

CHAPTER 1



"*A*bsolutely not. You may by no means accept the invitation. Mrs. Hamilton and her set are not the sort of people with whom I would have my niece associate."

Margaret gaped at her new aunt in dismay. Mrs. Cochrane had not even glanced at the letter in Margaret's outstretched hand, just kept her head bent over her needlework.

"But, ma'am—" Margaret looked to her uncle for support.

Uncle Cochrane was in his easy chair beside the fire, *The Scotsman* folded in one hand, his pipe in the other. He presented such a familiar figure that Margaret's heart gave a sudden pulse of sadness and longing for how things had been before the awful day last summer, when he had told her that Mrs. Rankine had accepted his proposal of marriage.

Mrs. Rankine, who had been the wife of the minister of a church over in Old Town, had suddenly appeared in the congregation of their own church, St George's, barely a year ago. Margaret had no idea how her uncle could have lived fifty years in the world immune to the charms of elegant and eligible young ladies, and then, in the autumn of his life, fallen under the spell of a widow

with no beauty and no fortune, plus, the added burden of a daughter.

Spell, she supposed it must be, for her kindly Uncle Cochrane was now in thrall to his wife's slightest word. Margaret saw him exchange a look with her and receive a stern instruction from her glance. He shifted his glasses on his nose, shook out his newspaper, and without raising his eyes to his niece, he said, "You have heard what your aunt has to say on the matter, Margaret."

"But, Uncle—" She tried to show him the letter. "Mrs. Hamilton is entirely respectable; her husband is Mr. Hamilton, the physician, and her literary soirees are famous throughout town. I have attended many in the past, in company with Mrs. Douglas—"

She broke off as her aunt snorted, and Margaret realised that this had been just the wrong thing to say.

"Mrs. Douglas!" spat Mrs. Cochrane. "Yet another instance, if any more were needed, of the bad company that woman led you into. Well, fortunately, Mrs. Douglas is no longer with us, and since you have no chaperone, there is an end of that. Now come and join us, child, and we'll hear no more of this foolishness."

Margaret almost stamped her foot in exasperation. It was true; even if her aunt had had no objection to the acquaintance, she could not have attended Mrs. Hamilton's soiree the next evening because she no longer had anyone to accompany her.

Since coming out at the age of seventeen, Margaret had been accustomed to the constant companionship of Emmeline Douglas, who had been both a friend and a highly useful chaperone. Emmeline was scarcely two years older than Margaret and had been married for but a summer in her nineteenth year, yet those few scant weeks of matrimonial union had qualified her to escort an unmarried young lady into company. Margaret had met and become firm friends with Emmeline while Mr. Douglas still lived, and when a sudden violent ague had taken that unfortunate young gentleman and left his widow penniless, Margaret had invited her into her home to be her companion. For four years—no, close on

five—she and Emmeline had been inseparable, going where they pleased and doing what they pleased. Margaret had enjoyed perfect freedom of movement under the protection of her widowed friend, almost as though they had been two young gentlemen rather than two young ladies. Her affectionate and indulgent uncle had offered no objection.

Until, alas, the thunder strike of last July.

Margaret reigned in her fury and obeyed her aunt, seating herself in the only chair left vacant in the circle by the fire. Her own rightful position, the padded armchair opposite her uncle's, nearest the fire, was now occupied by the new mistress of the house.

Instead, Margaret was obliged to sit beside her other recently acquired relation, her unwelcome step-cousin, Charity. Charity had, as was her way, appeared to pay no attention to the argument. She kept her fair head bowed over her work; her needle had not paused. But Margaret was sure she had relished every word of rebuke and was rejoicing in Margaret's frustration.

Margaret opened the slim volume she had been carrying around all morning and focused for a moment on the first page. The lines of poetry seemed to dance and swim, and she realised that it was because her eyes were filling with tears. She swallowed and blinked, disgusted with herself. She had always believed that women who cried—cried easily, at any trifling provocation—were letting down the sex.

She had to try again.

"Uncle," she said. "See, this volume here—it came for me two days ago, from Baillie and Begg—it is a wonderful poem, by a most marvellous new poet, Mr. Keats. It is a retelling of the myth of Endymion—you know, Uncle, the beloved of Selene, goddess of the moon?"

Her uncle glanced up from his paper, as if prepared to listen and be interested, but Mrs. Cochrane snorted again.

"Goddess of the moon, indeed," she said scathingly. "Margaret,

I'll ask you not to talk such impious nonsense, and before your younger cousin, too."

"It is Greek mythology, ma'am. It is not impiety. The ancient Greeks had no opportunity to hear the Gospel—how could their belief in a pantheon be blasphemous if the truth was never revealed to them?"

