



Echoes
of Love

Kathleen
Pickering

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For Jim

Echoes of Love was conceived shortly after laying eyes on my husband for the first time. I felt I recognized him, though we passed as strangers on a street in a dusty Arizona city.

Clearly, I was correct.

We've been together for over 25 years.

For Jude Ahern

whose affiliations with auction houses such as Christie's and William Doyle enhanced this author's understanding of the auction world.

For Diane Davidson

whose discerning eye edited my first draft.

I thank Diane for her good humor toward my blunders and her laughs and tears exactly where I hoped to earn them.

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whose legal insights proved invaluable.

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at LionHearted Publishing.

Mary Ann's enthusiasm is intoxicating.

Her support and expertise make the most impossible task possible. What more can I say?

If you can't live the adventure, read it!

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Chapter 1



Melissa wanted to kill Mark with her bare hands.

She took the steps to Carlisle's Auction House two at a time, a Blaire estate catalogue clutched in her fist, her blonde hair spilling out of its barrette. Midtown traffic had been horrendous. The auction was in progress now for thirty minutes. The fact that Anderson had managed to alert her to Mark's actions here in Manhattan was amazing. Now she raced against time.

The guard at the door recognized the heiress to Carlisle's and, seeing the intent in Melissa's blue eyes, immediately opened the heavy wooden door.

"Good afternoon, Miss Ryan," the guard said as she passed. Too angry to speak, she merely nodded to the man as she crossed the marble expanse of lobby to the auction room.

She stepped quickly inside the door and took a moment to collect herself. The spacious auction

room was filled to capacity. All attention was on the bidding. This was not surprising as the New York Times advertised for weeks that the estate of Beatrice Blaire would be auctioned today, by request of the late widow's son. The auction world buzzed with rumors Mark Blaire lost half his inheritance of Carlisle's Auction House to Melissa, and the auction of the matriarch's estate was an act of spite.

Melissa had been crushed by Mark's decision and retreated to Montauk after Mark continued to ignore her calls. She never intended to appear here, because she could not bear to watch a lifetime of memories go on the auction block. Melissa even turned off her telephone.

But a messenger delivered an urgent dispatch from Anderson, the longtime research administrator at Carlisle's. The message had said, "Read the Addendum!" There, inserted in the accompanying catalogue, was the addendum listing Melissa's sideboard as a previously unlisted antique to be auctioned with the Blaire estate. Melissa's sideboard—the only tie to her mother. Melissa had grabbed her purse and bolted out the door without so much as combing her hair.

Melissa worked her way through the crowd as Mr. Walters expertly called for bids on a turn of the century end table. The price escalated at a rapid pace. She recognized the table as the one Aunt Beatrice had next to the overstuffed chair in

the library—the same chair Melissa had sat in when Mr. Patterson read the will.

The heiress to Carlisle's swallowed her rage and inhaled deeply. Never act when angered, she reminded herself. Very slowly, she let her breath escape. Her eyes searched the glass-enclosed balcony that was the Blaire's personal viewing room. Mark was not among those watching and sipping champagne.

The petite debutante coordinating the paddle desk wore a black Ann Taylor dress, looking like every other rich, husband-hunting socialite. She recognized Melissa as she approached, and unknowingly was correct in discerning her intent. She smiled beautifully. "If you are looking for Mr. Blaire, he is in his office," the debutante offered.

"Did Walters auction off the English sideboard with the acorn carvings?" Melissa struggled to keep the impatience—and pain—out of her voice.

The woman's eyes lit up. "You just missed it. I've never seen such heated bidding..." The woman never finished her sentence. Melissa disappeared through the exit.

The barrette in Melissa's hair dug into her neck, so she unclasped it and jammed it into her jacket pocket. Her hair fell loosely at her shoulders as she took the stairs two at a time to Mark's office. She rarely, if ever, came to Mark's office, but this time, nothing would stop her. The door was closed. She heard voices within. She didn't

bother knocking. Rather, she barreled through the door like a runaway freight train.

“My sideboard. Where is it?” she cried angrily, as the door banged against the wall behind her.

Mark was seated behind his desk, dressed impeccably in a dark Armani suit and tie, his white shirt starched to perfection, his black hair combed back. His office, of course, was sheer opulence. Two men sat in the chairs before him. Billy Morton, Mark’s attorney sat in one chair. Melissa considered Billy as calculating and greedy a man as her cousin. A stranger sat in the other chair.

Mark smiled at her intrusion, as if he had expected her and was rewarded by her reaction. “Come in, Melissa,” he said casually. If Melissa weren’t seething, she would have heard the patronizing tone in his voice, as if he had calculated her actions. His smile revealed perfect teeth, which complemented his tanned face and ebony eyes beneath arched brows. “Won’t you greet my guests?”

Outraged, Melissa began to cross the room but stopped in her tracks. She became oblivious to Mark’s voice, for her attention was held by the stranger who turned to look at her. He had the most beautiful, smoky blue eyes she had ever seen. His face was exquisite and his gaze held a power that hit her like a gloved fist. She felt as if she were falling into a swirling tunnel, down,

down, down. She reached out blindly, bracing herself against the back of a chair as her breath filled her lungs in a gasp.

Billy saw Melissa's distress. "Melissa, what the devil is wrong?"

Melissa shook her head, as if to clear it, then looked at Billy. She was too rattled to think. Mark's voice brought her back.

"Melissa, you know Billy. Allow me to introduce Ian Marshall," Mark said with pure pleasure.

Melissa refused the seat Billy offered her. Whatever had shaken her disappeared. She crossed the room and circled Mark's desk to face him directly. She glanced at Ian Marshall. "Mr. Marshall, you'll have to excuse me. I have urgent business with my cousin," she said, dismissing Mark's guest. Melissa realized the man had not yet spoken a word. Somewhere beneath her rage, she wondered if his voice was as beautiful as the face that watched her with open curiosity.

"As I've told you before, Melissa, you have no business with me," Mark interrupted. "You see, Mr. Marshall just purchased our most valuable piece. We were concluding our business."

Melissa understood immediately. Her voice fell dangerously. "That sideboard is mine, Mark. You stole it."

Mark winced, and shook his head sadly, as if Melissa was bringing up a sore subject. "Not again, Melissa. Please. We have guests."

It was all Melissa needed. Like lightening, she slapped Mark across the face. The sound reverberated across the room. Billy Morton and Ian Marshall exchanged glances. Mark recovered enough to smile. He met Melissa's heated gaze. "Why don't you go home, Melissa?"

Ian Marshall rose. He spoke cautiously in a rich baritone Melissa found infuriatingly soothing. "Mark, is this your cousin of whom you spoke?"

Mark smiled indulgently. "Yes, as I warned you, Melissa feels she has claim to the sideboard. The piece has been in my mother's family for generations and Melissa has it in her mind it belongs to her."

"It does belong to me!" she cried, and felt her control slipping. "It's mine. It was always mine. You have no right to do this."

Mark reached for her hand. She recoiled as if bitten by a snake. "Don't touch me!" She realized the shrill, hysterical voice was hers.

"If there is any problem, I wish to clear it before I leave," Ian Marshall insisted.

"The only problem here is a family one, Mr. Marshall. I assure you. My mother's death seems to have exaggerated Melissa's condition."

"Condition? What are you telling him?" Melissa asked, incredulous.

Mark stood and calmly looked at his guests. "I think our business is concluded, gentlemen. I will take care of Melissa."

“I can take care of myself, Mark Blaire,” she cried, realizing all of her judgement had snapped. “I want my sideboard, you thief!”

Ian cast a concerned glance at Melissa. “I had better leave you two to conclude this matter,” he said politely.

“You can’t leave,” she stammered. “Mark sold *my* sideboard to you.”

Ian looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Miss Ryan. I understand you’ve been under a fair amount of stress.” He laid a hand on his breast pocket as if to reassure himself he still held the signed papers. He shook Mark’s hand, then Billy’s.

“I’m sorry for this outburst, Mr. Marshall,” Mark said quietly. “I warned you this might happen.”

“What are you saying? Don’t let him leave!” Melissa cried. She attempted to lunge for the man, but Billy restrained her.

“Wait, Melissa. Think what you are doing,” Billy whispered. “You have no proof. You look ridiculous.”

Melissa watched, speechless, as the man departed. She was dangerously pale.

“Close your mouth, Melissa. You’ll catch flies,” Mark said chuckling, once the door was closed.

Melissa’s gaze slid from Billy, who looked terribly uncomfortable, to Mark, who watched her, waiting for her next move.

“You sold my sideboard.” She said this as much to herself as to her cousin. Melissa wanted to crumple, but rage seeped into her muscles, steeling her nerves. She would undo Mark’s work, no matter the cost. She faced him, her face rigid. “You won’t get away with this.”

Mark grew serious. “You shouldn’t have left the sideboard in the house, Melissa. How was I to tell what was mother’s and what was yours?”

God help her, she wanted to kill him. “You stupid fool,” Melissa said. “If you had given me a chance to speak with you, none of this would have happened.”

Mark lifted a speck of lint off his jacket. “Just what do you mean?”

“I mean,” she said pointedly, moving in close enough to smell his cologne, “I was willing to give my half of Carlisle’s back to you.” She was rewarded by a look of shock. Mark and Billy exchanged glances. She smiled, relishing this small satisfaction. “But no. You refused my calls. You would not listen or speak to me for weeks, Mark. And now this.” She slapped the catalogue onto his desk and pulled herself to her full height of five feet eight inches. Melissa was in control of her emotions again. “Now you will never have my half of Carlisle’s. I will sue you to your last dime for stealing *my* sideboard, and then I’ll remain at Carlisle’s as an albatross around your greedy little neck.”

She flipped her blond hair casually over her shoulder as she headed for the door. “You’ll hear from my attorney.” She exited, not bothering shutting the door. The silence in her wake was deafening.



Melissa entered the side door to the auction room. She approached the clerk’s desk and sat quietly on the stool beside him.

“Give me Ian Marshall’s address.”

“I can’t do that,” he protested.

“You can give me that man’s address or your resignation,” she replied, her blue eyes flashing dangerously.

The clerk hesitated, then nervously fingered through the pages of a small notebook. With a well-manicured hand, he scribbled a name and address on a pad, tore the sheet off and slid it across the desk to her.

Melissa smiled, but her eyes held his coolly. “Thank you.” She left through the side door, making a mental note to fire the insufferable bore the day she returned. The taxi stopped at the Central Park West address. Melissa checked the number on the building with the information in her hand. The doorman opened the glass door.

“May I help you, Madam?” He asked.

“I am looking for Ian Marshall.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“No.”

“Wait a moment, I will ring him.”

Melissa watched as he lifted the phone. “Yes, Mr. Marshall. There’s a lady here to see you. Your name, please?”

“Melissa Ryan,” she answered.

“Melissa Ryan, sir.” He looked at Melissa, then replaced the phone. He nodded to the lobby. “Take the first elevator.”

