

Chapter 1

Rachel

I have at last managed to secure some rudimentary writing paper, a quill and ink. And so I write down my account to dispatch with a kindly envoy, in the vain hope that my husband, Lord Grange, once advised of my pitiful circumstances, might set about arranging my repatriation to civilised society. If not, perhaps one of his eminent colleagues on the bench in Edinburgh might concern themselves, but that is unlikely. Or my adoring children? Admittedly, some are too young, but Charles is now twenty-three and surely able to plead on his mother's behalf once he hears news of me, although he is of course busy with his new position at the Court of Session. And so, my only hope is that Mary, though a mere girl, might be permitted to intercede on my behalf through her husband the Earl. My Angel must be so distraught.

I am ill and weary and exceedingly disquieted living here in this godforsaken place, with no one for company but a glaikit serving wench. The only sound, apart from the roaring of the wind and the crashing of the waves, is the squawk of the seabirds: the purring puffins, the screeching guillemots, the harsh, croaking solan geese.

The inhabitants speak in their still largely indecipherable tongue and I can expend only so much energy using signs and gestures. It is tiresome and monotonous, but not as cruel as the means by which I arrived in this barbaric place. And now

I abide here, the only Lady so far from civilisation and my beloved family.

But I am jumping ahead. I ought to begin this tale in 1708 when I was but eighteen years old. I had travelled from Edinburgh down the coast into East Lothian one unusually warm day in early May. I was with my mother and sister and we were to visit the splendid grounds of Preston House, which were open to the public every Saturday afternoon. The three of us strolled along the shaded alleys between the tall hedges of elder and briar to the high stone walls that had obviously been built to protect the estate from the fierce winds of the River Forth; that day there was nothing but a balmy breeze. From there we entered the maze and, as I stopped to admire some trailing ivy, I let my mother and sister continue on. I was drawn towards a glorious aroma emanating from the hedgerow and I leant in to inhale the scent of honeysuckle, shutting my eyes as I did so. On opening them, I noticed a tall young gentleman at my side. I looked around but we were completely alone. The man inclined his head and addressed me in a courteous manner, asking if I should like to take a walk with him.

“Sir, I can’t possibly agree to your request, it would be unseemly. I don’t know who you are.”

With this, a smile flickered on his full red lips and he inclined his head.

“I am James Erskine, proprietor of Preston House.”

I was taken aback at how young he looked, as I recalled some talk about this very man in the coach earlier. Mama and my sister Margaret had been arguing over the gossip that was currently rife throughout Edinburgh, about the degeneracy and carousing of James Erskine, also known as Lord Grange.

Margaret had been told about it by her friends, the Dalrymple sisters; Mama hushed this talk as nonsense and insisted he was a good man, intelligent and, most importantly, of noble stock.

As I studied his face, I realised that Mama had been correct

and Margaret's claims must be untrue: his blue-grey eyes looked so innocent, those boy-like freckles on his full cheeks suggested naivety, something childlike.

"I should like that very much, Sir," I said, smiling, and he gave me his arm.

We emerged from the maze and he led me along a stone wall with a bower in it. We sat down there and he turned to point over towards the wide river.

"That island in the Forth over there is the Isle of May. It has been a place of pilgrimage for centuries; people used to come from far and wide to drink the water of the well. Many poor folk with terrible ailments were cured. God works in wonderful ways, don't you agree?"

I nodded.

"If I hadn't decided to study law and become a judge, I should like to have trained as a minister of religion," he told me as he continued to gaze over at the island.

I swallowed. My handsome companion not only owned this whole estate, he was a man of high intellect who was about to become a judge, as well as being a devout, religious person.

"I don't yet know your name," he said, taking my hand from my lap.

This was untoward and I found my heart begin to beat faster. As I turned to face him, the plaid around my shoulder slipped a little and I saw him glance down at the lace around my bodice. Thankfully I was wearing my family's fine Belgian lace.

