

## CHAPTER 2



“*I* am thoroughly vexed by the entire proceedings. I intend to return home. Holly has most probably whelped by now and I want to see the new puppies... I wonder how many pups she has had,” Rose mused.

“Rose Mortimer, I do declare, you’ve become naught but a country bumpkin!” Lady Margaret Wiggington wagged a finger at her friend.

“I agree, and I am not ashamed to say so either,” Rose conceded with a sniff.

There was a sigh of discontent from across the room.

“I only know that I am disappointed with the trials. I thought they would be *exciting*. Honestly, how do gentlemen manage to make things so utterly tedious?” Imogene threw her hands up in exasperation.

“Why, Imogene, you sound positively *peev*ed,” Claudia French sang out. Her sister-in-law glared across the room at her.

“Be warned, I am not in the mood to be teased!”

Claudia grinned back wickedly.

“I wonder how long Primrose will be kept on the witness stand. I was surprised she was recalled for the trials,” Margaret pondered

aloud. The other three ladies nodded their agreement, falling silent as they contemplated their friend Primrose's ordeal.

The previous year all the women had travelled south west to a house party in Cornwall. There they had encountered Claudia's nemeses, Primrose Latimer. After a series of chilling adventures which had involved Primrose marrying the leader of a smuggling band, and facing down a fierce band of ruthless wreckers, the ladies had absorbed Primrose into their tight knit circle as their friend. They were gathered here in London for the trial of the wreckers.

By a strange quirk of fate, Jago Poldrunne, Primrose's husband, was now named as the local customs officer in Cornwall. As Claudia's husband, Guy French had said, "Set a thief to catch a thief."

The door swung wide, and their friend Primrose appeared.

"Were your ears burning?" Claudia quipped.

"I know you are always talking about me, so yes!" Primrose retorted archly. "Actually it has been an incredibly dull day. It seemed they only wanted me there to help them place where certain folk were on the beach that night. I waited hours in the witness holding room just to spend two minutes being questioned in the court," Primrose complained.

"Come and have some tea, darling, you must be exhausted." Imogene poured a cup of tea, and Primrose took it, murmuring her thanks.

*Rat-a-tat-tat.*

"See who that is would you, Claudia dear?" Rose and Margaret were still using the excuse they were recovering from giving birth recently and exploiting every opportunity to be lazy. Rose lay reclined upon a chaise-longue while Margaret sat with her feet propped up upon a footstool eating sweetmeats. Claudia, being youngest of the four jumped up as requested. She was a mother too, but David was now eighteen months old. Margaret's new daughter, Lavonia, was two months and Rose's son, George, aged five months.

"Imogene, it is Clarke, the under butler from home. He says he

will only speak with you.” Pulling the door wide she gestured the under butler inside. Hesitating, he glanced about the room until he’d located his mistress, hurrying to stand before her, he proffered her a note. Claudia crossed to hover by her sister-in-law’s chair, sensing something amiss.

Imogene gasped as she read. Thrusting the note into Claudia’s hand once she’d finished reading, Claudia too read the message. The other ladies became agitated; showing concern, they began to question them over the contents of the note but Claudia could not yet utter a single word. She felt the blood drain from her face as she heard Imogene put into words what she could not.

“The Dowager, Lady Haffenden has been missing since Saturday. There is no trace of her.” Claudia heard no more, darkness closed about her.

A hand patted her cheek. An overpowering smell jolted her from the velvet blackness surrounding her. She awoke to find Primrose Poldrunne’s anxious face gazing at her, with a small bottle of Hartshorn pressed to her nose.

“What an awful smell,” she grumbled irritably, pushing the smelling salts away.

“It was this awful smell that roused you,” Primrose’s sharp retort brought a weak smile to her face.

“Thank you, Primrose, I am composed.” She sat up.

Rose proffered a cup and saucer. “Hot sweet tea, drink up, it will restore you.”

She took the proffered tea and sipped. Glancing about she noticed Imogene had left the room.

“Where is...”