The elevator doors opened onto a private landing. Melissa stepped onto a black marble floor and walked the few steps to an arched white door. Before she could knock, the door opened. He stood there in a linen shirt and black slacks, much different from this morning’s dark suit. Once again she was faced with those eyes—so smoky, so deep.

“Mr. Marshall?” she asked, not exactly sure how to continue.

“What can I do for you, Miss Ryan?” English. His accent was English. She hadn’t noticed that fact in Mark’s office. His deep voice, which she did remember however, was cautious and abrupt.

“Ah, well, Mr. Marshall, would you let me speak with you?”

His look of distrust was almost enough to make her turn for the elevator. But she met his gaze steadily. Mark must have told him a very persuasive tale about her. After what seemed an

interminably long time he remembered his manners. He opened the door wider, exposing more of the same marble that met wood floors gleaming with reflected sunlight. “Won’t you come in?”

The subtle scent of bay rum filled her senses as she passed him into a room that flowed to a wall of windows overlooking Central Park and the Manhattan skyline. He gestured toward a chair. “Please, have a seat.”

Melissa steered away from the overstuffed leather chair and perched on the edge of the couch for fear of sinking into its down cushions. She was suddenly aware of the length of her legs as sitting on the low couch pulled her skirt higher. Ian Marshall smiled cordially.

“I was about to fix a drink. Would you care for one?” he asked, turning to a table that held a tray of decanters. He poured a splash of amber liquid into a glass with ice, and looked at her, the decanter poised over an empty glass.

“No, thank you, Mr. Marshall. I won’t stay long.”

“Very well.”

Melissa watched as he approached. He was handsome. No, she corrected, he was the most beautiful man she had ever laid eyes on. His face seemed to have been molded by gods: smoky, deep blue eyes beneath a dark arched brow and a head of rich mahogany curls. He had a straight

nose and high cheekbones. She glanced at his broad shoulders and the glow of tanned skin revealed by the open collar of his shirt. He was tall, and walked with an easy step in a pair of pants that accented his muscled legs. She forced her gaze to his face as he stepped onto the rug between them and sipped his drink. Melissa became uncomfortable with the silence... and her own thoughts.

“Look, Mr. Marshall, I’ll get right to the point...”

“Yes. Let me understand this,” he interrupted. He sat on the leather chair, sinking comfortably into its depths. “A mistake has been made regarding my purchase.” He spoke as if she was dull-witted.

She held out a stopping hand. “I don’t know what story Mark told you, but it was a lie. I can prove the sideboard is mine.”

“How?”

She looked at him, suddenly at a loss. How was she going to prove that a piece of furniture that had been passed down through the generations like a photo, or a cherished piece of porcelain, was hers? There were no deeds. No records.

Ian watched her for a long moment. The ice tinkled softly in his glass. “I thought perhaps you’d offer me double what I paid for the piece,” he said, grinning unexpectedly.

“Mr. Marshall, I am dead serious,” she said, aware her raw emotions were visible and his grin

was causing an uncomfortable flutter in her stomach.

The grin faded. "I, too, am dead serious, Miss Ryan," he said soberly. "I came from England for the sideboard."

She looked confused. "You don't live here?"

"I live in England," he replied almost too politely. "This is a friend's flat."

She didn't have to look around to know Ian Marshall must have influential friends. "How is it you came from England..." She waved a dismissing hand. Mark would have notified international agents. "... so quickly, I mean?"

"I left immediately after receiving the papers Mark sent. I couldn't trust bidding by telephone."

"What papers?" she asked.

He looked at her oddly. "Of the legend, of course. I should think you would know if the sideboard belonged to you."

Her astonishment was clear. "I have never seen any papers or heard of any legend," she admitted. Then, almost to herself, "How did Mark?"

Ian shrugged. "He faxed copies to me a week ago. They had Beatrice Blaire's name on them."

Melissa felt her control slip just a notch. She closed her eyes. "This is a nightmare," she whispered. When she opened her eyes Ian Marshall was studying her, his brow creased in confusion.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head. “Sorry. You seem familiar.”

“We’ve never met. I’ve never been to England,” she replied, making a supreme effort to smile cordially. Still he looked at her, his gaze traveling the length of her blonde hair, dropping quickly—almost uncontrollably—to her long legs, then returning to her face. He studied her eyes until she felt uncomfortable. But she could not look away.

She found herself looking back, her smile fading. There was something about him, his look. Something distant yet intimate... and beckoning. Hold on girl, she cautioned herself. You are here for one reason. “And I am sure I would have remembered had we met before,” she added more firmly than she cared.

“Yes, of course,” he replied, and sipped his drink. He looked away and shook his head as if mistaken.

Melissa forced herself back on track. “Mr. Marshall, you must understand.”

He waved an impatient hand. “I cannot believe Mark would sell a sideboard you already owned. I’ve conducted business with him countless times.”

She could only tell the truth. “I’m sure you heard rumors Mark auctioned the Blaire estate out of anger. The sideboard was my mother’s. It was in his home since we both were raised there. He posted the sideboard for auction to hurt me.” Her

voice dropped wearily. And he succeeded, she wanted to add.

Ian had been listening, his eyes watching her with a little too much interest.

Melissa pressed on. "May I purchase the sideboard from you?"

He looked at her in disbelief, his drink stopping in midair.

"You do not understand," she continued. "This is all very confusing and... unusual... but I can arrange to have your money returned to you."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"The sideboard is being shipped to England from Carlisle's as we speak."

"You can't!" Melissa cried, and jumped to her feet. Her purse dropped from her lap. She ignored it, clenching her fists at her sides. He had to understand!

Ian placed his glass on the table beside him and looked up at the woman standing before him. "I'm sorry, Miss Ryan. I traveled a long way for that piece. I'm sure you and Mr. Blaire will resolve your family problem adequately." The way he stressed the word *family* suggested he did not believe her and his patience was running short.

"I will retain an attorney on the matter," she threatened quietly, looking down at him—at those smoky, blue eyes. "You will have gone to the

expense of shipping my sideboard for nothing.”

He stood, reached for her bag and handed it to her. “Miss Ryan, really. I’ve heard enough.”

“It is *my* sideboard!” Melissa said through clenched teeth.

“You are mistaken. It is my sideboard.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked. Unconsciously, she noticed she came up to his shoulders. He was tall indeed.

“I am taking it back to the place where it was made.”

“How do you know its origin?” she asked. How did anyone know it?

He waved a weary hand. “It’s a long story, Miss Ryan.” He gave her a meaningful glance. “I think your trouble now lies with your cousin.”

Melissa felt her spirits drain. He spoke the truth. Legally, Ian Marshall was not responsible for Mark’s deceit, even if she could prove it in time. Tears threatened any moment. “I must go,” she said softly, and headed for the door. In a last attempt, she swung around on her heels, not quite sure what she would say. “Mr. Marshall, I... I have loved that sideboard since I was a child. It is more than a mere piece of furniture!”

“I know,” he said almost inaudibly.

She shook her head in confusion. He had to understand. “*Please*. Give me two days to clear this affair.” She looked at him, embarrassed by the pressure of unshed tears. She pressed a hand

to her cheek.

His gaze softened. "I'm sorry," he replied. "There is nothing I can do."

Ungracefully, she reached for the door.

"Miss Ryan," he said softly.

But she was gone.

Ian Marshall stared at the empty space where Melissa Ryan had just stood. He was bewildered. She seemed so familiar to him, but how could it be? She was an American and he rarely came to the States. He rubbed his forehead, fatigued. Winning the sideboard at an auction was exhausting enough. Having to deal with overwrought members of the Blaire family was more than he cared to stand. He was ready to depart New York; it's noise, and its people. He wanted to follow his sideboard home.



An hour later, Melissa was grateful Mark wasn't in as she passed his office on the second floor at Carlisle's. She followed the long corridor, watching the vine pattern on the carpet undulate under her feet. This she had done this so many times as a child, but she used to run instead of walk to make the pattern move faster. She smiled to herself as she pushed the brass plate on the swinging wood-paneled door to the library. There she found Anderson unloading a carton of antique

books. It always amazed Melissa how dusty the cartons and books themselves were when they arrived.

“You’d think people would take care of their valuables,” Melissa said, clucking her tongue in disapproval.

The bespectacled woman looked up over the rim of her glasses. Her gray hair was in a neat chignon, and her face, though aged, seemed to contain vitality and youth. The woman’s blue eyes twinkled.

“Melissa Ryan, its about time you’ve come to see me!”

“Sorry, Anderson,” Melissa said sheepishly.

“Anderson? I’ve told you time and again, it’s Auntie Anderson,” the woman retorted.

Melissa grinned at the familiar argument. “You know I’m too old for that now.”

Anderson’s face softened. “I know what’s happened. Mark is livid,” Anderson said quietly.

“I’m suing him.”

“I’m not surprised.” Anderson reverently removed a leather-bound copy of Homer’s Iliad. “This one has to be one hundred years old,” she said in a hushed voice.

“Almost as old as you!” Melissa teased.

“Mind your manners, child. You’ll be in my shoes one day.”

Melissa wrapped an arm around Anderson. “And you’ll still be older!”

“Now how can I help if you’re disrespectful?” Anderson replaced the book and stood wiping her hands of dust. She gave Melissa a stern glare, all the while her mouth twitched with a grin.

“I do need your help,” Melissa admitted, “and thank you for sending me that catalogue.”

Anderson gave a dismissing wave. “Why don’t we take a stroll up to the roof and get some air?” She led Melissa to the door, then turned. “Wait here. I must get something from my desk.”

The roof had served as a garden retreat for Anderson for years. Slowly, but surely, she had brought in potted trees, flowering plants, and an arched trellis now covered with ivy and climbing sweet peas. Uncle Malcolm, who had frequented the hideaway on hectic days, had indulged Anderson with a Japanese meditation pool, its fountain a small stream bubbling over stones and rocks interspersed with small shrubs and moss. A deck and cabana had been built off the pool. Several chaise lounges and side tables completed the retreat. One could escape in this contrived garden. Only by stepping past the blind of potted shrubs and trees at the edge of the deck could one really see the rooftop.

The two women settled into armchairs beneath the cabana to escape the late afternoon sun. Anderson reached into her pocket and placed the parcel she had retrieved from her desk in Melissa’s hand.

“What is this?” Melissa asked, touching the burgundy velvet pouch.

“It’s for you. Beatrice brought it to me shortly before she became ill.”

Melissa loosened the tiny gold cord securing the pouch. A ruby and pearl cross fell into her hand. Attached to it was a delicate chain with tiny pearls, the pearls so old the patina had faded. “Oh! It is beautiful!”

Anderson smiled. “There seems to be a story behind this necklace.”

Melissa looked up. “Was it Aunt Beatrice’s?”

“No, your mother’s. No one knows exactly which of your ancestors owned it first, but the owner of the sideboard also gets the cross.”

“Why?”

