male, Daniel had the privilege of leading in the highest ranking lady. “Or in this case, only lady. You’ll have to work on numbers when you entertain formally, cousin,” the boy said ignoring the expression Fletch generally used to great effect on incompetent dockhands.

Daniel Graham came with a store of stories, and he entertained them over dinner with tales of his father’s checkered past and wandering youth. “He finally settled in Saint Louis when he met my mother.” Family stories entertained them, but his description of the settlement’s diverse population and its prominence as a base for regional trade captured Fletch’s attention. He and Anna between them peppered the new earl with questions. Daniel’s two younger brothers ran the family’s shipping business, as Daniel himself had after their father’s death two winters before, until he came to claim their family’s heritage, “as our father would have wanted me to. He always meant to come back to Ravenstone.”

“You must feel his loss deeply,” Anna said.

“Yes. I do. In some ways coming here helps me get in touch with him and his life.” Daniel sank briefly into his morose thoughts; he shook it off quickly. Fletch suspected he possessed a disposition as sunny as Fletch’s father had,

but if his stories could be believed, he had more business sense. Perhaps he would be good for the estate.

Dinner came to an end over apple tarts. Gordon explained the custom of ladies leaving gentlemen to their port, but, he said, "We're dining informally and, well, we can't leave Anna on her own can we?" He looked at his brother as if for confirmation.

"Certainly not," Fletch said. "Perhaps Anna would oblige us by serving tea."

"Can we check on the cat first?" the American cousin asked. "I am curious to see this animal."

Fletch couldn't think of much he would like less than checking on Rob Roy, but if it made Anna happy, he wouldn't argue.

Gordon obtained the cellar key on their way through the kitchen. He fiddled with it in the lock, but the door didn't open. Fletch took it from him, settled the big iron key in the lock. "It's loose," he murmured, moving it until he heard it click. He pulled the door open, and a ball of orange fur shot through his legs and out of the kitchen. "Damn cat!"

"Language Mr. Graham," Anna said, picking up her skirts to start after it.

Back to Mr. Graham? "I apologize for my language," he said stepping quickly to offer her his arm. They followed a laughing Gordon and his equally amused cousin after the cat.

The direction didn't surprise him. The cat and the young men made a beeline for their grandfather's office. By the time he and Anna reached the door loud yowling greeted them, followed by irate squawking from Hrafn. The cat had climbed up the drapery again and was hissing at the bird.

"Be careful. Those claws are deadly," Fletch warned.

"Oh, let me do it," his erstwhile betrothed said, letting

her irritation show as she elbowed past the young men. Before she could reach it however, the cat leapt at the cage and set it careening from side to side.

Rob Roy landed on the door, swung with it for a moment, and clung for dear life when the latch opened causing the door to swing wide. Hrafn jumped to the now open doorframe and glared at the cat still hanging from the swaying door. When the feline jumped to the floor the bird swooped after it, and almost caught it before it snuck under the settee escaping the raven's frustrated efforts to poke its head underneath and reach it.

"Goodness! What sort of creature is that?" Daniel Graham asked, watching the bird take flight. "A crow? Rather large."

"That, cousin, is Hrafn, the raven of Ravenstone, and he is all yours," Fletch told him.

"Nasty creature," Anna mumbled, kneeling down to peer under the settee.

"You best leave him there until we get Hrafn back in his cage," Gordon warned as the bird settled on the drapery pole. Fletch agreed; he also thought she presented the gentlemen entirely too enticing a view of herself. He helped her rise.

"How exactly to we lure him back to the cage?" the new earl asked.

"Meat," Gordon said. "He lives on meat, and I'll go—" The great raven interrupted him by landing on their grandfather's desk and strutting about as if he owned it.

"Our father gave that bird much too much freedom," Fletch muttered, arrested by the sight of Hrafn rooting through the bowl of pebbles. Taking one he particularly liked in his beak, the raven flew to the cage and ducked in.

Gordon slammed the door and snapped the latch

closed. "Look at this Fletch. The miserable animal has an entire pile of Father's river rocks."

Fletcher felt Anna's hand touch his arm as he followed his brother's pointed finger. He started to open the door to reach in, but she stopped him.

"I can guess what you're thinking, but that monster will take your finger off if you reach in and interfere with his treasure trove," she said.

"I need a long stick," Fletch replied.

Ten minutes later Gordon returned from the kitchen with a long hook meant for handling pots over an open fire. He also carried a wrapped bundle that proved to be utterly disgusting, two dead mice. "Rob Roy's victims from the cellar," he explained. "I've been feeding them to Hrafn."

Fletch ignored the mice. He poked through the cage and into the pile of pebbles. The signet ring appeared quickly, but the bird jumped onto his hook. "Gordon, kindly distract him with those mice," he said.