"I am Rachel Chiesley, Sir," I whispered, awaiting the usual reaction from anyone acquainted with both Edinburgh and the law on hearing my family's name. But there was no such response. Instead, he smiled and touched my face with his other hand. He was leaning in towards me and my eyes were opening wide when I heard them.

"Rachel, Rachel, where are you?"

I leapt up and pulled my plaid tight around my shoulders.

“Here, Mama,” I cried and glanced at the young man, who had also arisen.

They rushed towards me and James Erskine bowed deeply then introduced himself.

“Ladies,” he said, smiling, “I hope you are enjoying the grounds of my estate. Perhaps you will permit me to show you the hothouse and the walled garden?”

Mama looked taken aback but managed to stutter a reply. “Thank you, we should like that very much.”

As he took Mama’s arm and guided her back along the terraced wall, past the doocot and towards the back of the house, Margaret and I followed on behind. My sister tugged at my elbow and leant in close. “Does he know who we are?” she hissed.

I found myself beaming from ear to ear. “I told him who I was, Margaret, and he didn’t look troubled at all.”



There followed the most ardent, albeit swift courtship. James took me to two grand parties, the first of which I shall never forget, at Corstorphine House, where we danced our first minuet. I had always adored dancing, but this was different. We had partaken of supper and punch and as the music struck up once again, he took my hand and guided me to the dance floor. I believe this was the moment we both fell madly in love.

Mama could not, obviously, be there, since Edinburgh society was slow to forgive and forget, so James’ sister Jean was my companion that evening. I must admit I found her rather haughty and unfriendly, not the kindly soulmate I had hoped to spend the soiree with. It was as if she knew perfectly well about the Chiesley family history, even if her brother seemed oblivious to the facts, and she was making it all too apparent that she thought me unworthy of her noble

brother. She seemed to know many other ladies and they too shunned me; I noticed two lean behind their fans and nod in my direction. I took a deep breath, raised my head high and ignored them; I had had six years of rejection and I would not give up on happiness now.

But then, when we danced, everything was put to rights. He gazed into my eyes with such fiery passion that I was thankful the beat of the music meant I had to swing away from him, as I found my face redden with delight. Holding his hand was also an unexpected joy; I had been used to either my brothers' grimy, fidgety hands or the sweaty hands of my uncles. And the man Jean had forced me to dance with before James had hands so greasy, it was as if he had washed them in a basin of fatty mutton broth. But James' hands were silky, soft and cool; I will never forget his touch. I quivered all over when, at the end of the dance, he held both my hands and raised them to his lips. His eyes burned with fervour and mine opened wide as I stood transfixed. Returning to my seat, trembling, I ignored Jean's scornful scowl and took a long draught of punch, which made my fluttering heart steady once more.

Our second outing was to a gathering at the Assembly Rooms in the West Bow and thankfully his sister was not in attendance. We danced and talked to other grand people of the city as if we were already a married couple.

This time I noticed no one appeared to be in any way disdainful when he introduced me; but I did detect a difference in the way he pronounced my surname. He uttered it as if it were spelt Chessle, not Chiesley. Perhaps that was the reason I was addressed as an equal at all times; but no matter, it suited me well.

On the way home, he leant over to me in his carriage as we left the Assembly Rooms and headed up over the cobbles towards my home. His hand lifted the plaid a little off my shoulder and he peered through the dark to admire my gown once more. His

breath smelt sweetly of claret and punch as he whispered to me that he wished he could have spoken to my father, but instead he would speak to my uncle, Aunt Margaret's husband John, for my hand in marriage. It was all so romantic and when he touched the silk around my neckline, brushing a finger over my bosom, I felt that this was not improper, for I would soon be betrothed to James Erskine, Lord Grange, and without delay. And to think it all began at Preston House among the hedges of elder and the mazes and labyrinths of one of the finest gardens in Scotland. And soon it would all be mine.