Anderson compressed her lips as she did when unsure of how to answer a question. “Beatrice wasn’t too clear on details. She merely insisted I deliver it to you when you inherited the sideboard.”

“Why didn’t she give this to me herself?”

Anderson shrugged. “She didn’t say. Only that she had some papers explaining a legend. Something about the sideboard being tied to medieval lovers who died, or committed suicide or something,” she said, waving a hand in confusion. “Beatrice planned to give the papers to you with the necklace. One day, she found Mark snooping through her belongings. Shortly afterward, the papers were gone, and Mark claimed ignorance to

knowledge of them. So she gave this to me for safe keeping.” She sighed and shook her head.

“Papers!” Melissa gasped. “Ian Marshall said Mark faxed him papers.” Melissa studied the cross in her hand. “He also said the sideboard belonged in England. I guess this... legend corresponds to something he knows.” She shook her head, fighting a headache. Anderson reached over and squeezed Melissa’s hand. The cross felt warm in Melissa’s other hand. “If only things could have been different,” Melissa whispered softly.

“Things, as you call them, always have a way of working out for the best,” Anderson replied in her matter-of-fact manner.

“Should I wear it?” Melissa asked, carefully lifting the delicate necklace.

“Of course! Here, I’ll lift your hair for you.”

Melissa liked the easy weight of the jewelry around her neck. As the cross settled against her skin, Melissa felt a sensation like pinpricks at her temples. She closed her eyes, wincing at the discomfort. She felt lightheaded, as if the floor was a million miles away.

“Your hair is such a beautiful color,” Anderson commented as she released the silken yellow strands, unaware of Melissa’s silent distress.

“My mother always said I had my father’s hair,” Melissa replied softly, her brow furrowing at the ache in her temples.

“Surely you jest,” Anderson said, scoffing.

“Your father had black hair.”

Melissa looked at Anderson with confusion as the pain receded. “What?”

“You said your mother said you had your father’s hair,” the elder woman repeated.

“Impossible, Anderson. I hardly remember my mother.” Melissa gave her an odd look. “Why would I say such a thing?”

“Heaven knows. Are you all right, child? You look pale.”

Melissa waved a hand. “I’m fine. I have so much on my mind.”

“Of course.” Anderson went to the small refrigerator tucked in the corner. “Let’s have something cool to drink, then you can tell me what you have planned.”



It was now past lunch. Melissa ignored her grumbling stomach as she sat in the well-appointed outer office of William Patterson. Will Patterson had counseled the Blaire family for years and was like an uncle to her. He had known her parents, and helped her manage the large inheritance she had received at their deaths. Will’s partner, Harry Morton, recently suffered an untimely death from an accident. His son, Billy, inherited his father’s seat as partner.

Melissa instinctively disliked Billy for reasons

she could not explain. He was not the concerned grandfatherly type his father had been. Rather, his ivy-league polish grated on her nerves. In the past, Melissa simply ignored Billy and conducted business with Mr. Patterson. At the moment, Mr. Patterson was out. Melissa told the receptionist she would wait.

Melissa opened a compact and groaned softly at her reflection in the small mirror. Thank goodness the bloodshot eyes and blotchy patches on her face had faded, but she looked drained. She had managed to hold her emotions in check for most of yesterday. But no sooner had she left Anderson and entered the sanctuary of her apartment than the tears began.

She gave in to the past weeks of despair, crying for herself, her loss of Aunt Beatrice, who was the only mother she had known, and of course, the loss of her sideboard. Mark was all she had left for family now, and it was inconceivable to her that he would remain heartless for the rest of their lives. The thought left her numb. But nothing, not even Mark, would stop her from reclaiming her sideboard. Her resolve became all the stronger.

“Would you like a cup of coffee, Miss Ryan?”

Melissa glanced at the secretary. “Yes, thank you,” she said, closing the compact with a snap.

Left with cookies and coffee, Melissa was alone with her thoughts. Somewhere down the long wood-paneled corridor a LaserJet printer

whined in constant motion and mimicked Melissa's strained thoughts. Ian Marshall was, indeed, an innocent party in purchasing her sideboard, unaware of Mark's deceit. However, the sideboard was hers and no one else's!

And how could the papers Mark faxed to England have existed for so long without her knowledge? Were they fraudulent? Why hadn't Aunt Beatrice given them to her? It just did not make sense.

Mark had sold the sideboard clearly meaning to hurt her. Did Mark think she would be so easily chased from Carlisle's now?

Melissa bit into a cookie, grateful for something to put into her stomach. She sipped the coffee. It was hot, and at the moment, the only thing that seemed real.

The elevator chime sounded like the tinkle of bells submerged under water from where Melissa sat in the reception area. She looked into the lobby through the glass wall as elevator doors opened. Billy Morton appeared. Their eyes met and, once again, Melissa felt a chill run up her spine.

She could not quite pinpoint what it was about the man that rattled her so. He was, indeed, poised. His wavy brown hair was neatly trimmed. His face, although a bit too angular for her liking, was handsome enough. He had an engaging smile and the lean body of a runner. His presence gave

the impression he was larger. She watched him approach and decided it was his eyes that unsettled her. For brown eyes they were too cool, too distant. There was no warmth or trust to be found in them. No wonder Mark likes him, she mused.

“Melissa, what a surprise,” he murmured in a well-practiced tenor. One would think they hadn’t seen each other in years.

“Good afternoon, Billy,” she answered, choking down a small morsel of cookie.

“Looks as if you’ve been camped here for a while,” he said, eyeing the plate on the table and the half-finished cup of coffee in her hands.

Melissa shrugged at the implication that important people never waited. “I have urgent business with Mr. Patterson,” she replied, placing the cup on its saucer. She shot him a challenging look. “And I can wait forever, if necessary.”

Billy formed a silent ‘o’ with his lips. His brow creased. “Anything I can do?”

Not a beggar’s chance, she thought. “No, thank you.”

He studied her a long moment, crossed his arms and tapped a finger to his lips. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with Mark?” he asked.

She gave him a skeptical look. “Don’t play games with me, Billy.”

He smiled. Melissa just stared at him. His charms fell useless on her. He cleared his throat. “Actually, Mark has removed Mr. Patterson from

representing the Blaires. I now manage the estate. Mr. Patterson wasn't pleased, but I think he was glad to keep your family's business within the firm."

Melissa held her surprise in check. Billy was such a manipulator. "I cannot believe you stood by while Mark auctioned off my sideboard."

He cocked an eyebrow. "I learned too late the sideboard was yours."

"What you really mean to say is now that Mark holds the Blaire estate, it wasn't in your interest to speak the truth in front of Ian Marshall."

He held out a hand. "I would be happy to help you now."

"Like dealing with the devil?" she asked.

He smiled. "It is in both Mark's and your interest to reconcile. Think of Carlisle's."

She scoffed at his words. Carlisle's had caused this trouble. She had never wanted to be a part of the auction world, but no one knew this fact. The years she dedicated at Carlisle's were out of thanks for her aunt and uncle's generosity. She could never convince Mark otherwise. And now here she was.

She let out an impatient breath. Like Billy Morton or not, she was getting nowhere in the reception area. Reluctantly she stood. Perhaps she could sway him to help her. The drone of the laser printer filled her ears then grew dim as they

passed the printer room and entered the open area for the secretarial pool. The monitors at each station glowed a pale green. Cursors pulsed across screens as if chased by the words entered behind them.

Billy escorted Melissa to his office, a study in browns and deep blues. On the wall behind his desk was a large oil painting Melissa assumed was of the White Cliffs of Dover. The artist viewed the cliffs from the sea. Clear blue water with churning waves led the eye to the shore then up the massive chalk cliffs, seven of them, starkly white and majestic against the blue sky.

“Oh, that is beautiful,” she said.

Billy looked pleased. “My favorite. It’s called the Seven Sisters.” He smiled indulgently at the painting.

“Then it is not Dover?”

“No. It’s west of Dover near Beachy Head.” He tore his gaze away from the scene. “The shoreline of southern England is exquisite. Don’t you think?”

“I’ve never been there,” she replied.

“Neither have I,” he said.

Melissa shivered.

“Is the air conditioning too much?” he asked.

“No, I’m fine.” She sat in the chair he offered.

He punched the intercom key on his telephone and waited for his secretary to respond. “Mrs. Jawski, bring the file on the Blaire estate,” he said.

Melissa looked away. Inside her instincts were on full alert as she regarded Billy in silence.

There was a knock on the door. The secretary entered holding a portfolio. She smiled at Melissa and passed the Blaire portfolio to Billy's hands.

"Billy," Melissa began when they were alone again.

He held up a stopping hand. "Just a moment, let me look through here."

"Look," she continued. "There is nothing in there that says the sideboard is mine. The fact that I own it has never been an issue."

"Then what do you want?" he asked, closing the file.

"I want it back," she said flatly. Her palms felt slick with perspiration against the gleaming wood of the chair.

He shook his head. "You can obtain witness testimonies. We can start legal procedures. But Melissa, this won't have any bearing in England."

"What do you mean?"

Billy opened his hands helplessly. "Your problem is with Mark, not the Englishman. Legally, he has every right to it. You can only press charges against Mark for violating the trust, breach of faith as estate executor, or larceny. Pick one or all."

Melissa grew adamant. "I wouldn't care if Mark fell off the face of the earth," she said in a low, dangerous voice. "I want my sideboard."

“Put your emotions aside for a moment. You’re reacting because Mark is pushing you around.”

A dangerous light flared in her eyes. “Wouldn’t you?”

He gave her a sideways glance. “Why don’t you let me speak with him?”

“Talking won’t do any more. I’ll fight him every step of the way.”

Billy leaned toward her. “I understand what you are saying. However, Carlisle’s future rests on your and Mark’s shoulders.”

Melissa glared at him. Damn Carlisle’s.

“As Mark’s attorney and, I’d hope, yours, it is in my interest to protect you both.”

She smirked. “Mark will be paying your fees, Billy.”

He inhaled deeply. “Look. You’re half owner of Carlisle’s, for goodness sake. Are you going to let the press get wind of your lawsuit against Mark? You don’t want a scandal in your own company, do you?”

Melissa had thought of that fact. Damn. He was right. There had already been too much bad press on the Blaire name. She owed it to Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Malcolm to settle this quietly.

In the eight short years since Mark had taken his father’s place, Carlisle’s had flourished at his hands. The power and prestige of running a world-renowned auction house had not overwhelmed him. Melissa often questioned Mark’s

principles and his greed, but she could never fault his business acumen. He had earned the respect of the art world and Wall Street with his dashing, aggressive personality and calculated risks that earned his investors superb results.

Mark concentrated his efforts mostly on the society from which Carlisle's might represent estates. He ran with the haughty elite of whom Melissa, by choice, knew only by name from the society section of the *Times*. Aunt Beatrice often hinted that Mark needed Melissa to temper him. Melissa had been flattered but never interested. Only to humor Beatrice had Melissa spent afternoons at tea discussing Carlisle's possibilities with her. The matron had nodded in sage agreement and grinned mischievously over her teacup at the prospect of Melissa advising her headstrong son.

