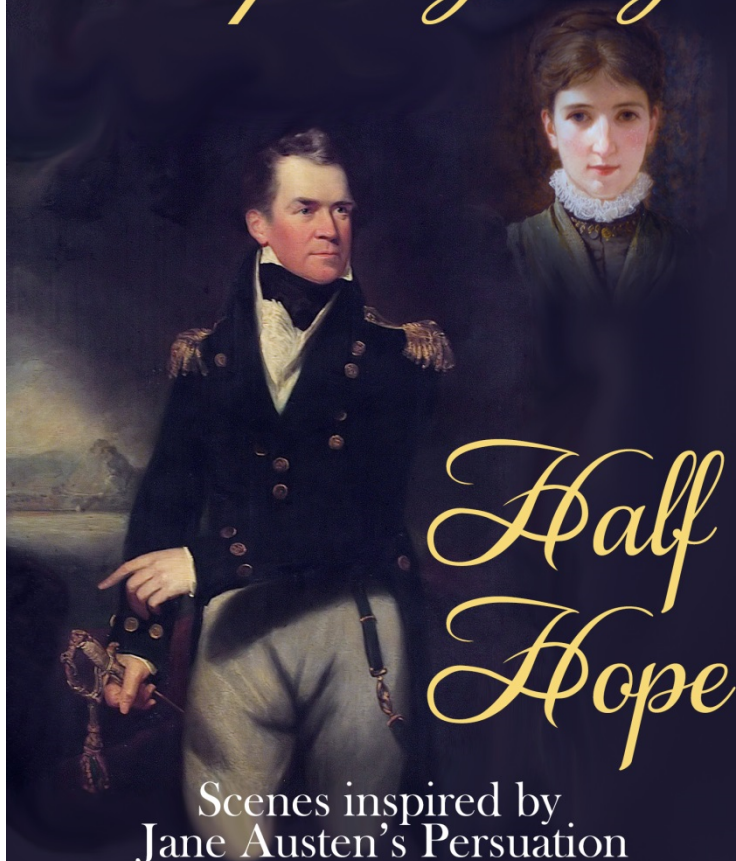


*Half Agony*



*Half  
Hope*

Scenes inspired by  
Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

MARIA GRACE

Jane Austen's *Persuasion* leaves a great deal of the story to the reader's imagination. What might have been going on in scenes that she did not write?

## **Praise for Maria Grace**

"Grace has quickly become one of my favorite authors of Austen-inspired fiction. Her love of Austen's characters and the Regency era shine through in all of her novels." ***Diary of an Eccentric***

"A great read for any Jane Austen fan-fiction lover. With great characters, witty writing, and a swoon-worthy romance, Maria Grace's *Given Good Principles* series is a solid addition to your bookshelf." ***Austenprose***

Grace sprinkles in enough of the familiar, while still allowing room for change and growth to highlight her creativity and abilities in weaving a tale. I believe that this is what she does best, blend old and new together to create a story that has the framework of Austen and her characters, but contains enough new and exciting content to keep me turning the pages. ... For those that enjoy a classic Jane Austen re-imagining this is a no-brainer. Grace's style is not to be missed. ***From the desk of Kimberly Denny-Ryder:***

*Half Agony*  
*Half Hope*

MARIA GRACE

White Soup Press

**Published by: White Soup Press**

Half Agony, Half Hope  
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# *Dedication*

For my husband and sons.  
You have always believed in me.

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## Lady Russel Persuades

LADY RUSSELL DISMISSED HER maid and sank down on the chair at her dressing table. Another curl, another tuck, none of it would make her feel any better. None of those things could alter the dreadful conversation she faced this all-too-beautiful morning. If only the weather better matched her mood. Somehow that would make this easier, just a little.

She opened a small drawer and removed a small framed sketch. From the confines of the oval gilt frame, Lady Elliot stared up at her. Oh to return to the day when she had sketched the likeness of her dearest friend. It should be a mother, not a godmother who had the responsibility of such a discussion.

What kind of friend would she be to mother, or daughter, if she failed to draw attention to the very great danger looming on the horizon, like a storm cloud waiting to burst? Sir Walter should do this duty—he should have already done it! Was it possible

for him to sink any lower in her esteem than he already had? Until just a few days ago, it was impossible to consider. Yet, indeed, he had managed it.

Was it not a father's role to consider the character and the prospects of a daughter's suitor? Without doubt, all genteel folk would agree. Those same folks would hardly consider Sir Walter truly genteel. His wife certainly had not.

She sighed and placed the portrait on the dressing table beside her hairbrush. She rose and walked to the window. Lady Elliot had always loved the sunshine, even as Anne did now.

Truly, what kind of man was this Wentworth? None here knew him or could vouch for his character. Moreover, he had been away at sea so long, none of her own connections knew him nor could she find any who knew of him. He might be everything he appeared to be. But just as likely, and far more disturbing, he might not be.

She pressed the spot between her eyes that often relieved her headache. Of course, today, it had no effect.

Wentworth's past might be quite dark. It was a well-known fact, men could, and did, join the navy to escape what they might want to forget. This whole ordeal might be unnecessary if only someone could vouch for his character.

What did they know for certain about this man who had offered for Anne? He spent what money he had freely enough—almost as freely as Sir Walter himself. What a glorious recommendation of his character. Anne certainly did not deserve the same grief her dear mother endured.



She twisted the edge of the curtain in her fingers. Sir Walter had not been a cruel husband - only a foolish one. That, though, brought enough grief.

Anne was such a sensible girl. She deserved a man of good sense, even one of limited connections was better than a fool. Was there anything sensible about a man who came into a neighborhood and so quickly entered into an infatuation with the daughter of a baronet? Did Anne realize Sir Walter had done much the same with Lady Elliot? The grief of a hasty engagement and marriage should not be repeated in another generation.

She dropped the bit of curtain and paced to the other side of the room. Anne should not be so unhappy, not for the world. A movement outside the window caught her eye. A young woman, the wife of one of the cottagers on her estate, carried a basket of washing and mending back to her home where two young children awaited her.

Heaven forbid! That too could be Anne! Sir Walter already declared he would give her nothing—how could he do that to his daughter? She wrung her hands. Dreadful, horrible, vain, selfish creature! Without his help they would only have naval pay, pittance that it was, and whatever was left of his prize money to live on.

Poor Anne could be living in some dreadful broken-down fourth-rate town house, shared with another tenant, possibly several, alone while Wentworth was at sea.

She sucked in a ragged breath. The only thing that could make the scene worse was the possibility Anne could be in such a situation and pregnant. With no servants to help her, it could jeopardize her health,

she might not even survive!

Her precious goddaughter, alone, in the throes of travail, unable even to afford a midwife? She grabbed the back of the closest chair.

Perhaps it would all be all right. Perhaps they would have enough to live on, even if not in the comfort to which Anne was accustomed, it might be enough. But—

Her stomach knotted and her knees quivered. How many thousand—thousands!—of men had already been lost to Napoleon and the sea? How many did she know who sailed off and never returned? Many—possibly most never returned.

That Wentworth had survived this long was a testament to his hardiness and good fortune, but it was no assurance he would return home again. If the worst happened, then what for Anne? What would there be for her, and quite possibly a child to live from? Certainly not enough, and Sir Walter, if he gave her nothing at marriage, would he support her and a child with Wentworth's connections?

No, not Sir Walter. He would turn Anne out to the mercy Wentworth's family for support. Who knew them or anything about them? They might well put Anne out in the hedgerows to starve!

No, no, no! This was not to be!

She could not let Anne take such chances with her future. Though she might dread this conversion, better have it and protect her dearest friend's daughter, the closest thing she herself had to a daughter, from near-certain disaster. Even if her husband had no connections, or a gentlemanly profession, or, dare she even think it, an honest trade—anything that might secure a home and a

future would be preferable to this unknown naval officer who was more likely to ruin Anne's future than to bring her any lasting happiness.

She straightened her skirts and picked up her hat and spencer. Best summon the carriage now and get this dreadful errand accomplished.

Please, let Anne not hate her for it. Sometimes motherly love could be so very hard to bear.

## Anne Wonders about Wentworth

ANNE LAY THE NEWSPAPER aside and maneuvered in the window bench until the sunbeam caressed her face. Such exploits, such bravery. Though there was not a soul with whom she could share it, had anyone asked, she would happily declare her pride in ‘her’ Captain Wentworth. The Asp and the Laconia—he had acquitted himself well indeed, far and away beyond anyone’s expectations. Her secret luxury, reveling in his success—how pleasing to have the morning room to herself and indulge—

“Anne. Anne!” Elizabeth barged in. “Why ever are you hiding here Anne? I have been looking for you everywhere.”

There was only one reason Elizabeth—or anyone else—ever looked for her. “What do you need me to do?”

“Now why would you say something like that? Truly Anne, you are so defensive and disagreeable,

acting as though you are so put upon.” She strutted along the windows and snatched the newspaper as she passed. “Father asked for this. He said there was news of the Dalrymple’s in the society pages.”

“I had not noticed.”

Was that—yes it was, another new gown. How many was that this month? Two, three? Anne and Mary had recently reworked older frocks into something fresh when Father said it was not a good time to make purchases. Of course, Elizabeth would not be satisfied with anything less than the newest, finest of anything.

“Since you ask though.”

Anne cringed. Elizabeth’s you-should-forget-your-plans-and-serve-me-voice never boded well for her.

“Do nip into town and visit Boyd’s for me. I am out of marzipan.” Elizabeth folded the newspaper and tucked it under her arm.

“If you are so fond of it—”

“You cannot be serious. How would it look for me to go?”

“How does a walk into town compromise—”

“I told Miss Hartfield that I was too ill to join her for tea today. She is such a dull hanger-on. Now I cannot—” Elizabeth’s lip pulled back into a well-cultivated Elliot sneer.

Anne lifted her open hand. That expression left her little choice but to put aside her plans and address Elizabeth’s needs otherwise a well-cultivated Elliot fit would follow. “I understand. I shall go now.”

“Good, and be sure they are wrapped correctly. Oh, and I want a large box.”

“Yes, Elizabeth.” No, she would exercise self-control and not roll her eyes—at least until she left

the house.

“And should you see Miss Hartfield—”

“I will offer her your regrets.”

“And do be a dear and pick up a fresh bottle of Gowland’s lotion for me as well.”

Anne forced a place-holding smile to her lips. She would replace it with a genuine expression when out of Elizabeth’s view. “Anything else?”

“No, no, that will do. You best get on, then. Really, Anne, you dawdle so.” Elizabeth flittered out.

Anne pressed her back against the wall and allowed her head to thump the paneling. What joy was hers. At least the walk would afford her time alone with her thoughts—exactly what she most desired. Best not allow Elizabeth know lest she deny her that as well.

Anne changed into her half-boots, donned her spencer and bonnet and slipped out before anyone could add more to her errands.

How very different things might have been had she been married now. She certainly would not be rushing out for marzipan. It would probably be a luxury she could ill afford. But life without a little marzipan was nothing to a life without Frederick.

Would she ever see him again? Surely she would. Life could not be so cruel as to deny her that.