“Immy has gone to organise her packing,” Primrose explained.

“We should leave soon; we need to get our maids to pack,” Rose added. Claudia’s head felt full of cotton wool.

“Are you all accompanying me to Surrey?” she asked groggily.

“Naturally,” Margaret answered. “We wouldn’t have it any other way.”

"But what of your husbands?" Claudia knew Guy would understand if she dashed away without consulting him first because it was her mother who appeared to be missing, but the other gentlemen? She feared it unlikely they would be as accommodating.

"We are more than just a club or society of spanked wives, dearest. First and foremost, we are friends, as such we stick together. I should think that was more than evident when Fotheringaye kidnapped you!" Rose assured her.

"Yes, and you all came to *my* aid when I got caught up in the smuggler versus the wreckers debacle last year," Primrose stated.

"Besides, I am rather fond of your mother," Rose added. The other ladies murmured similar sentiments.

"Immy assures us she has room for us all and our husbands, too, once they finally arrive," Rose continued.

"There is plenty of room at Caulderstone House. My parents will be only too happy to help with the search for Isobel," Primrose interrupted.

Claudia set her teacup aside and rose to her feet.

"Thank you, dearest friends. I'm sure you are aware our husbands will not be best pleased to find their wives have travelled once again without them as escort, and that may mean certain, *consequences*."

Giggles and titters met her caged remark. Rolling her eyes, she moved to the door.

"When did Imogene say we were to leave?" she asked, ignoring their mirth.

"Tomorrow morning, as soon as the gentlemen have departed for court," Rose answered. Claudia nodded and left the room, hurrying to her chamber to commence packing. There was no need to ask the ladies to keep the matter quiet. These women had been close friends through many an ordeal. They trusted one another implicitly.



"ALL I CAN TELL you is this, milady, the mistress, I mean, the Dowager, had formed the habit of running and dancing through the house and gardens at night..."

"She did *what*?" Imogene exclaimed, interrupting Hughes.

"Hush, Immy. Pray continue, Hughes." Claudia placed a restraining hand upon her sister-in-law's arm.

"Well I am afraid there is little more to tell, milady. I took my usual route through the house and retracing my steps I noticed the French doors were wide open. I presumed my Lady Dowager was in the gardens. The following morning her maid reported her missing. I organised a search of the house and grounds. When that proved fruitless, I sent Clarke to the London house to notify you."

The ladies had just arrived at Herstmonceaux House, situated in Surrey, home to Lord Charles Haffenden and his wife, Imogene, and Claudia's, childhood home. Since her marriage to Colonel Guy French, she resided with her husband and their son at Old Heath Farm which bordered the land of the Herstmonceaux estate.

The butler had left the allocation of bed chambers to the house keeper and remained behind to speak with his mistress.

"Has a search been made of her room?" Claudia asked him.

"A cursory search was made to establish if any of her clothing had gone."

"And had any?" Imogene asked.

"No, milady, none of her clothing appears to be missing."

Claudia turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Imogene asked, sounding bewildered.

"To search my mother's chamber, are you coming?" Imogene nodded hurrying after her sister-in-law.

They turned the room upside down but found nothing that gave a clue to Isobel's whereabouts.

"I am going to see about luncheon," Imogene announced.

"You go. I shall remain a moment or two then I will join you." Imogene gave Claudia a worried glance and left her alone in the room. After her sister-in-law departed, Claudia seated herself on

her mother's bed and looked about the chamber. There were candle sconces either side of the fireplace.

"I wonder..." She hopped up and went to stand by the empty hearth. In her childhood bedroom Claudia had discovered the candle sconces moved and opened to reveal a secret passage which she had used constantly to come and go unobserved. She assumed the same arrangement in her mother's bedroom; she pulled at the right-hand sconce but nothing happened. She then pulled on the left, again nothing. Then she pushed, with a deal of effort, the sconce in the other direction. There was a grating noise and a panel in the wall opened.