Beatrice and Malcolm had always hoped Mark would take a brotherly view toward Melissa, but that was never to be. Now Melissa was being asked, once again, to ignore her personal desires for the family's sake. Even in death Beatrice would triumph. No matter how angry with Mark Melissa might be, she could never besmirch the family name that had earned its greatness through the generations. She met Billy's gaze.

"I am still retaining Will Patterson as my attorney. I will agree to work with you as long as Will does, and states as much in writing."

"Agreed."

“I want Mark prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law,” she said firmly, her eyes reflecting her intent.

“Mark will understand your wishes. Rest assured.”

She leaned toward the desk. “No phone calls. I want him served the papers.”

Billy stood. He placed a hand on the closed portfolio. “Mark will be served papers and will answer for his actions.”

“Thank you,” she said, and rose. She chose not to shake his hand. Billy Morton would execute what he said, but not before Mark was made aware. Yet, she didn’t mind. This lawsuit would buy her time to finish the plan formulating in her mind.

Billy opened the door for her. “Can you be reached at home?”

“Not after tomorrow. I will call you.”

“Will you be out of town?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask where?”

She looked at him squarely, determination etched on her face. “England,” she answered.

Chapter 2



Melissa flew first class to London. She spoke to no one on the plane, and read magazines without interest while her mind swirled with unfinished thoughts and plans on how to retrieve what was rightfully hers. She watched out the window as the plane descended, catching a glimpse of Windsor Castle in the rising sun. She felt calm as the plane taxied to the gate. England was new territory for her, yet the only anxiety she felt was for her sideboard. She reached for her carry-on, anxious to stretch her legs.

Riding the tube into London was as simple as she had heard. Aunt Beatrice would have insisted she take a limo, but Aunt Beatrice had pampered—no, imposed on—Melissa throughout the years with chauffeurs, tutors, cotillions, debutante balls, and all the most nauseating, character-stifling rules and activities expected of the very rich. Propriety and etiquette had been the rule of thumb during her formative years—a rule that chafed

sorely against her independent nature.

Aunt Beatrice had scoffed when Melissa remembered tearful rides to school in a Rolls Royce while a yellow school bus full of screaming laughing kids pulled up next to the car at a stop-light. The bus loaded with children looked like heaven to her, but Aunt Beatrice had prevailed. She felt gloriously rebellious now sandwiched between commuters.

Melissa wore her sunglasses on the train, more to hide her exhaustion than to protect her eyes from the morning sun. Behind the dark lenses she could observe other passengers undetected. Across the aisle a woman with a strong British accent and lipstick too red for her hair color exchanged office gossip with a woman sitting opposite her. Both were dressed in skirts and light cardigans with shoes to match their bags. They spoke loudly, betraying themselves as secretaries in a large office pool. It occurred to Melissa that this was their home, not hers, and this morning was one in many they shared five days a week.

Melissa glanced down at her own attire. Granted, the Chanel blouse and Ralph Lauren jacket couldn't be avoided, but she wore jeans and felt very chic. If it wasn't for the suitcase, she could have passed as a local. She wondered if she could pass as an English woman. Aunt Beatrice would turn over in her grave!

Once in the room at her hotel, she kicked off

her shoes, peeled off the jacket and flopped onto the bed. The full import of purpose settled on her as she stared at the ceiling. What next?

She had obtained Ian Marshall's address from Carlisle's. The invoice copy she had taken said her sideboard arrived yesterday at Gatwick Airport, just outside of London. From there, it was taken by truck directly to Marshall's residence, an estate south of London in Sussex.

How to find and gain access to Ian Marshall's property was the tricky part. He would know her intent immediately upon discovering her presence. How would she approach him? How would she find "Long Hope," the place Ian Marshall called home? Pulling a map of England from her carry-on, she turned it over to the detailed side. Sussex was huge. This was a nearly impossible task. She reached for the phone.

"Front desk. May I help you?" came a woman's voice.

"Melissa Ryan. Room 214. I will need a car."

"Certainly, Miss Ryan. I can arrange the rental. When would you like it?"

"Tomorrow morning, please."

"Is there anything else?"

Melissa hesitated. "Yes. I'll be headed south to Sussex. Any chance you've heard of a place named 'Long Hope?'"

"I'm afraid not," came the reply. "We do have guidebooks here in the lobby that might be of help."

“Thank you.” Melissa replaced the receiver on the cradle. She debated calling Anderson in New York for advice, then decided not. There were plenty of decisions to make before checking out in the morning. She had secured this room for one reason only: to sleep off a jet lag from the red-eye flight. She fished two aspirins from her purse and swallowed them with a gulp from the bottled water in her carry-on. She closed the curtains, pulled off her jeans and curled up under the covers.

Her mind reeled with thoughts, but she willed herself calm. The last thing that crossed her mind was that she was in England. And free. For the next several hours, she could forget her aunt’s death, Mark’s treachery and her quest to retrieve her sideboard. For now she was in a small darkened room with fresh flowers and covers that lay softly against her cheek. She dozed with a smile.

Unfamiliar sounds on the street below jogged her from a deep sleep. Her eyes opened to see the wrist watch near her face read 4:17. She felt groggy and, at first, bewildered by her surroundings. She rolled onto her back, relishing the lingering dregs of sleep. Curtains blocked the light so she was unsure if she had slept through the night. The resounding sounds of traffic in the street below answered her thought. It was afternoon. She opened the curtains. Late day sunlight spilled into the room. Melissa felt as if England had been carrying on without her. She was ready to begin her search, but first she

was very hungry.

The hotel was once the home of an aristocrat. Melissa descended the curving staircase, her footsteps soundless on the carpeted stairs, her fingertips brushing the smooth mahogany banister beneath her hand. The reception desk below the staircase was empty except for a young man standing with his back to her, his head bent in concentration as he wrote something in a ledger. Clearly, he hadn't heard her descent and she waited silently until he looked up.

He seemed startled to see her there. "May I help you?" he asked.

"Could you suggest a good restaurant for dinner? I'm starving."

"Hmm. Restaurants." He checked his watch. She sensed his concern that she would dine before the dinner hour. He glanced at her politely. "Would you like traditional English or foreign fare?"

"Foreign? How do you mean?"

"Well, there are excellent Chinese and Italian restaurants one block over on Queensway. But there's a good pub on the corner across from Hyde Park that has excellent lamb's liver or pot pies."

Raised eyebrows were the best she could do to avoid a nasty response to lamb's liver. "It's good news they are all so close. I'll take a stroll and see which appeals to me."

“Very well, miss.”

She could have sworn he clicked his heels.

“Is there anything else I can do?” he asked.

She wondered if they had eagle scouts in England. “I was told there are guidebooks available?”

“Of course, miss.” He reached under the desk and produced several books and road maps. “Perhaps these might help.” The young man adjusted his tie and smoothed the hair at his temple with the palm of his hand, as if preparing himself for his next task.

This must be his first day, Melissa thought. “May I take these into the sitting room?” she asked.

“I believe that would be possible,” he said, pursing his lips in thought.

She leaned over conspiratorially. “I’ll return them as soon as I’m finished.” She pointed to the wing chair beneath the leaded glass windows of the parlor. “I will be over there if you should need these before then.”

“Thank you, Miss.” He was obviously pleased with her willingness to cooperate.

Melissa sauntered away, chuckling to herself, and settled into the chair, ignoring the emptiness in her stomach. This was a task she should have settled before arriving in England, but Anderson in her wisdom suggested Melissa wait to plan her agenda until she “got a feel” for the area. The

feeling at the moment was that Melissa had no idea what to do next.

Time was of the essence. Carlisle's, for now, remained solely in Mark's hands. Thank goodness for Anderson. She had eyes in every corner of the building. Nothing would go without being noticed. Melissa had also decided to give Anderson power of attorney to act in her absence. Not even Billy Morton knew of Melissa's decision to give Anderson this power. Though Morton had promised to help Melissa, she knew he was first and foremost Mark's attorney.

But staying away from Carlisle's was not her major concern. The sideboard was. Melissa wanted to take Ian Marshall by surprise, retrieve her sideboard—only God knew how—and escape quickly.

She flipped through FODOR's guidebooks and found Kent and Sussex. There were castles and manor houses, a few pictures, but no mention of an estate named Long Hope. "What you need is a good meal," she said softly to ease her disappointment. Returning the books to the desk, she stepped out into the waning afternoon light, definitely not in search of lamb's liver.



Melissa sat at a small table by a sidewalk cafe, sipping the most heavenly cup of tea. She had

enjoyed a satisfying meal of Italian pasta and a glass of excellent red wine, then wandered around until she found this charming cafe on a side road. Cars passed over this narrow cobble stoned street worn down over the years, while the sidewalk bustled with passersby.

Earlier, she had explored the area along Hyde Park. On every street she spied buildings that smacked of history. She was curious about the buildings, but her gaze continued to wander to the ancient trees inside the park, then to the streets. Although the roads were mostly covered in blacktop, she couldn't escape the fact that these noisy, bustling thoroughfares predated anything that existed in the states. Beneath the modern night life, Melissa could sense the whisper of ancient history, the muffled calls of fish mongers and pastry vendors, the ring of a hammer to an anvil, the staccati of knight-ridden destriers or the clip-clop of oxen pulling carts.

"More tea, miss?" the waitress asked, holding a tray with a small pot of boiling water. She looked at Melissa's empty cup.

"Yes, thank you. It is the best tea I've ever tasted." Melissa watched as the waitress poured water over the sieve of loose tea above her cup.

Out to the street, modern London looked back. She shook her head. Since arriving in England, her thoughts kept running to this country's rich past. That was natural of course, since England

had so much history. Yet, somehow, she couldn't shake the thought that when the London of the past was filled with fish mongers and muddy streets, somewhere in southern England, a carpenter from long ago had cut, cured and planed an ancient oak to build a sideboard—her sideboard. Had he loved it as much as she did? Did he know it would come down the centuries to her? She wanted her heirloom back. As she serenely sipped the last of her tea, she felt like crying.

The young man behind the desk hailed her as she came through the hotel door. "Miss...?"

"Ryan," Melissa answered.

"Yes. Miss Ryan," he echoed, gratefully. "I have found a few pamphlets offering B & B's."

"B & B's?"

"Bed and Breakfasts. Actually, I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner. Where is your destination?"

"Long Hope estate."

His brow furrowed. "Ah, that would be...?"

"South," Melissa replied, taking the pamphlets. Her ignorance was obvious and it embarrassed her.

"My aunt has a B & B in the south, near Hastings. Is that anywhere near your destination?"

Melissa gave him a helpless glance. "Actually, I'm not sure. I do believe Long Hope is in Sussex."

"I see," he said, clearly confused.