What would she say to him? There was little news. Nothing ever happened at Kellynch or with her family. Surely he would have stories enough to fill conversation for both of them.

She smelled Boyd’s before she could see the shop. She would recognize the fragrance anywhere, sweet, spicy, and comforting. The little confectionery boasted the best marzipan in the county, according to

Elizabeth, although the clear cakes were more to her taste.

People, happy people, young and old, filled the cozy shop. Small tables crammed the front of the shop, surrounded by blissful customers enjoying Boyd's wares and a few handsome young men vying for the attention of Boyd's lovely daughters who worked in the shop.

Everyone always smiled here and the conversation seemed merry—a little haven away from the dull and dingy parts of life.

"Miss Elliot." The confectioner's youngest daughter, Miss Christina Boyd greeted her at the door. One of the perks of being an Elliot of Kellynch Hall, someone always noticed when you arrived—not that it was always a good thing, but it was consistent. "May I help you with something today?"

Anne closed her eyes and drew a savored breath. "It all smells so delightful."

Miss Christina blushed and smiled, sweet as her father's wares. It was difficult to imagine a cross word ever coming from her mouth. "Father will be glad to hear you said so. Would the elder Miss Elliot be requiring marzipan today?"

"Why yes, how did you know?" Of course, she knew, a wise shopkeeper always kept track of his best customers, but Miss Boyd deserved the compliment.

"It has been a week since her last box. A large one today?"

"Yes please."

"Right away." Miss Boyd curtsied and disappeared in the crowd.

Anne wandered to the front windows, near the table where two young women tittered over

newspaper accounts of naval victories. Oh, to be able to partake in such a conversation. Best remove herself from the temptation. She dragged herself to a display of barley sugar twists.

Fredrick had enjoyed those. Did he think of her as often as she did him? He had been so very angry when he left. Could he ever forgive her? Would he renew his attentions to her when he returned?

“Miss?”

Anne jumped.

“Forgive me for startling you, Miss. I just thought you might enjoy something while you waited.” Miss Boyd handed her a rose-patterned saucer with a round almond clear cake in the center.

“Thank you.” Anne took the plate. Father would dismiss such thoughtfulness as the due of a baronet. But it was still kind and pleasing, especially when sweet Miss Boyd recalled her favorite confection when no one else could.

She bit into the clear cake, the sugary crust crumbling on her tongue. The jelly slowly melted into almondy-rosey sweetness that reminded her of Wentworth. He remembered these were her favorites, too.

If he did seek her out on his return, there would be no question as to her answer this time. There were not enough words for ‘yes’ in the English language to convey her sentiments properly. If only he would seek her out once more. In that, men had such a material advantage. They could be active in the world, seek out what they desired. Pursuing and fighting for it was their right, even their duty. Women were made for more quiet things, quiet unsatisfying things.

Things like bringing marzipan to Elizabeth.



*Half Agony,, Half Hope*

Miss Christina brought the properly wrapped box and Anne left to seek a bottle of Gowland's and return home for more quiet, unsatisfying pursuits.

## **Lady Russell discusses retrenching**

WHY WAS SHE FOREVER having these difficult discussions with Anne? A godmother should anticipate her duties, enjoy pleasant intimacies with her goddaughter. Recently those moments seemed fewer and farther between, overshadowed by difficult and challenging issues that should have been a mother's realm.

But with no Lady Elliot, who else was there to manage such unpleasant burdens? Only for the love of her friend, her dear, dear friend and her only deserving daughter did she persist.

She rearranged the tea table one more time. Anne would be there soon and their conversation must not be overheard by servants, even trusted servants. Not that any of them would be surprised by the contents of their conversation, they had probably already discussed it among themselves and with the staff of Kellynch. To be sure, every merchant of the village

knew and probably most of London—no secrets remained. Still, the impropriety of it all and respect for the Elliot family required discretion.

The butler opened the door and ushered Anne into the parlor.

“Lady Russell” Anne rushed toward her, hands extended.

Dear girl, always so warm and enthusiastic away from the shrewish eyes of her father and sister. Her eyes were worn, colored with disillusionment beyond her years. How unfair, when Anne worked so hard to prevent it all.

“I am so happy to see you.” She took Anne’s hands and kissed her cheek. “Do sit down. I had cook prepare your favorite sandwiches.” It was unlikely that the cook at Kellynch even knew Anne’s favorites, much less prepared them.

“What have I done to deserve such favor?” Anne laughed and removed her bonnet. Her smile was weary, the way it usually was these days. The joy had gone out of it some time ago and never returned.

A pang of guilt twinged in Lady Russell’s side. How was she to have predicted Wentworth’s success much less the lack of another satisfactory suitor? Now was not the time to indulge in self-recrimination.

“Simply coming to keep me company is sufficient.” Lady Russell took her seat. “Did you hear? The Bournes are all recovering nicely from their colds. They are fortunate that none of them has taken a turn for the worse.”

“I am glad to hear that. They have suffered too much in the last year.” Anne looked over the table. “Did those clear cakes come from Boyd’s?”

“Yes, they did. My cook cannot make them

properly. I would purchase them nowhere else.” She poured tea. “Have you been to Boyd’s recently?”

Anne looked aside, color rising in her pale cheeks. “No, no I have not.”

“Miss Elliot procures her own marzipan now? However did you convince her?”

“I did not. She...she decided her figure was suffering for taking too much marzipan and now eschews it.” Anne’s decidedly false smile returned.

Lady Russell laid her hand on Anne’s. “You do not need to maintain your façade with me.”

The smile slid from Anne’s face and rest of the mask slowly followed. “Oh, Lady Russell, it was so humiliating! Elizabeth forced me to accompany her and I could do naught but stand there stupidly while she berated first Miss Bond, then her father. They have been nothing but kindness to me, but now...”

“I had heard tell of a bit of a to-do.” To-do was an understatement, but no need to increase Anne’s discomfort.

Anne rose and took up her station at the window. “Then you heard of it in the most polite possible way. I do not understand why my sister and my father find it such an affront that a shopkeeper would desire to be paid for their wares. They seem to think the privilege of our patronage alone should be sufficient and they should be thanking us for being seen in their shops!”

“Has this happened—”

“More than once? Absolutely. In fact, it is happening so often lately that I dread going into town anymore. It has been weeks since I last showed my face. Little good it has done as my father’s creditors have now taken to visiting the house. The butler has

strict instructions not to allow them in, so they have begun to plague Father's agent." Anne dropped her face in her hands.

Lady Russell moved to Anne's side and embraced her gently.

"It is truly awful. Did you know there have been threats of debtor's prison? Though he would admit it to no one, Father lives in fear of the magistrate coming to the door. Mr. Shepard does his best to maneuver the apostles, paying a little to each merchant to try to keep them at bay, but I do not know how much longer he can persist. The next quarter day is still six weeks away and the farm has nothing to take to market. The sovereigns will run out soon."

"I am so sorry." Lady Russell sighed. "I feared matters had progressed to this point."

Anne gripped the curtain until her knuckles turned white. "What am I to do? Though Elizabeth is the eldest and has the running of the house in name, all the real work falls to me. I try to walk in my mother's path and press for economy and moderation in our home, but I am overruled at every turn."

"It all falls to you?" The question was pointless, the answer was written in the lines on Anne's face, still it was right to ask.

"You do not think Elizabeth sullies her hands with such mundane things as household accounts.? She does not even truly understand that all her frippery has any cost attached." Anne released the curtain and began a labored circuit around the room.

"So you are well aware of the expenses?"

"Painfully aware, painfully: new upholstery for the carriage, more new gowns for Elizabeth, a new suit

for Father. Have you any idea how many suits he has? Have you any idea of the cost of the food for the last party he held?"

"Actually, I do."

"He wants to host another next month! 'A baronet must be seen living as a baronet.' " Anne threw her hands in the air.

Had Anne ever demonstrated such agitation? The poor dear had reached the end of herself.

Lady Russell returned to the table. Anne needed the freedom to express herself here since she found it nowhere else. "Since you have mentioned the matter, may I speak freely regarding your family's troubles?"

"Certainly. You will be the lone voice of reason I have heard on the matter."

"There is a great deal of talk about the situation of Sir Walter and of Kellynch in general."

"It is to be expected." Anne returned to the table, but did not sit. She gripped the back of the chair as though it might try to run from her.

"Have you considered advising your Father to ... retrench?"

"I have considered advising my father of many things, but there seems to be little point in the exercise. If the idea does not come from Elizabeth, then it is not worth hearing. I am dismissed almost as soon as I open my mouth."

"And you have tried—"

"Every approach I can think of. I have even written him a letter, which he tore up in front of my face, declaring it a disgrace that I should attempt to garner his attention in such a way." Anne dropped into her chair. It creaked under the weight of her burdens.

“So there is no hope he would accept the notion of retrenching?”

“Truthfully, I do not know. I only know there is no hope of him listening to me.”

Lady Russell tapped steeped fingers to her lips. “Perhaps he might more readily accept it if presented with a choice? A more radical notion would be for your family to quit Kellynch altogether and move to a less expensive locale—Bath perhaps?”

“You know I hate Bath.”

“I know, but consider, it is still a better alternative than to allow things to remain as they are. And think, a few years in Bath might allow him to pay off his debtors and return to Kellynch. He might even learn moderation—”

Anne shot her a penetrating glare.

“Perhaps not. But still your family would be in a better situation.”

Even more appealing, Anne might encounter an appropriate suitor in the greater society of Bath and be away from her dreadful family all together. That alone would make Bath worthy of consideration.

“How much better? Do you really believe relocation could be the salvation of my family?”

“I do. If you like, we can get some paper and work it out specifically after tea. I think you might be surprised at how much more cheaply one may run a household there.”

“I would like that very much.” Anne massaged her temples. “But even if you are correct, how...”

“If you like, and think it would be useful, I would be happy to help you present the idea to your father.”

Anne’s look of surprise could hardly have been more endearing. “You would?”

“I know it would be very forward and intrusive of me, but the urgency of the matter supersedes all of that. If you think it would help, I would be willing.”

“Father respects your station. You have a better chance to garner his attention than anyone else I can think of.”

“Then let us have our tea, work our numbers, and plan how we shall approach your father.” It was high time that she should be able to offer Anne some relief. Hopefully, Sir Walter would be amenable to their plans.



## **Lady Russell warns of Mrs. Clay**

LADY RUSSELL SIPPED HER tea but Anne merely stared at hers. Something was on Anne's mind—something more than the family's impending change in circumstances, something very troubling. Perhaps she should mind her own business. That was an appealing thought. But if she did not ask, she knew there was no one else who would take an interest in Anne's distraction.

“Has Elizabeth had another ... ah ... discussion... with you?”

Anne set her tea cup aside and walked to the window. Silhouetted in the sunlight, she was the spit and image of her dear mother. Lady Elliot had been one of those rare women for whom economy and sense were things of beauty and her daughter was little different, whereas Elizabeth was her father's daughter and made it her sworn duty to point out Anne's insufficiency in all things.