Stepping into the dark space, Claudia discovered a large wooden chest pushed against the wall in the corner. There was a passage beyond, similar in shape and size to the one in her chamber. She dragged the box out into the chamber. The chest wasn't locked and the lid lifted easily.

The first thing she noticed as she opened the lid was a parcel of folded, chequered material. *Odd*. She lifted it out and set it aside, it was heavy. Studying the woollen woven cloth more closely, she realised with a jolt of dismay that this was actually Scottish plaid, *tartan*! Material that was banned ever since the English had defeated the Scottish clans at Culloden Moor. Fingering the thick woollen cloth she wondered at the significance of such a find, hidden away by her mother, in her private chest of all places.

"Ouch!" she cried. Glancing down at the source of her pain she saw her thumb had been pierced by something sharp. A bead of scarlet blood had formed upon the tip of her abused digit. She sucked her thumb and turned the plaid wool over. A large, round, silver brooch had become unpinned from the back of the fabric. It must have been the pin of the ornament that pierced her.

Inspecting the heavy brooch closely, she concluded it was silver and chased with three whorls which appeared to be interconnected. Turning the brooch in her hand, she noticed the initials I.C. engraved into the back. She frowned, pondering. Her mother's

name was Isobel but her maiden name had been – what? Claudia realised that she had never known her mother’s maiden name, how remiss of her never to have thought to ask. In fact, how much did she really know about the woman who had given her life?

She set the rough garment aside, and concluded she knew next to nothing about Isobel Haffenden the person. Delving back inside the box, this time she came up with a scroll. Unravelling the document she saw it was a marriage certificate. Reading the old-fashioned script she deciphered it was an agreement between one Logan Craig, Laird of Belvenie, and an Isobel Cameron.

*Isobel*, her mother’s name. She shivered as an icy chill of foreboding trickled down her spine. What was the meaning of this document? Rapidly she pulled other objects from the box. Buried at the bottom, under trinkets and oddly made pieces of clothing, she found a small, leather-bound book. Sitting back on her heels Claudia opened it, instantly recognising the writing as her mother’s; she began to read.

It was a diary, her mother’s diary. Claudia ran through the pages until she reached the last entry dated some twenty-five years ago.

*I realise now that I am doomed to remain in England forever. Since I carry the Sassenach Lord’s child, I shall never be allowed to return to my one true husband...*

*What?* Her mother had been married before and it sounded like she came from Scotland. How could that possibly be? Claudia knew her parents had met at court. What did she mean, returning to her, *one true husband?* Taking the handwritten missive with her, Claudia went and sat on her mother’s bed. She began to read the diary from the beginning.



“SO YOU’VE ESTABLISHED that your mother is the daughter of a Scottish Laird, a rebel who fought against us at Culloden?” Imogene asked incredulously.

"So it would seem from the entries in her diary."

"You say she married a Laird but after the battle of Culloden she was brought to England where she met your father at court?"

"Yes."

"Oh Lordy, Claudia what a coil! I don't know what to say. It is incredible. You are certain of the facts?"

"So far as I can ascertain... Here, read for yourself if you don't believe me."

"My dear, I believe you! It all just seems so incredibly unlikely. I take it your theory is she has returned to Scotland?"

"Yes. I am going to go after her, Imogene. Please do not try to stop me. I want to know why she maintained the years of deception."

"Perhaps she didn't go voluntarily, have you thought of that?"

Claudia stared at her sister-in-law. "I had not thought of that. It makes sense. It would take a long time for the news of my father's death to reach the wilderness of Scotland. I think you might have the right of it, Immy. I have to find her!"

"Dearest, you cannot travel as a woman alone across that distance!" Imogene looked horrified.

"She won't have to, because we shall all go!" They had not noticed they had been joined by Margaret, Rose, and Primrose.

Imogene shook her head. "Not this time. We wait for our husbands. There is no safe way for us to travel alone."

*Rat-a-tat-tat*

"See who that is, please, Primrose?" Claudia asked since Primrose was seated nearest to the door.