Melissa waved a dismissing hand. "It's a long story. You'll forgive me if I don't explain."

He cleared his throat and blushed. "My aunt is in East Sussex," he said. "I'll ring her if you'd like to arrange a stay. A post card of her inn is in the pamphlet."

An hour later, Melissa was still at a loss. Nothing seemed to give her any direction. Her gaze fell for the hundredth time to the post card the clerk had included. The picture of Bell Cottage had been too charming to ignore. Built in the 1600's—the post card read—as an inn for travelers on the road to Hastings. Mature fruit trees and a low, dense hedge practically hid the brown two-story clapboard building. Melissa could see how the cottage's proximity to the street was once a godsend to those who traveled by horse on dirt roads thick with dust or mud.

Glancing at the windows, Melissa felt an urge to press her nose against them and peer in. It was then she decided. Why not begin at Bell Cottage? At least, she'd be in Sussex. She reached for the phone and dialed the front desk.

Melissa was up early, despite the difficulty she had falling asleep the night before. Her bed beneath the window had acted as a funnel for the sounds two stories below. London's street life was rowdy, even on a Thursday night. Kitchen help from the restaurants along Queensway noisily dropped garbage into cans and dumpsters after

closing late, and the rumble of garbage trucks at dawn had been enough to keep Melissa tossing and turning most of the night. As much as she loved the city, she would be glad to escape to the country.

She checked her look in the mirror one last time. The sundress and sandals were comfortable. She added a light touch of lipstick. Her hair fell freely about her shoulders in blond waves. Despite her fatigue, her blue eyes were bright with anticipation—or was it apprehension? Her hand touched her bare neck. Reaching into her purse, she pulled out the small velvet pouch that held the ruby and pearl cross. “Maybe today I’ll find my sideboard,” she said to the jewelry and fastened it about her neck.

Pain struck her head like lightning. Her mind swirled. She pressed her hands to her temples. “Ahh!” she cried and collapsed on the bed...

... Morning sun poured through the unshuttered window of a carpenter’s shed. Birds chattered noisily in the woods outside. The fragrance of freshly hewn oak filled her nostrils. Her heart pounded as his hands wrapped around her waist. Her eyes riveted on his as he lifted her, light as a feather. His smile melted her heart. And his eyes. They held her prisoner and she thought she would die for love of him. He lifted her as if in slow motion and placed her on what she thought was a trestle but was too high. Her hands felt the

smoothness of the wood beneath her. The wood itself seemed to sigh at her touch. She glanced. Her sideboard! New! Golden! Unfinished! “Oh, David!” she cried and felt tears welling in her eyes.

“Come to me, Maggie,” he whispered. “*Come to me!*”

Through the swirl she fell. Her head pounded. A horn blared outside her window. A horn? Aunt Beatrice. Aunt Beatrice! Melissa’s eyes fluttered open. She winced as the pain receded and dared not move.

Her mind slowly began to function once more. What had happened? Her stomach lurched. She was going to be ill. She lunged for the bathroom.

Moments later, cold cloth to her face, she glanced at herself in the mirror. Her color was pale. The clock displayed that only minutes had passed. What had happened?

Her gaze fell to the cross at her neck. Did she have a vision? Clearly, she had seen her sideboard—just completed! And that man. She knew his face but could not place where. She had called him David. David. She knew no David. And who was Maggie? “You’re losing your mind,” she whispered to herself. “The pressure is getting to you.”

Melissa popped a mint into her mouth, feeling stronger. She had to get out of this hotel and be on her way. With a sigh she collected her bags. Little teeth of fear nipped at her thoughts, but she

wouldn't succumb. There was too much to accomplish in a very short time for her to be afraid. If only she could call Aunt Beatrice. But Aunt Beatrice could no longer help her.

Obtaining her car was easy. Getting out of London was a nightmare. It was so frustrating that the lines on the map looked nothing like the three dimensional, pitted, heavily congested, store-lined streets that weaved through London with no apparent order. Big Ben was beautiful. Buckingham Palace, superb. She even passed the Tower of London but two and a half hours later.

None of the roads were clearly marked, or if they were, the signs were small or hidden by a tree branch or billboard. It was virtually impossible to navigate and drive simultaneously. Melissa quickly realized that here in London, where it was considered rude to sound the horn of one's car, her driving was the cause of considerable rudeness.

Shaken, she pulled to a curb, fighting back the tears. She spied two men arguing over the open hood of a car. Melissa approached them, map in hand.

"Excuse me, gentlemen. I'm lost." Exasperation was clear in her voice.

The men exchanged an amused glance. Melissa's accent clearly betrayed her as American.

"London's not easy to escape," one man said with humor.

Melissa smiled wearily. “So I’ve learned. I might grow old first before finding my way out.” She showed the men her map. “Can you direct me to the M25?”

“Streets are poorly marked. Locals know them, though,” the other man said, saying more about his attitude toward foreigners than the condition of his city’s streets. Ignoring her map, he pointed back down the road she had come. “Turn back that way, love, and stay on the road. When you come to the turnabout, just continue the other side. After, you’ll see an overpass. That’s the highway south. There’s no sign. Turn right under the overpass and follow the service road. You can enter the highway from there.”

Melissa thanked the men and headed off, wondering if their directions were any clearer than the map in her lap.

By sheer luck, she was sure, Melissa found the M25. She headed south, racing the engine to meet the faster speed limit. Eventually she would access the A21 which would bring her to Bell Cottage. She felt the tension slowly leave her shoulders. Her stomach grumbled for food. She glanced at her watch. No wonder. It was already past noon and she hadn’t eaten.

Almost immediately, London fell away to rolling hills and farmland. Melissa was enchanted. “Now this is the England I expected,” she said to no one.

She dug into the paper sack that held her lunch. The sack rustled companionably beneath her hand in the passenger seat, which in America would have been the driver's seat. This driving on the opposite side of the car, let alone the road, was quite an adventure for her, but she adjusted easily.

She bit into the baguette smeared with Brie cheese and called happily to oncoming traffic, "You're on the wrong side of the road!" Gratefully, the highway speed was way over seventy. No one noticed the American in the rented Honda chatting amiably to herself about the farms and conical oat mills called Oasts dotting the country side as she took bites of her sandwich.

At one point she crossed an overpass offering a view of water and a... a castle. "This place is wonderful," she murmured in amazement. She glanced at herself in the rear-view mirror. "You belong here," she whispered. The thought brought her thoughts back to the fainting spell in the hotel room. Was it a dream born of exhaustion and worry? It had seemed so real. So familiar.

Absently, she fingered the cross at her neck. Her fingers wandered over the tiny aged pearls of the delicate chain. What would she learn about England by the time she returned to New York?



Melissa arrived at Bell Cottage near four o'clock. She passed it the first time on the narrow road since the hedge had partially obscured the small sign. Turning the car about, she turned into the drive and stopped short of a garage. She left the car parked very close to the street.

"Miss Ryan?" came a man's voice for the other side of the hedge.

"Yes," she replied and walked around the car in search of the man. She spied him inside a small gate beneath a trellis of roses.

"Won't you go around to the front door? The Missus will be there to greet you. I'll get your bags."

Melissa nodded. "Thank you."

"Latch the gate after you, will you please?" he called.

A wisteria hung over the door lintel. The two narrow steps to the door were stones. The door itself, heavy wood and painted black, guarded the entrance to Bell Cottage as it had for over three hundred years. Melissa lifted and dropped the doorknocker, already enchanted.

Pat Cooper answered the door. Aproned, with short brown hair, she greeted Melissa with a smile, her light blue eyes curious about her new guest. Melissa guessed the woman was in her fifties. "Miss Ryan?" she said with a perfectly charming English accent.

"Melissa Ryan, yes." Melissa offered the

woman her hand. She shook it in a soft friendly gesture.

“Welcome to Bell Cottage. I called my nephew in London. He said you’d left about nine. I’d expected you earlier.”

Melissa rolled her eyes. “It took me over two hours to find my way out of the city.”

Pat sucked in her breath. “Oh, London is not easy for strangers,” she said. “You must be tired.”

“A little,” Melissa conceded. “But the drive was beautiful.”

Her hostess beamed. “We love it here. Did you have any trouble driving on the left side of the road?” she asked as she escorted Melissa into the parlor.

The ceilings were low and beamed. The floors were wide planked wood beneath many small throw rugs. Heavy brocade curtains hung on a rod that when pulled would not only cover the front windows but the door as well. Bell Cottage was more than charming.

Pat motioned for her to sit on a pillowed couch probably as old as she, and took the smaller chair opposite her. “I think the fact I’m left-handed made the adjustment to the wrong side of the road easy for me,” Melissa answered, grinning at her absurd logic.

Pat smiled back, her eyes twinkling. “Of course, only a yank would think it’s the wrong side of the road,” she said.

“Touché,” Melissa countered. She was going to like this woman.

The man who had greeted her in the drive came through from the dining room. Her bags were in his hands.

“Well, here’s Tim, my husband,” Pat said as she rose.

Tim was a stocky man who looked tall against the low ceilings. His silver hair was probably once as dark as his eyebrows. Friendly brown eyes gazed back at her. They shook hands. “We met in the drive,” he told his wife in a very strong English accent. Here were some real country people, she thought, and again was charmed.

Twenty minutes later, Melissa felt the stress drain through her toes as she sat in the shade of an apple orchard sipping tea and slicing into a piece of chocolate cake that would surely ruin her dinner. She sighed with pleasure.

Beyond the orchard were fields sloping away on narrow hills dotted with trees. At one point the area became woods. It appeared as if the houses were built against the roads in order to hoard all the land behind them. It was a surprise to find so much land left open for farming and pastureland. Melissa was sure very little had changed through the ages.

The back of the cottage was draped with plumbing pipes, painted white to camouflage them as well as possible. Nonetheless, they revealed

how the house had adjusted to modern conveniences. Other than that, Melissa couldn't see any other signs of change.

She heard a horse braying and realized there was a stable behind the hedge dividing Bell Cottage and the adjoining property. A donkey and several sheep grazed in the pasture next to the orchard and a noisy brown bird, one she'd never seen before, flitted along the ground dining on fallen apples. She swatted at a particularly pesky fly that seemed as interested in her cake as she was.

Pat's cheery voice rose from the house. Melissa saw her emerge from the kitchen leading a gentleman behind her.

"Miss Ryan, we have another guest. I would like you to meet Mr. Fraser Kent. He's been here before and we're most fond of him," she said.

"Please call me Melissa," she said to Pat. Fraser Kent smiled down at her. "How do you do?" Melissa asked, and offered her hand.

"It's a pleasure," he countered. His hand was warm, his hand shake genuine.

"Won't you have a seat?" Melissa asked.

"Yes, do, Fraser. I'll bring more tea and cake."

"Will you join us, Pat?" Fraser asked his hostess. She hesitated. "Perhaps for a cup. I do have work."