“I can see she has. Is she complaining again of—”

"No, no, it is not that. Not exactly." Anne ran her hand along the edge of the curtain and fingered the tassel on the silk tie. "We disagreed, but not over the usual things."

"Then what?" Oh dear, this could be nothing but bad news. Lady Russell gripped the arms of her chair.

"Oh, it is hard to say."

"Hard to say what you quarreled about? In that you do not know or that it is a difficult matter to talk about?"

"Oh, I do not know. In any case, I am sure I was wrong."

Lady Russell hurried to Anne. Her intuition was excellent and she was very rarely wrong. "Do not be so quick to make that judgment. Tell me what happened."

Anne turned and leaned against the window sill. "No, I am being silly and small-minded."

"Those are two words I have never thought to describe you with and I doubt anyone but your sister and father might. Please, my dear, I cannot help you if you do not tell me."

Anne sniffed and her gaze wandered to the ceiling.

Oh, this was bad. Anne never failed to look her in the eye unless something was heart-wrenchingly wrong.

"You are familiar with Mr. Shepard's daughter?"

Lady Russell's face went cold. "Mrs. Clay? She is just out of her mourning, is she not?"

"She set aside her mourning gowns just a few months ago I believe."

"And she has two small children, but that is nearly all her husband left her?" All that was common

knowledge, but she had to say something to buy enough time to regain her equanimity.

“Correct. The debts he left to settle took most of what she should have had to live on, that is why she has returned to her father’s house.”

“She told you all this?”

Anne laughed, sad and a little bitter. “Lady Russell, you might be shocked at how much people tell me. I do not understand why, but on the whole, people make themselves free to unburden themselves to me as if I might somehow know the answer to their problems or be able to make a material difference. I know and have heard far more than I would ever have cared to.”

Just like her mother, dear child. Lady Elliot had always been such a repository of wisdom and solace for all those we went to her.

“So Mrs. Clay—”

“Penelope, my sister calls her, and the courtesy has been extended to me as well. She is ‘Penelope’ in our home, now.” Anne rolled her eyes.

“Oh dear, I had feared such a thing.” Lady Russell bit her knuckle and sank onto the window bench.

“Am I to gather than that you experience little fondness for Mrs. Clay?”

How to put it discreetly? “I find it difficult to discern anything of value in her company.”

“Her understanding is shallow, her opinions mean, and her admiration of my...my...”

Lady Russell squeezed her eyes shut. “Father?”

“I had thought to say family.” Anne shook her head sharply.

“Go on.”

“It is exactly what my father and sister prefer, but I find the admiration is much too much, beyond the bounds of all good taste.”

“And sense?”

“Yes, that too.” Anne pinched her temples and screwed up her face. “I made mention of it to Elizabeth.”

Ah, of course! “And that was the point over which you quarreled?”

“Yes!” Anne threw her hands in the air. “It is the most inexplicable thing. I cannot understand. Mrs. Clay is not the kind of company I would have thought valuable to Elizabeth. The woman has nothing to recommend her and so much against her. She has no fortune, no connections—either of which I could abide, but not my sister. Forgive me, but she has no good looks, no style, her manners are barely this side of tolerable—all things that matter to Elizabeth very much.”

“And to your father as well.”

“Absolutely! It astounds me that he would permit her so much in his company when, if he met her on the streets, he would pronounce her a fright.”

“You do not like her?”

“Not at all. I suppose she is not a bad sort of woman, but we have nothing in common and see things very differently. Her only opinions are to agree with whomever is speaking. She has read nothing, absolutely nothing, no poetry, no prose. I suppose she reads a few pieces from ‘The Lady’s Magazine’ and the scandal sheets, but I hardly consider those an admirable source of information.”

“Though it would contain enough information for her to follow most of your sister’s conversations.”

Lady Russell laid a hand on Anne's arm. "I am afraid I would go so far as to call her 'not a bad sort of woman.'"

"What do you mean?"

"I have been hesitant to bring it up, but I too have concerns about Mrs. Clay's presence in your household."

Anne sagged back against the window frame and puffed a shallow breath. "So then it is not just me."

"Not at all."

"And the funny little feeling in the depths of my stomach..."

"I share with you."

Anne dropped to her knees beside Lady Russell and clutched her hand. "Please, tell me everything, everything you have thought or felt in regards to Mrs. Clay."

"Oh my dear, it is difficult."

"Why? You have told me far more difficult things I am sure."

Lady Russell winced. That pain would never go away, would it? Her advice had been sound and would have proven out had things gone the way they were most likely to have gone. "I am afraid the matter of concern to me is rather...indelicate..."

"Indelicate?"

"Yes."

Anne's brows knit, the thoughts whirring through her mind clear upon her face.

"Mrs. Clay?"

"Whilst I should not speak of it to you, it would be wrong of me not to speak of it at all." Lady Russell pinched the bridge of her nose. Bad enough to speak

of this with Anne, but to meet her eyes too? No. "My dear, consider Mr. Shepard."

"What of him, other than I do not particularly like him either and find his advice rather self-serving."

"Self-serving...that is exactly how I would describe the man."

"You do not trust him or his motives?" Anne asked.

"Do you?"

"He flatters far more than he advises and when he does advise, I find I am often in disagreement with his recommendations."

Enough delicate hinting. Lady Russell swallowed hard. "Why do you suppose he might position his daughter to be your sister's particular friend and so close to your *widowed* father?"

Anne gasped. "No! You do not suppose..."

"That is exactly why I said it was an indelicate thought. That is precisely what I suppose."

"But why would Father even consider...her?"

"Men are far stranger creatures than you realize, Anne. Their vanity is as pronounced as a woman's. Perhaps Mrs. Clay's plainness is an advantage in this situation. She garners no attention to herself, leaving it all for your father and sister. It seems to me that would be a material advantage. Not to mention her flattery and devotion to both of them could easily put her in the way of offering...let us say 'more', to him."

Anne pressed a hand to her chest. "More? Surely not...my father?"

"He is a man my dear and I should be surprised if he has lost the taste for baser pleasures."

"Oh dear." Anne rose, hands shaking.

It was a rather jarring thing to consider one's father in such a light, poor child. "Please forgive me, I know I have caused you distress."

"Only a little more than I had already been feeling. Lady Russell, what am I to do? I do not...I cannot...but she...what am I to do?"

Lady Russell took her arm and guided her to a chair. "I do not think this is something you can approach directly, but it must be handled with a very delicate hand. Perhaps if you make yourself more useful to your father..."

Anne's look would have shattered glass.

"Then again, perhaps not...your sister then...no that is equally unlikely. If you were to gently begin remarking on how it looks to be seen with Mrs. Clay, to have her in the house so much?"

"Yes, that might do. Perhaps there is something to be said now for going to Bath. I can be much more in favor of it as it distances us from Mrs. Clay."

"That is an excellent thought indeed."

## Preparing Kellynch

ANNE TRUDGED UP THE steps, a heavy ledger tucked under her arm. Portraits, she was cataloguing portraits today. Just one more in an unending stream of tasks Elizabeth saw fit to assign her. Count the silver, record the books, and oversee the packing of Mother's china and crystal. Oh, yes, the condition of all the draperies must be noted, and the particularly fine pieces of furniture not suitable for their tenants, those must be readied for storage.

How was it Elizabeth was so good at devising tasks for her, but so very poor at participating in any of them? Had she done anything outside of her own chambers? Her gowns! Oh her gowns! They must all be tended and readied for travel. How dare Anne suggest that she need not take every one of them? Indeed, what effrontery to even consider it? Why, what might that, that *woman*, Mrs. Croft, do with access to Elizabeth's fine garments?



Anne pinched her forehead. Mrs. Croft was an unconventional woman who spent much time at sea with her husband. What would she care of Elizabeth's finery? Not everyone was obsessed with what Elizabeth Elliot wore.

Or how she looked...how many looking glasses had to be packed? What a ridiculous article to transport—how many were necessary? At least she had convinced Father to leave the largest one behind—after all the house in Bath could have no fitting place for it and it would draw attention to the smallness of the room if placed in anything smaller than the Kellynch gallery. Or so she had convinced him, thankfully. He obviously had no concept of the cost of transporting such a monstrosity.

"Oh, Anne!" Father stopped abruptly, blinking rapidly. "What are you wearing?"

What was she wearing? Of all the absurd questions! "A morning dress, Father. I must go through all the guestroom and record the portraits there. It is very dusty work."

"You look a fright, you know, an absolute fright." His lip curled in a vague sneer.

"No one but the servants shall see me, sir."

"Still, one must maintain an appropriate presentation to the staff. The family image must be upheld, here as well as in Bath. I will not have the servants thinking ill of us in Bath."

"Have you forgotten, sir, I am not to attend you at Bath, Mrs. Clay is going in my stead. I am for Uppercross." A touch of relief battled with a hint of bitterness. While Bath was certainly not the place she would choose to visit, for Mrs. Clay to attend them—it was galling. She had no delusions about being fine

or desirable company, but for the unpolished, designing daughter of their agent to be preferred company? No amount of mental machinations could alleviate that sting.

“Oh yes, we cannot do without Mrs. Clay. I had quite forgotten what arrangements we had made for you.”

“I shall visit with Mary.”

He lifted his hand. “Ah, yes, that is right. Very good. I am glad that is settled. I need you to see to Mrs. Clay.”

“Excuse me? I do not think I heard you properly.”

“Elizabeth is quite concerned that she does not know how to correctly pack her gowns for the trip.”

“What do you expect of me?”

“Teach her how to manage them properly, perhaps accomplish her packing for her. She cannot be seen to be arriving in disarray.”

Anne squeezed her eyes shut and balled her hands into tight fists. Unlike Mrs. Clay, she knew how to behave properly and she would choose to do so, even if it killed her. “Father, you must see that I am overwhelmed with tasks as it is. Since Elizabeth is her friend, it should fall upon her to assist Mrs. Clay.”

“Elizabeth knows nothing of packing—that is the job of her maid.”

“Then perhaps her maid may be enlisted for this project. She might also arrange Mrs. Clay’s packing.”

“I suppose that is possible. But I do not see why you are being so disagreeable.”

Perhaps because she had far more work to do with far less help...no that thought was not helpful at all. “Please, Father, try to understand, both you and Elizabeth have insisted—”

“But what else have you to do? Truly I do not understand why you complain so. You must learn to better manage your time.” He frowned and tossed his head. “I shall instruct Elizabeth’s maid to assist Mrs. Clay, but I will accept no more lip from you.” He strode past her, muttering something unpleasant under his breath.

She swallowed hard and dashed down the hall. Privacy, she desperately needed privacy! She ducked into the farthest room and shut the door behind her. No one was likely to find her in the smallest, shabbiest guest room.

She pressed her back against the door, panting to hold back the roiling turmoil in her chest. Clutching the ledger to her ribs helped hold back sentiments she must not express. Perhaps it was best she be separated from her father and sister for some time.

Oh, goodness! She gasped. Her mother’s face stared at her from the darkest corner of the room.