Mrs. Cochrane at last put down her embroidery and fixed Margaret with a chilly glare. "You dare to answer me back, child? And on such a subject? Mr. Cochrane, you see where your faulty indulgence of your niece has led?"

"Well, well, my dear. Margaret, apologise to your aunt."

"Uncle!" cried Margaret, suddenly becoming desperate. "This is unjust and—illogical! When did the culture and beliefs of the ancients become blasphemous? You yourself, sir, studied Greek and Latin literature at school and at the university! You taught it to me!"

"Aye, and it would have been far better had you done no such thing!" Mrs. Cochrane snapped, addressing her husband. "What use does a girl have for Latin and Greek? Folly and nonsense. My Charity was taught all the accomplishments fit for a young lady, and set to such reading as purifies and fortifies the mind and spirit. She has never been permitted to open a novel, nor to read *poetry*." She spat out the last word as if it were an obscenity. "And look at her, Mr. Cochrane. Is she not a picture of filial obedience and humility? Have you heard from her a single word of defiance or seen her behave in a way that is anything less than exemplary?"

"Indeed, my dear, Charity is a credit to you and the late Mr. Rankine."

Charity's needle had not paused, and she did not lift her eyes, but Margaret saw the faint smirk of satisfaction. She seethed and attempted to speak again, but Mrs. Cochrane's steely tone overrode her.

"I will be frank with you, husband. I am nothing if not always frank. I was always frank with Mr. Rankine; God rest his soul.

When you did me the honour of offering your hand in marriage, I was afraid that exposure to unsound ideas—to a poor example—might hurt Charity, who has been so carefully, as I say, brought up. I knew of your niece's reputation."

"Oh, my dear, now—"

"My *reputation!*" Margaret cried, unable to suppress her outrage. "What reputation, pray, madam?"

"Your niece's reputation as a coquette and a bluestocking, a young lady who had been allowed to run all over town in the company of a very young widow, who had turned down several eligible offers of marriage and was said to have advanced ideas. I do not blame you entirely, my dear Mr. Cochrane. It is very hard for a single gentleman to know what to do with a headstrong young lady left on his charge. And they are all headstrong. Charity, here, would have been just as bad, had I and her late father not taken such pains with her education and management. Daily churchgoing, improving reading, and regular applications of the tawse, all are essential."

"A *coquette?*" Margaret jumped to her feet. "Uncle, dear Uncle Cochrane, will you let your wife speak ill of me like this? How can you?"

"Silence, child!" said her aunt shrilly, without stirring herself. "Mr. Cochrane, rebuke your niece for her impertinence, this instant."

"Margaret, please do not speak in this way. This is not like you, my child. Apologise to your aunt."

"And to your uncle," said Mrs. Cochrane. "And your cousin, for your ill temper and impudence."

Margaret looked between her uncle, who was red-faced and uncomfortable and seemed as if he would like to disappear behind his newspaper, and her so-called aunt, who was pale and rigid and outwardly icy calm. Charity, beside her, was vibrating with some kind of emotion. It was excitement, Margaret thought with disgust.

She slowed her breathing with an effort. "I apologise, sir, if I have caused you any offence. And to you, madam. But you see, Mr. Keats is in town—he is actually here in Edinburgh—and I was told—" She stopped herself from saying that Mrs. Douglas had told her, just in time. "I have heard that Mrs. Hamilton has invited him to the soiree. It is for that reason I am so particularly keen to accept the invitation. To be introduced to the author of *Endymion*..."

She broke off as Mrs. Cochrane looked up from her work and fixed her with a direct look of such outrage and disgust that Margaret quailed. Charity, too, had stilled her needle and was watching, her eyes shining in her pale face.

"Did you hear your niece, Mr. Cochrane?" said her aunt, her voice quiet but quavering. "Did you hear your niece express a desire to be introduced to a *man*?"

"But, Aunt—"

"And not any man. A *poet*, one who is a known associate of the debauched set led by Lord Byron?"

Margaret was mildly surprised that Mrs. Cochrane should know about such things.

"Go immediately to your room," she said. "We will not see you at dinner."

"Uncle—"

"Margaret, my dear, you had better do as your aunt says. And mind your tongue in future. Be a good girl."

Margaret turned in frustration, stalked from the room, and barely managed to restrain herself from banging the door. She did not want to give Charity the satisfaction of witnessing a display of temper.

Once in her room, she flung herself on the bed and opened the slim volume once again.

A thing of beauty is a joy forever...

The opening line seemed to mock the ugliness of her life, now that it had been blighted by her uncle's incomprehensible decision to bring Mrs. and Miss Rankine into their previously happy home.

She traced her fingers over the title page, across the name of the poet, and imagined a dedication written to herself underneath by the poet's own pen. She imagined clasping the hand that had written those lines, and she shivered.

One way or another, she *had* to go to the soiree.