A deft movement hooked the ring and extracted it while the bird, apparently satisfied with the bargain, swallowed his treat. "Your signet ring, my lord," he said with a bow to his cousin.

Anna collapsed onto a chair. Fletch reached down to take a hand, but she folded them in her lap firmly. "Kindly help me extract Rob Roy from under the settee, Mr. Graham," she said primly. She would not meet his eyes, which did not bode well for the reckoning he knew was upon them. *What did I tell her? Just until Walker left and the new heir's arrival distracted the shire.*

He let out a breath. "I'll take you home, Anna."

"No thank you Mr. Graham. A footman can see to my safety. You had best finish your business with your cousin." She rose and curtsied to the earl. "It has been an honor to

welcome you to the region, my lord.” Fletch longed to remove the bleak shadows from her face, but found no way to gainsay her in front of the others.

Tomorrow, he thought, we’ll settle things between us tomorrow.

CHAPTER 8

Anna threw herself into baking early the next morning. By dawn the day's quota of bread baked in the ovens, and even more lay rising. She decided to bake ginger biscuits a day early, and apple tarts as well.

Work has ever been my refuge in times of sorrow. She pushed the thought aside, refusing to ascribe sorrow to the ending of what had been, after all, a business arrangement.

He came when the apple tarts sat cooling, and Anna, elbow deep in lemon cake batter trying, once again, to remove dropped eggshells, heard his voice mingle with her father's in the outer room. She determined to ignore him until she finished.

"We need to talk." She jumped at the sound of his voice so close behind her.

"What are you doing in the kitchen?" she demanded. She turned to face him with both arms held bent at the elbow, her hands and forearms covered in batter.

"Trying to speak with my betrothed," he replied.

"Walker is gone; the heir is here. You said—"

"I said a great many things, some of them foolish," he told her. Something in his expression made her insides quiver and turned her brain to mush. She couldn't formulate a reply; she could only gaze into his eyes, unable to move.

"Oh hell, I'm making a mull of it!" He exclaimed, pulling her to him, wrapping one arm around her waist and one hand on the back of her head while he leaned forward and touched his mouth to hers, roughly at first but quickly gentling when his hand slid forward to cup her cheek and his tongue teased her lips.

Whatever Anna meant to say to him this morning fled at his touch. Her knees sagged, and she leaned into his embrace and his rock hard body. She clung to him with both hands at first, but when one began to caress his back, she ran the other through his thick hair, as she had longed to do for days.

When her father's growl from the door brought Fletch to his senses, he had cake batter in his hair, across his back, and all over one side of his face. "I presume you two have settled things," Papa said.

"Not yet, but we will," Fletch replied, taking her by the hand and dragging her out to the little garden behind the bakery.

Her head began to clear as she sat her on the stone bench next to her mother's lavender. "Fletch, you can't just—"

"I know. I just manhandled you again, and creatures don't like that—or so you claimed." He grinned a lopsided grin. "I promise the next time I make love to you, you will be a willing and enthusiastic participant."

"But Walker is gone."

"Forget about Walker. Forget about my cousin. I told you

that so I would have an excuse to linger, to spend time with you."

"Why?" Her heart had begun to race, and she had so little breath the word came out as the barest whisper.

"I like you; I admire you," he said with that intense look that made her whole being heat. "I want you—" He broke off and ran a hand through his hair, coming away with cake batter. "Sorry. Ignore that last, at least for now."

Anna couldn't take her eyes away from the sight of Fletcher Graham licking his fingers clean of her cake batter. "What are you trying to suggest?"

"I suggest we remain betrothed," he replied

"But you've only known me for a week," she protested.

"What I know pleases me very much." He began to tick off reasons on his still sticky fingers, "I have before me the first lady I know who challenges my mind, refuses to put up with my nonsense—understands business for goodness sake, which is no small thing to a man of commerce."

"Just betrothed? Doesn't that mean we plan to marry?" she asked.

"We don't have to marry quickly, Anna, but give me a chance—for now just betrothed. It will give you time to get to know me, to see if you can spend your life leg-shackled to me, to be certain what you want."

"What about you, Fletch?"

"I'm already certain. Take a year, and I'll hope for less. That will give your father time to find someone for you to train, Gordon time to find his place—and me time to enjoy your company."

When had he slid so close to her on the bench? She turned her face and found his inches away. When she didn't move, he smiled. She returned it, and his mouth met hers

before he pulled her into his lap. He leaned her head on one arm so he could deepen the kiss.

Long moments later Anna pulled away a few inches, just far enough to speak. “Six months,” she said firmly. He frowned, raising one brow as if to ask what she meant. “Six months should be enough,” she said. As she closed the distance between them she added, “and then we will marry.”

So it was, and so they did.

THE END