Anne dropped her ledger on the press near the door and staggered to the unfinished canvas, balanced haphazardly on an easel. Lady Elliot, standing amidst a spring garden, beamed at her. The paint faded into pencil sketch from her shoulders down, and many of the flowers were unfinished, but there was no mistaking her mother’s face.

“Oh, Mama.” She sank to her knees on the dusty floor, face in her hands. “What have we become? I have tried to make you proud, but I have failed you.”

Standing, she scrubbed tears from her face with her apron and paced before the portrait. “This would never have happened under your management, Mama, but now we must leave our home. They are going to make merry in Bath, whilst I am for

Uppercross to see Mary. The Crofts will be here now. I think you would like them. They are very sensible people, as I understand it. Mrs. Croft, I am told, is very much like her...her...brother..." Sobs, uncontrollable and soul-wrenching, drove her to the floor.

*"After you have had a good cry out, you must dry your eyes and be happy again. This life is far too fleeting to waste one extra minute on mourning or regrets. I would not have you languishing and forlorn ... Anne. I wish to see you strong, sensible, and smiling ..."* Those were some of Mama's last words.

It was time to dry her eyes and be strong and sensible and smiling once more. She dragged her sleeve across her eyes and pushed up to her feet. The lists must be finished, looking glasses packed, and all the houses in the parish visited, it was the Elliot way. Somewhere, she would find the strength to smile through it all. And perhaps in Uppercross she might find something worth smiling about.

She dusted the unfinished portrait with her apron and tucked it under her arm. All the rest would wait a few minutes whilst she put the portrait in her room. Father and sister might have their looking glasses, this is what she would take with her from Kellynch.

## Everyone talks to Anne

ANNE PULLED HER SHAWL around her shoulders more tightly and slipped outside, the sun still so low on the horizon, only the servants were about. A fresh breeze teased, begging her to come out and partake of the morning, a far more appealing invitation than Mary's snores filtering from her open window. The violent, rasping roar had kept her up most of the night and it would be a pleasure to be free of it, even for a short time, before it was replaced by Mary's whining, nasal voice.

Anne hurried along the path that led to Uppercross' gardens. There were few better places to enjoy the first rays of daylight. Mrs. Muskgrove kept a spectacular array of flowers. Something always seemed to be blooming and filling the air with fragrance, a very cheerful place to seek solace for her frazzled nerves.

How very different Uppercross was to Kellynch,

so very different. Neither her father nor Elizabeth cared one whit about her or her opinion. Unless they wanted something of her, no one spoke to her. Of course it was a trial...but perhaps there was some redeeming value in the isolation after all. She chuckled under her breath.

In some ways this place was quite the opposite. It appeared Uppercross was populated by those who wished desperately to talk to her. That was new and novel. But it was quite familiar in that its inhabitants, willing as they were to speak, rarely if ever listened.

The difference was quite remarkable and took some effort to become accustomed to. Everyone, literally everyone, had to seek her out to express an opinion to her, sometimes under the guise of seeking hers. Not that any of them actually paused long enough to allow her to reply. Odder still, her silence was more often than not credited to her as some form of wisdom and great compassion when in truth all she had done was hold her peace and nod.

When she visited the apothecary for herbs for Mary's teas, he kept her a full hour discussing similar herbs and pontificating on all their uses. True, he had waxed on regarding the nature of Mary's complaints and offered a few additional leaves and flowers for her tea, and that was much appreciated. But all the odd smells and dust in the shop brought on a pounding headache that kept her company all the way home. She must remember to send a servant for the herbs in the future.

The throbbing had only just subsided when she slipped into the cottage kitchen to make Mary's tea and the housekeeper found her. The water boiled, tea steeped and cooled to stone cold as the taciturn

woman hinted at her mistress' shortcomings. And the list was not brief. Anne squeezed her temples.

'Could you, Miss Anne, help improve Mrs. Charles' understanding on the difficulty of hiring and retaining help so that mayhaps she would refrain from scolding the young maids so much? Oh and it would be ever so grand if the mistress would be a bit more liberal in allowing the servants to sell the extra food from dinners. That was, after all, the custom in most larger houses and by not permitting it, Uppercross Cottage appeared to great disadvantage in the neighborhood.

When had Anne become a font of wisdom on such matters?

And the housekeeper was not the only denizen of Uppercross who wished wisdom imparted upon Mrs. Charles. What had she already been asked? Perhaps Mrs. Charles might be convinced not to pursue precedence so forcefully, not to complain so much, not to compare the company to that which she knew at Kellynch. It might be pleasing for her to rein in her children better, to make an effort to be more agreeable when she called upon the great house, to recognize that it was not below her to occasionally call upon Mr. Charles' Aunt Hayter with him.

Did any of them realize how little influence she had over her sister? Nearly as little as with her father and Elizabeth. She pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head. How frustrated must they be to believe she could accomplish what they could not?

A patch of white flowers—what were they called? They grew at Kellynch as well—caught her eye. Mother had loved those, often bringing them into decorate her rooms. Even Father had been known to

smile when he saw them. Mary may have brought them with her when she married Charles.

Anne sighed. She had overheard Louisa whisper to Henrietta how much happier they all would have been had Charles married her instead of Mary. How strange to think someone actually wanted her company above someone else's.

What would it have been like, all these years later? Would she have had sons and be afraid more children would come? Might she have had daughters, whom she could cherish and teach as her mother had?

Would she sit across the table from her husband, sharing banal conversation interspersed with dull complaints and rolled eyes? Might she be pleased when he kept away from the house most of the day or would she miss his presence?

Perhaps she and Charles might have been more amiable, even fond of one another by this time. He was a good man, of steady character and good reputation. They would likely have been good friends, further buoyed by the agreeableness of his mother and sisters.

But they would not have loved one another.

The familiar gaping hole in her chest opened once again and sent her staggering for the support of a nearby tree. No, she had felt love once, and good man though he was, Charles could never inspire that in her.

That would be reserved for one man alone. Frederick.

Would that she could have it to do all over again. The bitter lessons she had learnt would be put to use and she would not permit herself to be persuaded by any but her own heart ever again. But that was but a



pipe dream, one that could serve no use but to remind her of what was forever gone.

She drew in a ragged breath, then another. The heat in her chest cooled and the tightness in her throat eased. She must not look back, there was no hope there. Only forward, she must turn her eyes there. That was the only direction where she had a modicum of control, the only direction she could change.

For now, forward was the direction of Uppercross. At least she had pleasing companionship from the great house, and her company was much sought after. That was a rare pleasure in and of itself was it not?

“Anne! Anne, I am so pleased to have found you!” Henrietta dashed toward her, breathless, cheeks and eyes bright. “I just have to talk to you. I so need your opinion...”

Not that there was any chance she would actually be given a moment to offer it. Anne smiled. At least it was good to be asked.

## **Anne considers the Croft's arrival**

“WOULD YOU CARE FOR some blackberry jam?” Charles Hayter asked, lifting the dish in her direction.

Oh bother, she must stop daydreaming before someone at the dinner table took notice, or worse, offense! Anne smiled, “Thank you, yes. I think I shall miss picking them.”

“It is a shame there are still so many on the bushes and now Michaelmas has come, we cannot pick them anymore.” Henrietta batted her eyes at Charles.

Their recent berry-picking expedition had ended with Henrietta returning with her dress stained as bright as her cheeks.

He tipped the spoon of jam almost into Anne's lap. “Pray forgive me! I did not mean to be so clumsy!”

“Never fear, only a small bit missed the plate.” Anne schooled her features into anything but the laugh that bubbled up. The young curate was a gentle

soul who would not relish being the source of a good natured joke.

"I cannot agree, Miss Henrietta," Mrs. Hayter dabbed her lips with her napkin and folded her blue-veined hands on the edge of the table. "The true shame is that we had to send young Henry off to school and we are all deprived of his company."

"But Mother," Charles Hayter leaned across the table, "you can hardly despair him pursuing an education. It was the making of me, you say all the time. Consider, you might find yourself with a solicitor in the family."

"Yes, yes, that is quite agreeable and I would be pleased to see him make something grand of himself, but you cannot discount the tender feelings of a mother's heart."

"I quite understand, dear," Mrs. Musgrove patted Mrs. Hayter's hand, "it was a very sad day when our dear Richard left home."

Charles Musgrove exchanged a tight-lipped look with his father, then glanced at Anne. Did they expect her to divert the conversation from such an awkward topic? Why did they not step in to talk of their hunt or fishing or even the coming harvest? Were they not the men of the family and able to control so small a thing as a conversation? Hardly.

She swallowed back her sigh. It was, after all, to her advantage to turn this conversation. "It is a beautiful bunch of Michaelmas daisies you brought to grace the table, Louisa. I did not see any in the garden. Where did you find them?"

Louisa launched into an animated description of exactly the spot in the wood where she found them and everything she saw along the way. Though

sometimes a bit fanciful, Louisa could be counted on to have her share of the conversation, and more if she were permitted.

Anne leaned back in her chair. Louisa would occupy them for some minutes and perhaps she might gather her composure now. Michaelmas had always been an awkward day at Kellynch and this year was even more so.

Bad enough facing the affected merriment of the tenants who resented presenting her father with a goose fattened on hay stubble only to hear that he would raise rents yet again. How the resentment and anger in their eyes pierced her soul. There would be no feasting or pretended gaiety at Kellynch this year, at least none she would be made aware of. The tenants might well celebrate the departure of Sir Walter, even if he was still their landlord.

The Crofts were still far too new to the neighborhood to be part of any Michaelmas celebration this year. As they had only just taken possession of the house a few days past, they could hardly be prepared to host a feast themselves.

Oh, but had they been ready, what kind of feast would they have held? Certainly they would have included all the tenants, something Father never did—allow people of *that* quality to sup within the walls of Kellynch manor? Bad enough that they should be permitted to live within the shades of Kellynch, but Mr. Shepard insisted none of the farms or houses should be left empty. But Admiral Croft seemed the kind of man who would share the jovial proceedings with as many as might be included and Mrs. Croft, with her gentle eyes and kindly smile, she would be the kind of hostess Anne's mother had

been.

Anne swallowed hard. She had not seen much of the Crofts when they visited Kellynch, but what she had was enough to convince her they were very decent people and, had she the opportunity, she would have liked them very much, indeed.

“Miss Anne, are you well?” Mrs. Musgrove asked, cocking her head and peering at Anne in her motherly-but-almost-intrusive sort of way.

Anne blinked rapidly and stretched her lips into something that should look like a smile. “Very well, thank you.”

“She is just sulking again.” Mary sniffed and curled her lip, almost affecting the signature Elliot sneer.

“Mary!” Charles hissed.

“What? I merely noted Anne’s tendency to sulkiness. Surely I am not the only one who has noticed.” She pulled her head back and twitched like a hen about to peck. “She has always had the propensity, ask Father or Elizabeth.”

Anne’s face burned, but to speak in her defense would only prolong the discomfort.

“She has been sulking all week about the new tenants coming to Kellynch.” Mary tossed her head, with the air of superiority that Louisa often complained about.

Of course her refusal to capitulate to every one of Mary’s whims would come back to haunt her, but was it necessary to cause a scene in so very a public a setting?