Melissa placed her plate on the napkin in her lap. It would be rude to eat without them, even

though the half-eaten tower of fudge cake was irresistible.

Fraser saw her hesitation. “No, please, don’t wait. I’ll enjoy watching the effect Pat’s baking has on a new guest.”

Her eyes rolled heavenward. “I’ve already eaten too much,” she said, but didn’t hesitate to lick fudge from her fork. “This is divine!”

Fraser chuckled, clasped his hands across his chest and relaxed into the lawn chair.

Melissa was pleased with the unexpected company. Fraser Kent had the air of a scholar. She guessed his age to be in the mid-forties. He was casually dressed in a pair of walking shorts, a pale plaid shirt and serviceable brown shoes. His blond hair was cropped close to his head. He appeared trim and had a healthy glow to his skin. His smiling light blue eyes met hers.

“American?” he asked.

“Is it that obvious?”

He chuckled once more. “Only to the well-trained ear. Are you on holiday?”

“No. Though this is so beautiful,” she said gesturing to the orchard with the fork in her hand, “it seems like one.”

He glanced around. “This is my third time here. Bell Cottage is special.”

“You’re here on... holiday?” she asked, wanting very much to say ‘vacation’ as every good American would.

“No. I’ll be conducting the London Philharmonic at Battle Abbey tonight.”

“How exciting!” Of course, a conductor.

He smiled. “It’s a fund raiser to restore the Abbey. Every year we perform in a different historic spot.”

“What will you play?”

“The Magic Flute,” he replied. “Do you like opera?”

“Oh, very much. I’d love to see the performance.”

Fraser thought a moment, then seemed uncomfortable. “I’ve given my last ticket away.”

She waved away his embarrassment. “Can I obtain one at the door?”

“Yes, but it’s more of a gate actually. The entrance is in a huge stone wall which surrounds the abbey.”

“Wasn’t Battle Abbey built by William the Conqueror?” Melissa asked, wishing she had paid more attention to her history studies. She took another bite of cake. The fudge icing melted on her tongue.

“Yes. Back then the abbey was no more than a small stone church built on the sight where King Harold fell from an arrow in the eye in 1066.”

Melissa shuddered. “Not a pretty picture,” she said grimly.

“No, but the abbey was William’s apology to the English, and the gesture acted as an effective

balm. The town and abbey grew. Battle became a center of learning, though, I dare say, the monks' prosperity caused occasional uprisings."

Melissa shook her head. "Only the English would hold a concert in a spot having drama and magic of its own." Melissa swallowed the last bite of cake, then unceremoniously licked the fudge from her fork, much to Fraser's amusement.

After a moment he asked. "And what brings you here?"

She hesitated, and took a moment to place her plate on the table. She met his inquiring gaze. "Research," she replied.

"Oh? What type?"

Melissa smiled. "It's a long story. I'm in search of a man."

Fraser raised eyebrows. "Sounds fascinating. Any one man in particular?" He grinned.

Melissa ignored his look. "Actually, yes. His name is Ian Marshall."

The light suddenly faded from Fraser's eyes. He became thoughtful. "I know Ian Marshall. Of Long Hope?"

Melissa's heart skipped a beat. "Yes."

"Why do you seek him?" His question was a challenge.

"Don't worry. It's no big deal. He recently purchased a piece of furniture in New York." She shrugged. "I need to speak with him about it."

"Then you're a dealer."

“Of sorts. My family owns an auction house in New York.”

“Do I know it?”

“Carlisle’s.” Melissa knew the name was as well known as Sotheby’s.

Fraser nodded in his dignified British way. “Then you should know how to contact him.”

“He would prefer I leave him alone,” Melissa replied honestly.

Fraser chuckled. “Ian is always dodging the ladies.”

Melissa scoffed. “The matter has nothing to do with the man, himself. Actually, it’s a family matter. My cousin sold him a sideboard which belonged to me.”

Fraser studied her, debating his next words. Finally, he leaned toward her conspiratorially. “If I didn’t find you so charming, I would not reveal the fact that Ian and his uncle will be in the audience tonight. They are the benefactors of the opera.”

Melissa blinked in disbelief at her incredible luck. “Does he live nearby?”

“I shouldn’t tell you, you know.”

“I’m really no danger to him,” she insisted.

Fraser leaned back in his chair. He smiled to himself. “Ian Marshall could use a little excitement in his life.”

Now it was Melissa’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “Oh, yes?”

“The man lives like a monk at Long Hope.

Spends all his time working on research of his own or charity functions as if he had to.”

Ian Marshall's image rose in Melissa's mind as she had seen him in New York. Both times he seemed formidable, hardly the charitable type. In the auction house he seemed hard-hearted, yet in the apartment, he—no, she thought, he remained unyielding. She had been honest, near tears, practically begging and she had no effect on him. Yet, he had looked at her in a way that had made her weak. She had forgotten that until now. Mentally, she shrugged the memory away. Ian Marshall had no heart as far as she could surmise.

There was no chance he would indulge sentimentality. Melissa still had no idea how she would approach him. His gut-wrenching grin filled her mind in unbidden clarity. Grudgingly, she could not ignore the fact that Ian Marshall and his damnable good looks intrigued her.

“I see I've lost you,” Fraser said, interrupting her thoughts.

“Oh, no. Not at all,” Melissa insisted, feeling her face heat with a blush. “I only just met Mr. Marshall and was remembering our encounter.”

She was rescued by Pat's return. “There now,” she said, placing a tray laden with teapot, cups and cake on the table. “Shall I pour for you, Fraser?”

“This is all so... English,” Melissa said. “The teapot warmers, the pretty dishes, the flowers.”

She gestured to a small vase holding a nosegay. "And the flavor of your tea! Nothing rivals this taste in America." She toasted the two with her cup.

"We do especially like our tea. Don't we, Fraser?" Pat answered.

"Indeed," he said, and delivered a heaping forkful of cake into his mouth. He savored the flavor before speaking. "Pat, did you know that Miss Ryan is acquainted with our Mr. Marshall?"

Pat's eyes brightened. "Oh, Melissa, he's a brilliant young man. Don't you think?"

Fraser snorted with laughter. "He's not exactly young, my dear."

"He's too young for the likes of me," she said, shooting Fraser a sly smile. "But Miss Ryan here. Now she would be perfect for him."

Melissa wanted to die of embarrassment. "Oh, please," she said.

Fraser rolled his eyes. "You must forgive Pat. She loves to be a matchmaker. It, like tea, is a favorite English past time."

Melissa declined to point out that earlier Fraser was on the verge of doing the same. She shrugged helplessly. "We were acquainted in New York on business," Melissa explained to Pat.

"But she's in England precisely to seek him out," Fraser added, sending Melissa a teasing wink.

Melissa chuckled. "I see I'm no match for the

two of you. Will you tell me where he lives?"

"Long Hope lies north of here. Off the B2244 in a valley the locals call Crimson Vale," Fraser answered. "But Ian will be in Battle tonight. Perhaps you can find him there."

"Will you go to the concert then?" Pat asked Melissa.

Melissa smiled mischievously. "I do believe I will."

Chapter 3



Melissa was not prepared for the town of Battle. If not for the cars and smartly dressed people, she could have stepped back into the thirteenth century. The English clearly cherished their past. Except for an occasional alley, the street was lined with whitewashed, shutter-trimmed buildings that seemed to elbow each other for space. Some stood sturdily, others sagged a bit from the passage of time, and rested gratefully against the wall of its neighbor.

The village was spotless. The shops, pubs and businesses crowded the high sidewalk which edged the only narrow cobblestone street that meandered like a stream sloping downward through the town. The abbey stood at the base of the street, its walls formed by huge crenellated boulders that dared anyone to attempt access to the ancient and majestic sanctuary within. Tarps covered parts of the roof where renovations were in progress. Melissa thought of Fraser's comment

that the villagers from the past tried to scale those formidable walls to steal from the wealthy monks.

She absorbed all of this in the midst of a traffic jam on the road above the abbey. Concertgoers looked for places to park, congesting the flow of traffic. Melissa blessed the car rental agent who insisted she rent a small car. There was just enough room on the street for oncoming traffic to pass. A large car could have very easily scraped its sides on the curb that rose a foot above the street.

Melissa finally turned into an alley that led to one of the public parking lots off the main road. She took a moment to collect herself, then hesitated before stepping from the car. An odd sensation overcame her. That nipping fear returned.

Out of nowhere suddenly came the thought that if she touched ancient ground she would be catapulted back in time. Inwardly she scoffed at such an odd notion, though the possibility of going back in time was fascinating. She stepped out, locked the car, then frowned in mild disappointment when her fantasy did not become real. She was firmly planted in the twentieth century. Smoothing the skirt of her dress, she headed toward the alley leading to the main street... and Ian Marshall.

It was still early. The concert was to begin at sunset. Melissa thought she would grab a bite to eat before purchasing her ticket. She was enticed

by the savory aromas wafting through the open doors of the restaurants. The best aroma came from a building with no sign outside, but she could see tables set elegantly through the lace curtains fluttering in the open windows. She reached for the large doorknob in the center of the heavy door. It was locked. She knocked. A young man stuck his head out the window.

“Are you serving dinner?” Melissa asked.

“Sorry, miss. We’re closed to the public. We’ve been reserved for a party after the performance.” He disappeared behind the curtains.

Disappointed she would never know the source of those great aromas, she headed for a pub doing a lively business just two doors up.

The sun was setting when she emerged. The discordant sounds of orchestra tuning instruments within the abbey rose on the air. Everywhere about her people bustled along the streets. A line formed outside the huge wooden gate into Battle Abbey. Some people carried small lawn chairs, others had blankets draped over their arms. Some were dressed in evening attire, others in Brooks Brothers casual.

The air was warm and charged with excitement. Melissa was about to step into the street when a woman in front of her stopped short. A man bumped into her from behind, knocking her into the woman in front of her. Both Melissa and the woman nearly toppled into the street. The man

helped them both regain their balance, murmured his apologies and walked off. The woman glared at Melissa before moving on. “So much for merry old England,” she said in a mutter, and hurried to join the line at the abbey gate.



“That’ll be 28 pounds, miss,” the doorman said.

“Why that’s almost sixty dollars!” Melissa said, surprised.

“Aye, and worth every penny,” the man responded. “This here is a charity event, miss. Philanthropy and all.”

She’d pay any price to find Ian Marshall. Not that Ian Marshall was her objective, she reminded herself, but he had her sideboard. “It’s a fine price,” she replied and dug into her shoulder bag. Her hand found empty space where her wallet had been. She yanked open the purse, peered in, then searched again with her hand so she could touch what her eyes could not believe. “My wallet. It’s gone!” she cried, looking up at the man holding her ticket.

“Really, miss?”

She focussed on the man’s face while her mind retraced the last hour. “I just used it to pay for my meal. I know I returned it to my purse. I don’t understand.” She did not appreciate the skepticism in his face. “It has my passport and credit cards!”