"I am sorry to disturb you, milady, but a Sister Mary is here from the Convent." Hughes addressed Imogene.

"Send her in please, Hughes." The butler bowed his head in acknowledgement and retreated. He returned moments later with a jolly looking nun dressed in the usual black habit.

"Lady Haffenden, Mother Superior is asking all the great families hereabout to contribute to the restoration of our chapel. The



gales this past winter blew down the tree near the knave and caused damage to two of our most beautiful renaissance windows.”

“Of course we shall help! Indeed, I believe Lord Haffenden has already pledged a sum for the whole of the repair of the arched window. He must have forgotten to send the funds to your Mother. I shall write a note to remind him,” Imogene promised.

“Thank you kindly, milady. I shall pray for you at Vespers tonight.” Sister Mary turned about and strode from the room.

The ladies watched her go. Primrose cleared her throat drawing everyone’s attention.

“What would you all think of us travelling as an order of nuns into Scotland?”

Margaret beamed at her. “That is pure genius!”

“But where would we get the habits from? No, I vote we wait for our husbands to arrive. As it is, I am going to be in serious trouble for leaving London and travelling home alone, with only the aid of a footman and a coachman,” Imogene quickly naysayed the idea.

“We shall take a vote on Primrose’s plan. Immy, you can stay here if you want to. All those in favour of Primrose’s idea raise your hand.” Four hands instantly shot up.

Imogene threw up both of hers in exasperation. “I suppose I shall have to come along with you, if only to ensure the rest of you don’t take any unnecessary risks!”

The other ladies glanced from one to another and fell into a fit of the giggles.

“Immy, you are simply priceless!” Rose told her affectionately.

“I know where we can get the robes from.”

Immediately four pairs of eyes swivelled to Claudia. “The Holy Cross Priory,” she said.

Primrose nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose we could break in, but I feel uncomfortable stealing from a nunnery.”

“I am not suggesting we steal anything, you goose! We go and see the Mother Superior and tell her we are putting on a moralising play, a treat with which to surprise our husbands on their return.”

"That is inspired!" Primrose clapped her hands.

"I shall be Mother Superior of our group," Margaret stated smugly.

"Who made you our leader?" Rose enquired.

"Me. I am the obvious choice, since I am the organised one."

"She does have a point you know, she is surely bossy enough to take charge." Primrose granted.

"But she is not in charge, *I am*. It is my mother who is missing, but for the purpose of our disguise, I agree. Margaret, you should play our Mother Superior," Claudia conceded.

The others agreed with sage nods.

"Let us eat luncheon and travel over to the nunnery this afternoon."

"Um..."

"Primrose, is there something you wanted to add?" Imogene asked.

"I don't know if this will help us, or not."

"What would help?" Imogene pressed.

"I met the Mother Superior once before."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes, it was after I met the despicable Timothy. I thought of joining the nunnery; it seemed a rather romantic alternative to marriage."

Claudia gave an unladylike whoop of laughter. Primrose blushed.

"Since I married, Jago, and discovered the, err, conjugal benefits to being a *married* lady, I am jolly pleased I didn't pursue that avenue."

The other ladies chuckled delightedly.

"So you think you going to see the Mother alone might be to our advantage?" Imogene asked, bringing them all back to the subject in hand.

"Well, perhaps you or Claudia should come with me for moral support?" Primrose suggested.

“I’ll go,” Claudia stated firmly. “We will take luncheon and set off immediately afterwards.” She turned, gesturing for the others to follow, leading them into the dining room, where a cold collation was laid ready on the sideboard.

The ladies chattered excitedly throughout the meal. The topic of conversation was their husbands’ reaction when they caught up with them and found them all disguised as nuns. Of course Imogene pointed out that if the gentlemen arrived *before* they left, there would be no necessity to rush across the country. Claudia realised the other ladies’ responses to her sister-in-law’s remark only confirmed what she suspected, they simply saw the situation as another adventure. She did not join in their sparring conversation. Her mind raced with possibilities. Supposing they managed to find her mother and she didn’t want to return with them?