“I think it is very understandable, Mary,” Mrs. Musgrove laid her silverware on her plate with a louder than necessary clank, “I would be very melancholy to see another family take possession of

Uppercross.”

Anne stifled a gasp. While it was very dear of Mrs. Musgrove to speak on her behalf, Mary was quite likely to—

“Pray excuse me!” Mary slapped the table.

Anne, Henrietta and Louisa winced and cringed. Mary’s tantrums, while familiar, were uncomfortable and embarrassing on the best of days, without the additional audience of the Hayters.

“Indeed, indeed,” Mr. Musgrove laced his fingers in front of his chest and lifted an eyebrow toward Charles. “Consider how you would like it, Mary, to see another in your place.”

Why did he have to mention that? Mary was all too aware that the Musgroves would have preferred Anne be Charles’ wife and was none too happy about it. No doubt Mary would now take to her sickbed for several days to come, expecting Anne to wait on her the entire time. Such was Anne’s penance for being the more agreeable sister.

“Do you not think it agreeable to have new company in the neighborhood?” Mrs. Hayter asked, her voice a little high and thin.

“I certainly do,” Mrs. Musgrove nodded too vigorously, “One cannot have enough agreeable company and I believe Miss Anne recommended them as agreeable indeed.”

“I know them only a very little, but they did seem well mannered and pleasing.” Anne shrugged.

“Then we must certainly invite them to sup with us at the first possible moment.” Mr. Musgrove crossed his arms over his chest.

Decision made, clusters of smaller conversations broke out across the room, none of which included

Anne.

Of course, it was only right that the Crofts should be entertained at Uppercross. Basic hospitality demanded at least that much. Oh, but how could she bear it? To be so close to them, and all the memories they invoked.

Mrs. Croft, her eyes, they were so like her brother's. Anne could not look at her without being transported back to those few lovely days... Admiral Croft would surely regale them with tales of the Navy, the kind of tales Frederick might have told her of his own exploits. Tales she would not likely ever hear.

Could one's very soul ache? Surely it could, for the emptiness that welled within her wrenched at the core of her being. How could she endure keeping company with the Crofts, no matter how lovely and agreeable their society? Not that she would have much choice. Choice was not her lot in life. Hers was to endure. And somehow she would.

## **We are for Lyme**

“SHALL WE TO THE drawing room?” Mrs. Musgrove, all smiles and good cheer, placed her napkin on the table beside her empty plate and stood, a benevolent queen surveying her grateful subjects.

How bright and truly happy she appeared, as if she genuinely enjoyed the simple graces of hospitality. Anne sighed and fought not to roll her eyes. Yet one more unfavorable comparison between the Elliots and the Musgroves.

At Uppercross the dining room was a merry place, full of warmth and companionship, if not the most elegant dishes. No fancy French dishes or towering jellies filled with fruit graced this table. Yes, if someone's manners slipped and they sipped from the wrong side of their soup spoon, or one of the ladies enjoyed a hearty portion of her favorite dish, no one



appeared to notice, nor was it brought up in hushed conversation in the days following.

Her father had dined here but once and pronounced it a beastly affair, not to be repeated. But she could not agree. No amount of fine food could substitute for pleasing companions and easy manners.

Anne followed the rest of the company out of the room. Mary looked over her shoulder from the front of the group and glowered. Yes, technically Anne should take precedence over most of the company. But among such a gathering of friends and family, was it truly necessary? Being an Elliot did not require she flaunt her rank, did it?

She turned away from Mary's cross mien. None of those reasons would make sense to her sister. Even less the notion that walking near Wentworth would only heighten her own ill-ease. In all likelihood, he would not favor it either.

In the drawing room, she took her place at the pianoforte. Over the last several weeks, she had taken that place so often, Henrietta and Louisa had begun calling it 'Anne's seat.' In any other company, it might have been an offense. But they only meant it with affection, so Anne accepted the designation with the grace with which it was offered, even as Mary tried to put a stop to it all.

No one seemed interested in a dance, so Anne began to play something soft and restful, a tune she knew so well it required no thought to play, one that soothed her soul.

Wentworth sat near Louisa, caressed by the firelight as she tried to take his silhouette. How he seemed to revel in her attentions. Was it is pride—or perhaps his loneliness that she soothed?

Anne dropped her gaze to the keyboard. She should be happy for him—at least one of them might finally find some happiness.

"You mentioned your trip, sir." Mrs. Musgrove smoothed her skirt over her lap. "But you said nothing more of it. Was a pleasant one?"

"Indeed it was." Wentworth smiled with such warmth in his eyes that Anne nearly missed her fingering. "The sea air alone was enough to do a land-locked sailor a world of good."

"So our country air does not suit you?" Charles' brows twitched up.

Henrietta and Louisa tittered.

"Do not put words in my mouth, sir." Wentworth cocked his head and raised his brows.

"Oh, do be still. I cannot take an accurate likeness if you keep bobbing about like a bird on the water." Louisa's lips drew up into a decided pout. How bold she had become.

"Forgive me." Wentworth settled back and smiled at her, a bit patronizing, but pleasant nonetheless. "When you visit London, do you not find you long for the freshness of the country air?"

"Well said, sir, well said." Charles chuckled and laid his hands over his belly. Soon, his portly stature would match his father's. They were so alike in looks and humor.

"Then you do understand. A sailor always longs for the sea and the companionship of his shipmates."

"So you say we are not sufficient company for you?" Mary sniffed and wrinkled her nose as if detecting a foul odor.

"Not at all." Wentworth's voice turned entirely patronizing and not at all pleasant.

Anne winced. He had used that tone with Mary back at Kellynch those many years ago.

"But if you were to meet Harville, you would understand in an instant. I would do nearly anything for him and him for me."

"Sounds like an exceptional fellow. I would like to meet him very much." Charles propped his feet on a nearby stool and crossed his ankles.

"What a wonderful thought, Charles!" Louisa clapped.

"Why do we not go to visit Lyme?"

"That is a very interesting notion my dear, a very interesting one indeed." Mrs. Musgrove clasped her hands together very tightly.

She did not like the idea, but was far too polite to say so in company. How rude of Louisa to place her mother in such an awkward situation. Anne bit her lip.

Did Wentworth notice the mischief her influence had worked? As much as he claimed to prefer a woman who knew her own mind—and he had said so in her presence often enough for his full meaning to be felt—he could not approve of what bordered on disrespect, could he? No, it was not possible that he could have changed so much.

Mr. Musgrove cleared his throat. "Travel can be a very good thing for young people, I think. There is much to be learned in seeing other places...and the sea..." He swallowed hard.

Poor man, he always choked up when reminded of his dear, departed son. Though Dick's siblings did not share his parents' grief at his loss, the children should be more sensitive of their pain.

Wentworth's cheeks tightened—a tiny look of disapproval he had perfected for use in the Elliot

household when he must not speak his feelings about Sir Walter and his eldest daughter. The question was would he correct Louisa as freely as he praised her.

"I do believe that everyone should see the sea at least one in their lives. One cannot understand a sailor lest they have seen the sea." Wentworth glanced at Louisa.

Apparently he would not. Probably just as well, the Musgroves were doting parents and probably would not take it well, even from a guest as esteemed as Wentworth. Anne closed her eyes and bit her lip, arranging her features into something neutral if not pleasing.

The skin along the side of her neck prickled. Wentworth's gaze had wandered to her. Why?

Mr. Musgrove cleared his throat. "I do believe a trip to Lyme might be accommodated."

"Thank you papa!" Louisa clapped softly. "As soon as may be possible, tomorrow even—" She turned and clasped Henrietta's hands.

"No, my dear, that is not practical. I think such a trip would be better made in the spring. November is a ghastly month to travel—"

Louisa slouched and huffed. "No Papa, we cannot wait until spring. That is entirely unnecessary."

"But the weather must be considered."

"The weather has been very mild and we have no reason to think that will change in the immediate future. Besides, that is all the more reason for us to go immediately. We can be off early in the morning and back in the same day."

"No, I draw the line at that notion, child." Mr. Musgrove folded his arms over his chest.

"Papa, you cannot withdraw your permission!"

"The effort would be too much on the horses. I must consider them. They cannot go both legs of the journey in a single day. On that I am firm."

"Very well then," Louisa frowned briefly. "I suppose we must stay the night then."

"The night? Where will you stay? You cannot impose on the hospitality of a family we do not even know." Mrs. Musgrove's eyes widened and her mouth formed a perfect little 'o'.

Anne pinched her temples. When had Louisa become so headstrong and unfeeling?

"An inn, Mama. I am certain there are inns at Lyme. Are there not, Captain Wentworth?" Louisa batted her eyes at the captain.

Wentworth hesitated, his brow drawn into a tight knot. "Yes there are. I know of several respectable establishments."

"I do not like it." Mrs. Musgrove twitched her head.

"Young ladies should not make such a trip alone."

"How can you say we will be alone in the company of Captain Wentworth?"

"You must have a chaperone and on this I will not be moved." Mrs. Musgrove glanced at her husband who nodded.

"But Mama, if Henrietta goes, is that not—"

"No it is not. You need the guidance and protection of someone older and more sensible than yourself. Miss Anne," Mrs. Musgrove turned and caught Anne's gaze, "I declare, I know no one with more good sense than yourself. Perhaps you would consider making the journey with our girls?"

Anne gasped.

"Please, Anne!" Henrietta jumped up and hurried to Anne's side.

"Yes! That is the perfect solution! Anne, you must go with us!" Louisa beamed. "Then it is settled—"

"Settled? Settled?" Mary cried. She sprang to her feet and paced along the center of the room. "I do not see how this is settled at all. Why should this be settled? I do not understand why Anne should go. She is nothing to you. I am your sister. Who more fitting to watch over you and protect you than your sister? Truly who is Anne to you?"

Anne's cheeks burned and she pinched her temples. If only she could hide beneath the piano until this humiliating episode was over!

"Why must I stay home? I do say, it seems when there is a gay outing to be had I am always the last to be thought of." Mary dabbed her handkerchief to her eyes.

"There, there, Mary dear." Mrs. Musgrove rolled her eyes. "No one intended to leave you out. You have said so many times that you dislike the carriage, we were only thinking of sparing you a half day travel in one."

"I should like to see Lyme." Charles sat up and squared his shoulders. "I do not see why we cannot join the party."

"There you have it," Mary nodded sharply. "With Charles and I, there is no need for Anne to make the journey."

Anne swallowed back the lump in her throat. It was flattering to have been asked, and that should have been enough. Traveling with Wentworth would have been awkward at best. Though it would have been nice—

"You may have precedence over your unmarried sister," Charles shot a sour look toward his wife, "but that does not mean you should also exclude her. Anne has had little opportunity to travel and if the rest of us are going, then she too should have the opportunity. Will you join us, Anne?"

Blood roared in Anne's ears and her cheeks heated painfully as Wentworth's gaze fixed on her. "I do not know..." Why did he look at her so? Whatever could he mean by that?

He blinked three times. "I think Miss Anne should take in the sea."