“Take it easy, miss,” the man said. “Why don’t you step aside and look again? I’ll let these people come through.”

“Pickpockets,” the woman behind her said. She looked like a typical busybody, outdated flower hat and all.

Melissa stared at her dumbly. “What?”

The woman bobbed her head with authority. “They come out in a crowd, all right. Did anyone ask you for the time or bump into you, perhaps?” The woman watched her husband pass their tickets to the doorman before favoring Melissa with an I-know-it-all gaze.

Melissa slapped a hand to her forehead. The man and woman who bumped her in the street. They must have worked as a team. “Of course. The oldest trick in the book!” She groaned at the loss.

The woman patted her arm. “Sorry, dear. Tourists are their favorite targets.” The woman captured the curve of her husband’s arm and walked off, as she continued to loudly discuss Melissa’s predicament.

“Shall I call a bobby?” the man asked.

“Bobby?”

“Ah, police,” he said.

She thought about Ian Marshall. She couldn’t lose her chance to find him. “There’s nothing I can do tonight. I’ll report it in the morning.” Melissa looked pleadingly at the man. “Will you let me in?”

The man shook his head. "Sorry, miss. I can't. You might want to report the theft now."

"I can't believe such rotten luck!" she said, and stormed from the gate. Then she turned, retracing her steps to the man. She looked at him, a bit subdued. "Is there a police station nearby?"

He pointed out the gate. "Top of the street past town hall," he replied. "So sorry this happened here, miss."

One hour later, with a report filed and no wallet recovered, Melissa stood before the forbidding and closed gates of Battle Abbey. Her nerves were shot, but her resolve to enter the abbey remained. The heavenly sound of orchestra and opera floated on the night air.

She walked along the front of the abbey, running her fingers on the stones in the wall. The motion over the hard, cold surface sent tingles through her fingertips. She had the urge to run, as if she had run along a wall in the dark before, using her fingers as guides against the cold stone. Before. In the dark. She looked up at the waning light. Impossible. She had been afraid of the dark for as long as she could remember.

The wall of the abbey stopped just above the road. Melissa jumped the small distance down to the sidewalk. The abbey wall rose twenty feet as the sidewalk sloped down hill. Ancient trees on the other side cast branches over the wall. Dark shadows lined the sidewalk. The setting sun

shone crimson in the clouds above.

She placed her hand on the wall. Again the stone on her fingertips felt so familiar. She found a wooden door. The wood was very old, dried, and splintered in some places. She pushed. The door wobbled on its weak hinges, but no luck. Through cracks in the slats she could see the door was barred and a huge rock had been pushed against the entrance. A rock. A rock was used, just as they would have in medieval times. "Some things never change," she murmured. Headlights from a passing car flooded the area with light. The remainder of the wall dipped abruptly to connect with the walls of lower buildings. There was no way in. Her spirits sank, but she would not give up.

Melissa retraced her steps to the front of the abbey. A security guard walked in the opposite direction. Melissa noticed a small sign indicating there was a parking lot on the other side of the abbey. She followed the man and watched as he walked to the far end of the lot. Just across from where she stood a path led into a wooded area behind the abbey. She inhaled sharply, then quickly disappeared into the shadows.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She swallowed her desire to turn and flee for the safety of the lighted street. Fear of the dark was one phobia she had never overcome as a child. Yet, here she was, walking down a dark

path in a foreign country leading to heaven knew where. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she whispered, and pushed on, stepping very quietly.

She came to a small tourist center in the middle of the path. Arrows pointed toward a turnstile on the side of the building. She climbed over the turnstile, ignoring the fact that she wore a dress.

The path continued into the woods along the abbey wall and led to a small walkway behind the abbey. The land suddenly sloped downward and the wall disappeared below her. Battle Abbey had been built on the precipice of a hill. A small rise of grass and trees were all that remained to guard the back of the Abbey from the sudden drop below. Melissa followed the walkway uncomfortably aware of the height. The music grew louder. She could see the shadowy outline of the high roof of the abbey against the glow of spotlights filling the night. The pure clear voices of the mezzo-soprano blending with the tenor seemed ghostly from where Melissa stood in the dark.

The abbey was in serious disrepair. Scaffolds lined the walls of several buildings and canvas covered portions of abbey roof. Clearly the funds raised from this concert were sorely needed. Melissa wondered what type of man Ian Marshall was that he aided in the restoration of ancient buildings. Her gaze shifted away from the abbey to the field below.

The scene caught her by surprise. She watched,

fascinated. She realized the wall continued below the path she was on. From the wall the land fell abruptly into a shallow valley. Tents had been erected and a few outdated trailers that looked like old wooden gypsy caravans circled a campfire. Sheep bleated in the dark. There were people seated around the campfire. The richness of their laughter floated up to her ears. They looked like gypsies, oblivious to the modern world, and very much at home on the field that saw the fateful battle of 1066.

A pause from the orchestra interrupted her thoughts. Reluctantly, Melissa turned her back on the scene below and spied stone steps leading up to the abbey. Glancing quickly about, she hiked up her skirt and climbed the steps two at a time. She ascended a small hill, staying in the shadow of the trees.

The orchestra began to play once more. Melissa reached the crest of the hill only to find herself blinded by a spotlight. Anyone looking in her direction would surely have seen her. She darted back into the shadows, her heart pounding.

From her hiding place, Melissa stood stage right of the performers. She could see the lumber supporting the scenery. The orchestra was seated below the stage. Melissa strained to see Fraser. She spotted the top of his head and watched as he conducted the orchestra. He paused. The performers spoke a humorous part, and the audience erupted

in laughter.

She could only see a smattering of the audience closest to her. It was her rotten luck one spotlight aimed at the stage flooded the area where she stood. She was torn between working her way through the trees to mingle with the crowd, or finding a vantage point to search the faces for Ian. The less obvious action would be to search the crowd from a distance.

There was a scaffold along the darkened side of the building behind the stage. From its height, Melissa was sure to have a bird's eye view. The music grew to a crescendo. Melissa stepped into the light and walked ever so casually to the shadow of the building.

Once she reached the spot she waited. No one approached her. She scurried up the scaffold. The music covered the squeaks and creaks of the boards as she climbed. Rust came off the poles onto her hands. She was careful not to wipe her hands on her skirt. She peered around the edge of the building. The view was breathtaking. The performers were bedecked in colorful costumes. The orchestra, dressed in tuxedos, moved as one while Fraser conducted. A look of sublime satisfaction played on his face. Melissa decided to compliment him on his style. Behind Fraser, the crowd fanned out on the grass to the very reaches of the abbey, which even in disrepair, made a majestic backdrop for the concert. Melissa searched the crowd closest

to the stage.

There he was.

He was seated between a man and a woman. Each sat in low lawn chairs. Melissa counted ten people in their party. Ian was dressed in a dark blazer, crisp white shirt and tie. He sat in partial darkness, which only served to contrast the light falling on his hair, his face and broad shoulders. His hands were joined comfortably across his chest and his legs were outstretched before him and crossed at the ankles. He was as much at ease here as he had been in Mark's office in New York.

Melissa felt her heart jump into her throat. A sigh escaped her lips. Ian Marshall was exquisite. She had never reacted to a man in this way, nor was she willing to acknowledge that this particular man affected her so. She reminded herself sternly that she had come to England to retrieve her sideboard, not fantasize about the man who had taken it.

As she watched him, a look of concern clouded his features. His brow furrowed and his attention drifted from the stage to the building behind it. Melissa watched, as his gaze wandered the face of the building. Just before his gaze rested on her, she jerked from view, pressing her cheek into the cold stones of the building.

When she thought enough time passed, she dared to look again. Ian was standing. The woman to his left looked at him quizzically. The

elder gentleman to his right touched his arm and spoke. She had no idea what had been said, but watched as Ian made his way through the crowd. Melissa decided to wait. Surely he would return to his seat.

She carefully sat on the scaffold. In the dark, she closed her eyes and let herself be carried away by the playful strains of the Magic Flute.

She almost lost her balance when he spoke.

“They throw Americans into the tower for trespassing,” came the rich, English voice she had heard only days before.

Ian Marshall stood below, scowling, arms folded across his chest, though he could not hide his amusement. “Come off the boards before you break your neck.”

Melissa froze in place, still shocked she had been discovered.

“Shall I come up and get you?”

She held out a stopping hand. “No... no. I can manage.” She rose to her feet and pressed her skirt against her legs, suddenly aware of the view he must have from below.

Ian frowned. “What are you doing here?” he asked, as she made her way along the narrow planks.

Melissa moved with the agility of a trapeze artist, her arms in graceful motion as she reached for the supporting poles of the scaffold. She swung around the pole to access the ladder down.

“I thought I was well hidden,” she said dryly.

“You were,” he replied. Their eyes clashed at his curt manner. Despite his obvious annoyance, he held out a hand. “Here, let me help you.”

Though perfectly capable to help herself off the scaffold, Melissa reached for Ian Marshall’s hand as if an invisible force pulled her fingers toward his. His hand encircled hers.

At his touch, the air suddenly chilled. Wind rose without warning, fierce and howling. Melissa stumbled as blackness other than the surrounding night filled her vision. Her mind spun wildly. She struggled to keep her eyes open. She reached out, vaguely aware the voice crying for help was hers.

Ian pulled Melissa against his chest only to be caught in a tailspin with her, as if they had fallen into a cyclone. Her arms clung around his waist. Her fingers dug into his skin through his jacket.

“What is happening?” Melissa cried.

She could feel Ian’s breath was coming hard as they were buffeted in the hurricane-like winds. How this could be happening?

“Hold on! Just hold me tight!” he called.

Then, as quickly as the onslaught arose, it was gone.

The pain vanished. The sensation of movement stopped. The Englishman held the American woman in his arms, but for a moment, neither could quite understand how she got there.

Melissa realized she was in Ian's arms and looked up at him, confused and inexplicably exhausted. She pulled herself away, frightened, and completely uncomfortable. For that one moment she had fit perfectly in Ian's arms. She trembled and wrapped her arms protectively about her midsection.

"Are you all right?" Ian asked her, his voice subdued.

She shuddered. "What happened?"

There was a long silence. She looked up at him. He looked terribly stressed. "I don't know, Miss Ryan," he replied, shaking his head slowly as his mind raced to solve the question. "I don't know."

"Well, I'm glad I wasn't alone for that one," she said with more bravery than she felt, and leaned against the scaffold.

"This has happened to you before?"

She could not bear the accusation in his eyes. She looked away. "Not exactly. I fainted yesterday in the hotel," she said with a careless air. "I'm sure it was jet lag."

He turned her to face him, gripping her arms. "Why are you here?"

Her head snapped to attention. She tilted her head back to meet his gaze. "I came to retrieve my sideboard," she said, aware her voice had lost its strength.