What had he said? Words caught in her throat and he turned aside before she could muster a response.

"Then it is decided." Charles brushed his hands together. We are all for Lyme."

## Anne Visits Lady Russell

LADY RUSSELL OPENED HER inlaid walnut teapoy. The dusty herbal fragrance of tea leaves wafted up, riding on the dust motes in the afternoon sun. How long had it been since she had last shared tea with Anne?

In the absolute sense, not that long. Only a few months. But it felt far, far longer. She spooned out the tea. Anne should be down in just a moment. How much had happened in just these few months? More important, how traumatizing had it been? Anne's letters had been cheerful enough. She wrote all the right and proper things. Everyone was in good health—or at least they had been at the start of her visit before two serious falls had taken their tolls. The weather was tolerable and the cottage was comfortable. Her hosts were as kind and thoughtful as ever they had been and her stay was pleasant.



But truly, what was one to make of such missives, when one knew the true nature of the characters involved a little too well? The Musgroves were decent enough people, but careless, and if the truth be told, a bit vulgar. The girls were barely genteel and though Charles Musgrove could pass for a gentleman if he refrained from too much conversation, their other son, the departed Dick Musgrove, had been simply dreadful. He was certainly a testament to the quality of his parents. One might only imagine what boorish conversation poor Anne might have had to endure, night after night, after of course, she played endless hours on the pianoforte to amuse the silly, flighty girls.

If that were not enough, Mary Musgrove was still an Elliot, despite leaving that name behind for marriage. She was every bit as vain, small-minded and thoughtless as her eldest sister, with the added benefit of her hypochondriacal tendencies. Where Elizabeth found a thousand mindless tasks for Anne, Mary preferred to see her sister as her nurse—or more appropriately, nursemaid.

Tolerating such a company would surely tax a saint, but to add the Crofts and their undesirable guest—what worse circumstances could have been forced upon her young friend? And all for the sake of economizing! She pressed her temple hard. Perhaps that would force her nagging guilt away.

“You are so considerate. That is my favorite tea that I smell, is it not?” Anne stood in the doorway, eyes smiling.

How well she looked, bathed in a golden sunbeam. Very well indeed. Her figure was softer, less gaunt than before. Her cheeks had filled to a pleasing

roundness and all sallowness of complexion had quite disappeared.

Perhaps the benefits of time away from her father outweighed the disagreeableness of her current company. Too bad it would end soon. Poor Anne did not like Bath, despite the benefits of society that it offered.

Lady Russell bit her lip and nodded. Perhaps this second bloom would carry Anne through her stay and work to her great advantage. There were many eligible young men in Bath and introductions could be arranged. Sir Walter could be worked on easily enough if the right circumstance were to present itself. After all, having one less set of expenses could only ease his current situation.

She would definitely have to put pen to paper this evening. How pleasing it would be to see Anne well settled.

"I made sure to lay in a stock of your favorite, my dear. Do come in. How I have missed taking tea with you. It seems as though Uppercross has quite agreed with you."

Anne sat near her, but her expression seemed far away. "I do believe the change of scenery has done me good."

"I am very pleased to hear it." Lady Russell placed a teacup in Anne's hand.

"So tell me of the news in Bath." She settled back in her chair and let the teacup rest on her lap. Her face was arranged into the very image of politeness, but her eyes lacked the animation that would have marked any true interest in the subject.

"I take it Elizabeth has not written you?"

Anne dropped a lump of sugar into her tea.

“Elizabeth has far more pleasing pastimes, I am sure, than writing to me.”

“But surely you have written her.”

“Indeed I have. You can hardly imagine I would not—she was so insistent that I write her regularly. I expect there is a certain comfort in being assured that one will receive mail when one is away from home. But it does not follow a correspondence is necessarily returned.”

Lady Russell forced her frown away. “I am sorry to hear it.” Not surprised at all, but certainly sorry.

“Do not be. It is as I expected it would be. Neither of us has ever known Elizabeth to be a diligent correspondent, unless there was news of society to be had, and Uppercross is not society.” Anne sipped her tea and laughed softly. “In truth, there is some correspondence one does not necessarily wish to receive. I would much rather hear your impressions of...”

“Camden place?”

“Yes, that is the house they took, is it not? What do you think of it?”

“I am sure you would have preferred something even more modest.” Lady Russell cocked her head and chuckled.

“But my father could hardly take a house not befitting a baronet.”

“The house befits his rank—”

“—and his budget?”

“I made a few discreet inquiries on that point and, yes, it is quite affordable. “ Lady Russell set her tea cup aside. “Perhaps more significantly, your father and Elizabeth have been enjoying the invitations of their new acquaintances while keeping their own

entertaining—ah, restrained. Elizabeth limits herself to card parties—”

“Which fulfill her obligations without so much strain on the budget as a dinner party or ball?” Anne’s eyebrow arched in an echo of her mother’s favorite expression.

“Quite.”

“I cannot tell you how pleased I am to hear you say that.” Anne leaned back, eyes closed and sighed.

Poor dear, how much anxiety had Elizabeth’s lack of correspondence caused her?

“Does Mrs. Clay still enjoy my father’s...favor?”

Lady Russell swallowed hard. “I am afraid so. She hangs upon Elizabeth like a lady-in-waiting, so she is utterly essential. She offers similar attentions to your father, so she is included in nearly every invitation.”

Anne pursed her lips and nodded, averting her eyes from Lady Russell’s gaze.

“I am sorry, I have tried to convince both of them that their...guest...does nothing to increase their status in the eyes of society, nor does she impress anyone with her beauty, wit or manners. Those issues would usually work upon Sir Walter, but on this matter he simply will not be moved.”

Anne closed her eyes and nodded.

“However, there is good news. At the very least, Mrs. Clay is not encouraging an increase in their spending.” It seemed the opportunistic harpy knew better the danger the Elliots were in than the Elliots themselves. At least she had the wits about her to realize if she encouraged them to ruin, she would fall with them. Some little comfort that was. “If your father maintains his current plans of economy, I am optimistic that your family will one day be able to

return to Kellynch.”

“Then I shall choose to take comfort in what blessings might be found.” Anne sighed and straightened her shoulders. “In the meantime, the Crofts are excellent tenants. They are a credit to Kellynch.”

How singular and how gracious. Truly Anne must be immune to the pettiness carried by the rest of her family. “Have you seen much of the Crofts?”

“Indeed I have, they...and Captain Wentworth, have been regular guests at Uppercross.”

“I am surprised the Musgroves would make them frequent guests.”

“Indeed, why so? The Musgroves are very agreeable people as are the Crofts. It is not so odd that they would find pleasure in one another’s company.” Anne looked out the window, in the direction of Uppercross.

“I merely assumed that out of deference for you, and Mary I suppose, they should not have been in the habit of inviting them. Even you must agree, it does make for a great deal of difficult conversation topics. It surprises me that you should find such pleasure in their company.” Lady Russell leaned forward and tried to catch Anne’s gaze. “Oh my dear, my heart has been so heavy for you these months, knowing you were in such company: the ones living in your home and...and...him.” There she had said it, finally broached the unmentionable.

“I confess, it was difficult at first seeing the Crofts. But truly they are so thoughtful and kind and courteous, it is easy to forgive them for leasing Kellynch. It is a comfort to know the estate is so well managed in my family’s absence. Do you know, they

even took me home in their carriage when they came upon us after a long walk? Although they truly only had room for themselves, they squashed up and gave me space to travel with them. It was very gracious indeed for they had no need to do so." Anne's gaze drifted up to the ceiling. "As for Captain Wentworth—I cannot lie to you. You know me far too well for that. His presence has been more difficult to bear."

Lady Russell pressed a knuckle to her lips. A familiar tightness gripped her chest. "Even so, you seemed to have blossomed under the adversity. I have not seen you so well-looking in, I cannot remember when."

Anne's cheeks flushed and her lips turned up. One of her cheeks dimpled just the way her mother's had. "It is easier now, though. He seems to have formed an attachment to Louisa."

"Louisa Musgrove?"

"Indeed. Although to hear Mary and Charles talk of it, Henrietta might well have caught his attention too. But she is often in the company of her cousin Charles Hayter, the curate, and the good captain could not rightly continue paying attentions to both young ladies in the house."

Lady Russell nodded as Anne detailed the acquaintance of Louisa Musgrove and Captain Wentworth. How forward and headstrong the girl had become in recent days. So unbecoming in a young woman! At least Anne was beyond being influenced by such company.

Clearly she had overestimated that man. The regret she had at separating Wentworth from Anne faded just a little. Surely one who might consider one of the

silly, flighty Musgroves would never have done for her steady, sensible, worthy Anne.

Perhaps Anne recognized it too. Is that why so much color had returned to her cheeks and her eyes were brighter now. Had her melancholy finally lifted? Of course! Why had she not seen it sooner?

What a delightful and wholly unexpected prospect. Perhaps this trip to Bath held greater promise than any she ever hoped.

How delightful.

Lady Russell settled back, listening to the details of the events at Lyme but considering what invitations and connections she might make on Anne's behalf. Perhaps finally she would see her friend in her rightful place as mistress of her own home. Spending time in Wentworth's presence might have been a very good thing after all.

## The Musgrove's Domestic Hurricane

THE MUSGROVES CAME BACK to receive their happy boys and girls from school, bringing with them Mrs. Harville's little children to improve the noise of Uppercross, and lessen that of Lyme. Henrietta remained with Louisa but all the rest of the family were again in their usual quarters.

Lady Russell and Anne paid their compliments to them at once, when Anne could not but feel Uppercross was already quite alive again.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of the great house at Uppercross. The driver handed Anne and Lady Russell down, the noise from the house clear even from the distance.

Lady Russell sucked in a sharp breath as she pursed her lips. All that was polite and elegant, she would say no more than this, but it was enough to speak her discomfiture. Children were not her chiefest pleasure.



They were loud, to be sure, but the sounds were happy ones, full of life and spirit rarely heard at Kellynch. The contrast alone made them most welcome. Even more welcome, perhaps, was the certitude that the expanded company at Uppercross would not include a certain person whose presence threatened to discompose her most. He was off to visit his brother at Shropshire.

Mrs. Musgrove met them at the door, mobcap slightly askew. "Come in, come in. My gracious it is good to see you." She led them in.

In the far corner, well away from the fire, three little girls sat giggling and cutting paper into decorative shapes. Louisa would have been among them no doubt, had she been there.

Lady Russell took a seat near the fire as befit her station. Anne hesitated a moment, giving precedence to Mrs. Musgrove. Mary would have been quite put out, but it gave Mrs. Musgrove such a glow of pleasure, the little, unnecessary politeness was worth risking Mary's wrath.

"You cook has been very busy, I see," Lady Russell nodded toward the tables laden with cold pies, brawn, biscuits and cake.

"Indeed she has and we have called in extra girls to help her. Christmastide dinners are no small task, you know. It would not do to be found short at the table with so many in the house this holiday."

"How many of the Harville children did you bring to stay at Uppercross?" Lady Russell looked over her shoulder, probably trying to count children as they dashed to and fro.

"Just four of them, the older two are useful to Mrs. Harville, so they stayed behind. But they shall

come to join us when the Harvilles bring Louisa back.”

“Louisa is strong enough to return?” Anne sat a little straighter and leaned in. Mrs. Musgrove was difficult to hear above the noise of the children and the crackling fire.

“Not yet, but it will be soon, Miss Anne, very soon I am told, certainly before my younger ones return to school. They are so concerned for her you know, quite distraught at her absence.”

That she would have to take on faith alone, based on the high spirits of the children. “How lovely to hear her strength and health are returning. I cannot think of better news to receive for the Christmastide season.”

“I completely agree, Miss Anne. We are very blessed to be sure, but I am certain a bit of quiet cheerfulness will do her no end of good.”

“Quiet cheerfulness?” Surely she could not mean—

“Yes, indeed. Can you think of anything better than being here, among good spirits and quiet, that would be better for convalescing?”

Quiet cheerfulness? That was not the way Anne would choose to describe the scene before her. A domestic hurricane might be more accurate. But that was not to say this was not a warm and pleasing scene. Such busyness was preferable to the cold propriety to be found at Kellynch.

Two young Harvilles ran up to Mrs. Musgrove and took refuge in the shelter of her arms.

“There, there dears.” She turned to Mary’s two boys who had stopped just short of their grandmother, eyes on the younger boys. “Do stop

chasing. I do not like to see any of you running in the house.”

“Then let us play snapdragon! Please, please!” Little Charles pleaded, his arm still in a sling, a reminder of his earlier injury.

Mrs. Musgrove’s eyes widened so much they bulged. “I think not. I do not think it a good game for children.”

“But—”

Mr. Musgrove scooped up Mary’s boys from behind and held them off the floor. “You are far too young to play in the flames. Perhaps another year. Now off with you.” He bounced them twice before returning them to their feet, then dropped down onto a footstool near Lady Russell.

Anne winced. That bouncing could not be good for little Charles’ injury, but the boy did not seem to complain.

“Miss Anne, do come and take a turn about the room with me.” Mrs. Musgrove rose and held out her hand.

Anne rose; what was on Mrs. Musgrove’s mind? She wore the look she always wore when she wanted to talk about something significant.

“The fire is so loud, I can barely hear my own thoughts. Conversation is quite nearly impossible.”

She did have a point. Mr. Musgrove’s voice veritably boomed as he strove to be heard to Lady Russell.

They stepped into the drawing room and Mrs. Musgrove closed the door behind them. “I declare, if I do not shut the door tight behind me, the children will follow me in barely a heartbeat. None of them have any respect for my fine room. I quite understand

it from the Harvilles, you know, I quite doubt they have much experience with a drawing room at all. But from Mary's children, they are quite out of control. I do not know how to curb them."

Anne forced a smile, the properest response to the request that was sure to follow, that she should ask Mary to—

"But, dear Anne, that was not why I brought you in to talk."

Anne blinked twice and bit her tongue.

"I just had to take a moment to thank you so very much for all you did for Louisa in Lyme."

Oh! "It was really very little—"

"That is not how Captain Wentworth described it. He waxed on and on about how calm and sensible you were, how it was you who knew to send Captain Benwick for a surgeon, how you marshalled them all and told them what to do. You managed everything for my dear girl. For that I cannot thank you enough."

"You are very welcome, but I fear you are making too much of it."

"I am sure I am not. You are far too modest Miss Anne. I fear you cannot see your own worth. If only you had heard Captain Wentworth speak! He certainly is convinced of it. You must accept at least a little of our thanks."

Anne opened her mouth, but her words lagged behind several seconds. "I am just pleased that Louisa has made such a good recovery. That makes any effort on my part entirely my pleasure."

Mrs. Musgrove continued on and on in her appreciation, but the words faded into the background. Captain Wentworth had spoken well of

her? And done so freely? Her heart fluttered and the room wavered around her. But he was attached to Louisa, was he not? All but engaged, in fact? Surely it could not mean anything, could it?

Mrs. Musgrove stopped speaking and smiled. Hopefully Anne's smiles and nods had been at the right moments, for she had no idea of what had been actually said. They walked back into the great room and joined Lady Russell once again.

Merry conversation swirled around her, but none of it made any impact. To have Frederick's praise...indeed that he thought well of her...this was the most remarkable news, even though it sent her feelings about Louisa into a dither. What did it mean? What could it mean in light of the expectations everyone else had of Frederick toward Louisa?

Still though, the indifference she had seen in his eyes was no longer the only thing he felt for her. That alone might sustain her. At least a little.

Lady Russell rose; a movement she only caught from the corner of her eye. Anne jumped up to follow. They gathered their wraps and made their good-byes.

"Anne, are you well? You do seem out of sorts." Lady Russell touched her arm lightly as the driver handed them into the carriage.

"I am well, just a little overwarm I think." Anne settled into the well-worn seat. The intelligence she had gained today was certainly not a thing to be shared.

"It is no wonder, with that fire and sitting so close! I cannot agree with the wisdom of having such a very large fire on a day which is not so very cold. And so much noise! I had no idea. I hope I shall remember in

the future not to call at Uppercross during the Christmas holidays.” Lady Russell fanned herself with her handkerchief. “It is far too discomposing.”

Anne nodded and blinked. Indeed it was.

## **Anne Visits Mrs. Smith**

ANNE PRESSED HER TEMPLES and winced. Elizabeth and Father were in rare form today, both unleashing their well-developed Elliot tempers upon their personal servants.

Father demanded his valet press his shirt a third time—his ruffles must be flawless. Elizabeth shrieked at her lady's maid for what could only be intentional neglect of attention to Elizabeth's hair. The poor girl dressed it no less than four times. The curls were uneven...the pins were too tight...no that was too plain!

Did Elizabeth have to threaten to sack her maid, again? With as much difficulty as she faced replacing her last maid, one might think she would be a little more careful of the way she treated her staff. She would be very fortunate indeed if the girl were still there when Elizabeth returned from tea at Laura Place.

Father and Elizabeth had been engaged for tea with their cousins, Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret. These were acquaintances worth having, despite the sad truth that Father would never have tolerated their dull appearance and awkwardness at Camden place, save for the accident of their birth.

What would they say about the call she was planning to make this afternoon? Surely it would, at best, elicit very little interest from them. At worst, they might censure it. Best keep her agreeable plans to herself.

Her dear schoolfellow, once Miss Hamilton, now Mrs. Smith, stayed in Westgate Buildings, but severe rheumatic fever kept her to her lodgings. In the days following Lady Elliot's death, when Anne had been sent to school, Miss Hamilton's friendship eased her loneliness and suffering considerably.

Since there was no way for the enfeebled Mrs. Smith to call upon her, she must call upon her friend. Happily, Lady Russell heartily approved her desire to renew the acquaintance and offered to convey her to Westgate Buildings.

But what was she to say? So many years had passed, and now their situations were so...so reversed. Then, Miss Hamilton had been the superior girl, taking notice of the young, dispirited Anne. But now, Anne was in the decidedly elevated position. Would that ruin their friendship?

Mr. Elliot's words still rang in her mind, *Good company requires only birth, education and manners, and with regards to education it is not very nice*. A little shiver ran down her spine. Surely that was not what she was walking into, was it? Miss Hamilton had always been clever and well-informed, though her sense of humor



had been a bit wicked. Anne bit her lip to hide a giggle. That had been one of her most appealing qualities.

Lady Russell's carriage stopped and the driver handed her out at the street corner nearest Westgate Building. The fine carriage would attract enough attention on the street. Best not make a spectacle of her arrival, when the event was somewhat awkward as it stood.

She drew her cloak around her and stepped brightly down the dirty, crowded street to the number to which she had been directed. Pausing only briefly to gather her courage, she knocked on the door—paint peeling and dusty—and waited. After an interval which would have mortified her father, a rough looking, stooped woman admitted her.

"So's you here to see to Mrs. Smith, eh?" The woman sported a gap-toothed smile, but seemed well intentioned enough.

"I am."

"I had no idea of her having such fine friends. Mighty nice of you to come away from your fine place to see the likes of us. She's just in the parlor here." She shambled down a short hall and pointed into a dark room.

Anne nodded and preceded her into the parlor, a bit uncertain of how to respond to the odd little woman. How did one reply to such remarks? Father would have considered them impertinent at best. Elizabeth would have dressed the woman down without hesitation. Perhaps silence and a pleasant expression were the best option at present.

The parlor's few, small windows faced east, leaving the room dimly lit and vaguely cold. The smell

reminded her of the Harville's lodgings, only far more pronounced. How many people must share this house?

"She's on the daybed, there in the corner. Having a particular bad day today, I would say. She ain't one to tell you directly, you know, but you seem like the kind of lady who'd want to know." The woman shuffled to the corner of the room. "Look who I brung ya'."

"Miss Elliot!" Mrs. Smith sat up a little straighter, her voice weak, but full of warmth. "How delightful it is to see you!"

"Indeed it is." Anne dipped in a little curtsy.

The woman dragged a chair close to the daybed and dusted off the shabby seat. "Here you go, Miss, enjoy your call."

Mrs. Smith pulled herself up a little higher against the back of the daybed. "Thank you, you are too good to me, Mrs. Lance."

Anne sat down. How frail Mrs. Smith looked, covered with a threadbare blanket. Though she smiled, pain lined her face, and her color...there was hardly any at all.

"I was not certain that you would come, Miss Elliot. I know these are not the kind of lodgings that you would find particularly comfortable."

Whilst it was true, best not remark upon it. "I am most happy to see you. It has been far too long I think. I regret that we did not maintain our correspondence."

"I must bear the blame for that. I fear I was a most negligent correspondent. But now you are here and we may forget the time we have been apart." Her gaze drifted over her shoulder and she lifted her hand in a weak wave. "Nurse Rook just walked past."

“Nurse Rook?”

“She and her sister, Mrs. Lance, have been my blessings, my angels of mercy here in Bath. You see, when I had just arrived, I suffered another desperately ill spell. Mrs. Lance set her dear sister to care for me when I most needed it, despite knowing that my means are meager and friends few. She has nursed my body with tonics and carrying me into the hot baths; she had cheered my spirits with news of the outside world; and given my hands useful employment with threadcases, pincushions and card holders to make, and sell, and teaching me to knit that I might be a little help to those in the neighborhood whose situation is poorer than my own. I am indeed most blessed.”

Blessed? In these circumstances, blessed? “I...I...forgive me, I should have thought...”

“That I was quite the brown study? I suppose I was at one time, feeling quite sorry for myself. Certainly when I first came here, I was. But with the help of my new friends, I have regained my good cheer.”

“Forgive me, but have you not found it difficult?”

“Indeed I have, have no doubt about that. In truth, there have been days indeed I have been entirely ungrateful and thoroughly churlish to manage. You may have Mrs. Lance’s word on that.” Mrs. Smith made such a face and laughed.

Anne laughed along with her. What else could so do? Such good humor was truly infectious. “Have not your losses been—”

“Oh, they have been. Sometimes there seem too many to count: my husband, of whom I was exceedingly fond, our fortune, our connections, my

health. Yes, they are heavy burdens indeed.”