His gaze held her for far longer than she liked. She thought her knees would buckle as his gaze

traveled from her eyes to her hair, to her lips, then slowly down the length of her throat until his sight rested on the ruby and pearl necklace. The necklace startled him. He reached to touch it, then stopped his hand in midair.

“Where did you get this?” he asked quietly.

Her hand covered the cross. “It was my mother’s,” she replied, speaking as softly as he had.

He nodded, as if he understood. His eyes narrowed. When he finally spoke, anger laced his voice. “Miss Ryan, leave England. Do not look for me, again. If you do, I will call the police.” He turned and stalked away.

Then, suddenly, he stopped and retraced his steps. He came so close she thought, for one giddy second, he intended to kiss her. She could smell his cologne. The fragrance had invaded her senses earlier, but she had been too terrified to notice. Now, in an odd sort of way, the scent pacified her. Her eyes held his questioningly. She thought he wanted to explain something, but she dismissed the thought. Instead, he said, “I repeat. Do not attempt to find me. Stay away!”

Melissa clutched the arm of his blazer. “Wait, Mr. Marshall. Don’t leave me here. I’m afraid.”

He pulled his arm free. “I don’t care,” he said.

Then he was gone.

Strains from the Magic Flute danced on the air around her. Melissa grasped the scaffold as darkness closed in. The air grew warm.

“What just happened?” she murmured. Whatever it was, she hoped never to experience it again. She fled headlong through the spotlights, straight for the gates. It mattered little if the doorman discovered her now.

Ian’s heart pounded in his chest as he exited the abbey. Melissa Ryan was danger. Every nerve in his body felt it. He rubbed a strained muscle along the back of his neck. His life depended on never laying eyes on her again. Yet, oddly enough, the thought of never seeing her again was unbearable. For those few precious seconds when he held her in his arms, nothing in his life had felt more right. Melissa Ryan was so very beautiful—like no woman he had ever known. “Damn!” he muttered and increased his stride around the building. The concert was finished for him. His uncle and cousin could host the reception without him.

Melissa hurried down the alley way to her car. She wanted to run, but kept her pace to a brisk walk. She wanted to escape the night, the ancient abbey and the music. Somehow it all tied into her fear. She didn’t want to think, didn’t want to understand what had happened between her and Ian Marshall in the shadows of Battle Abbey. Yet, she could not deny that those assaulting winds had affected only them. Not even the music had stopped.

The heat of his embrace still lingered, making

the air about her seem cooler. His arms. The heat of his body. He felt so perfect. Had he felt it, too? Clearly not. All he did was threaten her with the police. What had she done? How would she get her sideboard now?

She looked down at the sidewalk as she walked, her mind reeling. Something familiar caught her eye in the shadows. "My wallet!" She glanced through it quickly. Her money and traveler's checks were missing, but her driver's license, and—she peered into the side compartment—her passport were still there. She hugged them to her chest. "There is a God," she murmured to herself.

She opened her car door, only to realize the steering wheel was on the other side. "Really, Melissa!" she said, no longer amused. She circled to the other side. "Well," she said to no one in particular, "I have my identity back. Now where do I go from here?"



Bell Cottage was quiet when she returned. Fraser no doubt would be attending the reception after the concert. Tim and Pat had already retired. Her key was placed in the tray on the table, as Pat had instructed, and she quietly negotiated the narrow stairway to her room. She was grateful for the solitude. Now that she was safely back to her room, her composure returned.

She stripped off her dress and pulled a soft cotton gown over her head. A hot shower would have been perfect, but Tim had mentioned that the plumbing was loud. She'd wait until morning.

Melissa slipped beneath the covers. The tiny window beside her bed was ajar. Ivy along the casing rustled in the evening breeze. Melissa breathed deeply of the soft garden scents, willing her body to rest, but sleep eluded her. Her mind worked overtime as the events of the evening returned. Everything had seemed so unreal.

Sneaking into the abbey had been quite an adventure, one she couldn't wait to tell Anderson, but the night, no, her world began to unravel when she spotted Ian Marshall seated in the crowd. The sight of him definitely had unnerved her. She was sure he hadn't seen her. How, then, did he manage to appear beneath the scaffold? She remembered her eyes had been closed. Then there was the sound of his voice, and the earth seemed to tremble beneath her. When she gave him her hand, they both became swept into a tumult of wind and bottomless careening earth. Ian Marshall had felt it, too. He had been as shaken as she had, though he acted as if *she* was the cause.

A thought dawned on her. "He knows what it was!" she said out loud. She sat up in the dark and peered out the open window, searching the swirl of stars that played overhead. Somewhere

out there was Ian Marshall, her sideboard and many unanswered questions. A tongue of fear licked at her neck, sending pin prickles down her spine. What was happening here? She could only believe Ian Marshall held the answer.

She slept fitfully, and dreamt of running through stone corridors in the black of night, her fingertips drumming against cold, granite walls as she ran looking for... a woman... crying. She could smell soot from extinguished torches, the aroma of roasted game and the stench of old straw. Such dreams. Lifeless fingers pointed toward the darkness. Her fingertips on the coarse wall were her only chance of finding her way in the night. Dreams. Somewhere in her mind she knew dawn would come. Dawn and light.

Melissa was up early, unable to shake the disturbing remnants of her dream. She indulged her fatigue and showered for a long time under the hot, surprisingly well-pressured shower. She regretted that she agreed to have one of Pat Cooper's special English breakfasts—whatever that was. The smell of roasted bacon wafting up through her door had no appeal this morning.

Slowly she buttoned her blouse. "Come on, girl," she said to herself. "You'll be on your way soon enough. Eat an English breakfast and savor every bite!" Melissa left her room determined to enjoy the niceties of England while she was here.

Fraser was already seated at the table when she

entered the dining room. The table was set to perfection with the always-present vase of fresh flowers. The sight helped lighten Melissa's dark mood. She smiled at her hostess, who peered through the kitchen door. Melissa gestured to the table. "There is something about English hospitality that is unrivaled," she said. Pat placed a warmed plate in front of her. The plate had two fried eggs, sausage, bacon—which looked like a thick slab of American ham—potatoes, a large slice of mushroom and fried tomatoes. "This is a work of art."

Pat beamed. "Well, eat."

"How could I refuse?" Melissa cut a forkful, realizing she was famished.

"Did you make the concert last night?" Fraser asked over his teacup.

Melissa swallowed the first delightful bite. "I withstood a chain of events Sherlock Holmes would have been hard pressed to solve," she said, "but yes, I did see the concert."

A grin broke across his face. "This sounds like a story, Pat," he said as she poured him more tea.

Melissa held up her fork. "Before I tell my story, Fraser, I must compliment you on your performance. Not only was the music exquisite, your technique was magical."

"Why, thank you. I don't believe anyone has ever complimented me so nicely," he said.

"That's because she's American, you silly man," Pat interrupted. "The English are never so

generous.”

Melissa laughed. “There’s freedom in a compliment. You folks should practice.”

She sipped her tea as they laughed, feeling as if she’d known these people forever.

“So tell us what happened last night,” Pat insisted.

“Well, my wallet was stolen,” Melissa said, popping a piece of buttered toast into her mouth.

“No!”

She shook her head. “Too true. But fear not, I found it later. Minus the money, of course. At least I have my passport.”

“That is terrible,” Pat said, pressing her cheek with concern.

“Reporting the ordeal kept me out of the concert for a while,” Melissa added.

“For a while?” Fraser asked.

“Mmm.” She grinned. “I snuck in behind the abbey.”

Fraser let out a hoot of laughter. “No doubt you did at that!” After collecting his breath a thought occurred to him. “Don’t tell me you were the person on the scaffold!”

“How did you know?”

“I saw you. But just caught a glimpse of your beautiful hair. I thought the students were having some fun. Oh, my. It was you!” He chuckled in appreciation.

“And did you find Mr. Marshall?” Pat asked,

her eyes twinkling.

“He found me,” Melissa said, dryly. “And wasn’t too pleased.”

“Now that surprises me,” Fraser added.

Melissa looked properly embarrassed. “He threatened to call the authorities if he sees me again.”

“Strong words,” Fraser said, eyeing her carefully.

“It was an odd encounter. I can’t quite put my finger on what happened, but I clearly upset him. My sideboard must mean more to him than I thought.” She avoided mentioning what happened between her and Ian Marshall. How could she? It was too unbelievable. She looked up at them both pleadingly. “But I must speak with him again. This matter is unfinished.”

Pat sat in the chair across from her. She uncharacteristically poured herself a cup of tea and sipped it while watching Melissa over her teacup. “You could always just happen to wander onto his property,” she suggested.

“In light of last night, that isn’t such a good idea,” Fraser said.

“Nonsense,” Pat replied. “You and I both know Ian can blow steam hotter than a boiler.” She returned her gaze to Melissa. “Can you ride?”

“A horse?” Melissa asked. This conversation was taking a direction she hadn’t expected.

“Yes. What else would I mean?”

“Of course I can ride. I love it,” Melissa said, watching her hostess warily. “What are you thinking?”

Pat looked at Fraser. “Dare I?”

He looked hard and long at Melissa, as if assessing her character. He let out a breath of resignation. “If you must,” he said to Pat, “but be advised I will claim ignorance to the entire matter.”

“What are you two talking about?” Melissa demanded.

“Ian’s estate begins just two miles up the road. You can take the trails through the fields behind the cottage. You’ll be there in no time.”

“I don’t have a mount,” Melissa said.

“I certainly do,” Pat announced. “I think a picnic in the country will be an excellent way to erase your bad experience of last evening. Imagine, having your wallet stolen,” she said, pursing her lips. “Don’t you think she needs a picnic, Fraser?” she asked, not letting him off the hook for a moment.

“Indeed,” he answered.

“Will you join me, Fraser?” Melissa asked, her eyes merry.

He held up a defending hand. “Absolutely not. You’re on your own!”

Within an hour, Melissa was astride a beautiful black mare, with a satchel of bread, cheese and cider strapped to her saddle. Melissa had changed into jeans, a light cotton shirt and her Chanel

jacket. Her hair was twisted into a chignon that glistened golden beneath the black velvet-covered helmet which Pat had supplied, compliments of her daughter. Pat also offered the use of a pair of excellent boots that fit snugly but not enough to pinch. At a glance, Melissa looked comfortable, sophisticated, and with an ease all her own, very sexy.

“You look perfect,” Pat said looking up at her guest.

“Never know who I’ll run into,” Melissa replied, smiling. Tim gave her a hand-drawn map of the area with local landmarks clearly defined. He and Pat waved their goodbyes from the stable. Pat saw this escapade as total mischief and was delighted. Tim didn’t seem to have an opinion. As for Fraser, he disappeared quietly after breakfast.

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Kathleen's writing career involves freelance work for newspapers, human-interest organizations, as well as domestic and foreign retail market reports. Her writing hobby is poetry. *Echoes of Love* is her first published novel. She lives with her husband and two sons. They divide their time between Ft. Lauderdale, Florida and Amityville, New York.

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