“But you are so cheerful. Forgive me for saying so, but I know so many whose situations are far better...” Oh, perhaps that was not the most gracious of things to say.

“Better than this?” Mrs. Smith gestured to the dilapidated little room around them and chuckled. “I am indeed aware of the meanness of my circumstance. You offer no offense by drawing attention to it, I assure you.”

Anne muffled a little sigh. It would have been unthinkable to have offended her friend. “I cannot help but think of my sisters, though I should not say so. Mary has a husband, a comfortable home, children, and her husband’s inheritance of Uppercross to look forward to. Yet she is forever fancying herself ill and unhappy.”

“She would not be the first, nor the last to do so would she?”

“I suppose not. But consider my father and Elizabeth, worrying themselves into a dither over whether our cousin Lady Dalrymple would cut them or not! How very petty it all seems...forgive me, you must think me utterly insensitive—”

“Hardly, my friend. It is refreshing to be able to speak openly of things. You have always known that I am apt to speak bluntly rather than with tact and elegance. It is a relief to share that with you. We have always had that, have we not?”

“I suppose so. But enough of my own circumstances, you must tell me, what may I do for you?”

“Tell me...oh, of anything. Of places I have not been, people I have not met. I quite rely on such

intelligence to carry me through those moments when I fancy myself more miserable than I am.”

Of all the things she would ask, it would be that, would it not? “I have not been many places, nor done many things, nor know many people...”

“And you have many regrets?”

Anne turned her face aside. Mrs. Smith was astute as she ever was. Sickness had not taken that from her.

“We all have regrets, every one of us. Just because some around you will pretend not does not make them immune. What matters is not your regrets, but that you have the elasticity of character to rebound from them and have a disposition to be comforted in whatever your circumstances. We must go forward, for we cannot go back. Today, and tomorrow are only ever as pleasing as we choose to make them, are they not?”

*As we choose to make them...as we choose...we choose....*  
Mrs. Smith’s voice faced into the background hum of the noisy room as Anne’s awareness narrowed around a single word: choice. She had the power of choice. She could indeed choose. She had been persuaded in the past, and while perhaps it was not wrong for her to have been so, today she had the power to choose for herself. Choose what she would do, with whom she would associate, what she would think, what she would approve.

She was not a victim of the whims of others. She could choose...and today she would.

## Anne suspects Mr. Elliot

ANNE FASTENED HER SPENCER and tied her bonnet strings. Strange sensations threatened to overwhelm her and if she did not get outside into the fresh air quickly she might be overcome. The butler opened the door for her, inquiring if she might require a chair. She shook her head and hurried out before anyone could inquire as to her destination.

What a very strange conversation she had shared with Lady Russell. In truth it was not a conversation. Lady Russell had gone out of her way, once again, to extol the merits of Mr. Elliot and imply his desirability as a suitor. This was not the first time and in each repetition, her subtlety waned.

Something within Anne strained to breaking, and she spoke her mind. Just a few words, soft, but firm ones. *He is an excellent man, I am sure, but we would not suit.*

The look on Lady Russell's face—Anne had never see it before—something between astonishment and

affront. She almost responded, but stopped before the words escaped. Instead, she turned a very polite, practiced smile on Anne. It was one she used when she disagreed with an expressed sentiment, but was far too well-mannered to voice it.

Anne hurried along the lane, hand pressed to her chest. What had come over her, to speak so boldly? Had she ever openly disagreed with Lady Russell before? Quite possibly not. No, certainly not. What an odd, empowering sensation, to speak one's own mind.

She drew several deep breaths as if free from some oppressive prison for the first time. She would have to do this again not disagree, but represent her own opinion with the same liberty as those she most admired.

But what was her opinion toward Mr. Elliot?

She jumped back out of the way of a phaeton driven too fast along the narrow lane by what looked like a very dandified young man. This was the very kind of behavior Mr. Elliot softly confessed to. In truth, that was among the least of his past transgressions.

He now professed correct, pleasing, very proper opinions, even with regards to his previous behavior. Still, something of the disingenuous lingered.

Why was it no one else saw it? Mr. Elliot had the happy ability of pleasing whomever he was with, from Father to Mrs. Clay—of whom Anne knew he thought very little. They both held him in high regard.

She watched the phaeton disappear around the corner, turning so sharply it nearly turned over on its side. She held her breath until it righted and left her sight.

How could one man be so uniformly pleasing to all? Was it possible to be always rational, discreet and polished? Mr. Elliot seemed so, perhaps even preternaturally so.

The confectionery shop appeared near the end of the lane, greeting her with delightful, teasing smells and pretty cakes in the window. Elizabeth had not yet discovered this place, so she had no demands for marzipan or anything else for Anne to fetch for her. What a happy thing indeed to go somewhere for her own pleasure alone, not that of another.

Inside, Anne requested her favorite almond clear cake from the serving girl and perched on a high stool near the window amongst the other happy customers to wait. Somehow people always seemed happy at a confectioner's.

A couple passed by the window, engrossed in what appeared to be an animated discussion. Her eyes bulged at some statement of his, and his face colored and his mouth gaped at her retort. How pleased they looked with themselves.

Mr. Elliot never demonstrated any such warmth in his discussion either by way of assent or indignation. Instead he was unfailingly polite at all times. Polite was pleasing, after a fashion, but wholly unsatisfying.

The girl brought her clear cake. Gracious heavens! These were every bit as good as those at Boyd's. She closed her eyes and savored the first bite. Oh, the ethereal delight of the crunch of the sugary crust, surrounding the cool, melting jelly.

How Mrs. Smith laughed at their last visit, as Anne had described her enjoyment of this secret pleasure. Perhaps she should bring one the next time she called. But no, Mrs. Smith confessed to a deep



disinclination toward jellies of all varieties before she could censure herself.

Mr. Elliot would never do such a thing—allow a careless word to escape his lips. Mrs. Smith—how flustered she became—attempting to apologize over and over all the while Anne insisted no offense had been taken.

Anne paused and set her clear cake on the dainty pink china plate. Of course! How clear it was now. That was the crux of the matter, indeed.

Mr. Elliot never spoke a careless or hasty word, and he never had occasion to repent. But was it not in those moments that one's true character was revealed? Surely Miss Smith showed her true, sensitive nature with her concern for the distress she might have caused.

Anne could not accuse Mr. Elliot of actual disguise, yet at the same time, he never indulged in those moments of exposure that might have offered assurance of his true character.

Since her time in Lyme, among the Harvilles, Captian Benwick—and Frederick, she had come to treasure the frank and open-hearted character she had found among the naval men much more than among the gentlemen of society. Dear heavens, that was what she had found missing in so many she met in Father's company.

The tension that stiffened her back floated away and she sighed. Frederick expressed himself with warmth and enthusiasm. He occasionally said what he should not, told stories not so very appropriate for the drawing room, complained when affronted by others. In short, one felt like one knew him, the true man, after an evening in his company.

How many times had she been in Mr. Elliot's company only to come away knowing him no more after the call than she had before. What was more, she did not like it, did not trust it.

And that was her opinion on him!

How very...freeing to finally understand her own mind.

She took another bite of her clear cake, savoring it as much as the knowledge that while Lady Russell might appreciate Mr. Elliot all she wanted, Anne would remain courteous and save her regard for one who might enjoy a clear cake with the same relish she did.

## Wentworth learns of Benwick's engagement

WENTWORTH SAT UPON HIS brother's horse, surveying the countryside on a very fine morning. At one time, he had been a decent horseman. But years at sea took their toll and his seat had suffered. Thankfully, he had not acquired Admiral Croft's reputation as a terrible driver. That last tumble had damaged both his reputation and his curricula almost, but not quite beyond repair.

It was a wonder Sophy was not hurt. How could she merely laugh off such an incident? She was a remarkable woman. Nothing like Louisa Musgrove, who was pretty and silly and foolish and now, in all likelihood, an albatross to be strong about his neck for the rest of his days.

But it was all his fault. He had encouraged her, flattered her, and attended to her, as much to vent his spleen at Anne as that he truly liked the Musgrove girl. He was a man of honor though. And insofar as

he had control, Louisa would not pay the price of his folly. She would have every respect, if not every affection, as his wife.

A driver and gig rose in the distance. His brother never mentioned expecting company. Wentworth urged his horse up the rise. Perhaps from there he might have a better view.

Though still too far to make out a face, there was something unsettlingly familiar about the driver. The shock of blond hair, the flash of red neckerchief, the odd cant of his shoulder...Harville? What could he be doing coming to Shropshire without sending word?

Wentworth urged the horse to a trot. Something must be full wrong indeed. He caught up to Harville still half a mile from the cottage.

"Wentworth! How fortunate to meet you on the road. Saves me the trouble of looking for you." He dragged his sleeve over his forehead, leaving a trail of dust in its wake.

"What is wrong? Why have you come?"

"What, no greeting, no welcome? I am shocked at your manners."

Perhaps he did not bring news of an emergency. "Forgive me. Do you wish to come to the house? My brother and sister are out for the day, but I am certainly up to the task of offering tea and victuals if you are of a mind to stay."

Harville dipped his head. "Thank you, kindly. I should appreciate the opportunity to get off this borrowed equipage."

"Borrowed?" It was not the kind of transport Harville was likely to rent.

"Belongs to Musgroves. Kind of them to lend it, but mightily uncomfortable nonetheless." Harville

shifted to extend his injured leg.

"The house is not far. Come." Wentworth led them back to the humble curate's cottage.

"Coffee or tea?" Wentworth asked as he took Harville's coat.

"You wouldn't have a mite of brandy to add to either?" Harville rubbed his thigh.

"Tea with French cream it is. Sit down, put your leg up." Wentworth left the room to instruct the maid and returned to Harville.

Harville stood at the window, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Did I not tell you sit?" Wentworth slapped the nearest chair.

"It is difficult when the body wishes to sit but the mind bids you stand, eh?"

Perhaps it was bad news after all. Enough was entirely enough. "Whatever it is, best out with it. This suspense is doing neither of us any good."

"I suppose you are right." Harville turned to face him. "I cannot tell you how guilty I feel, as it has happened under my roof, my watch."

"What has happened?"

"You deserve better and full well should have had it you know. Especially with all you have suffered."

"I assume you will start speaking sense sometime soon or I swear I will have to shake you."

Harville laughed. "Forgive me—you know how I hate to deliver troubling news."

"You have delivered nothing and I may well run mad before you do. Tell me already—or shall I begin to guess?"

Harville sank into a wingback chair. "I imagine you are aware that Louisa Musgrove has been recovering

quite well.”

“I am. Has there been some sort of setback?”

“No, no quite opposite. She has been restored to her family and all is quite well indeed. Quite well. Far better than any might have expected given the nature of the accident.”

“Harville!”

“Benwick has spent many hours entertaining her during her convalescence and now they are engaged.”

Wentworth squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. “Engaged? Benwick and Louisa Musgrove?”

“Her father has given his blessing and the settlements are being finalized.”

Wentworth drew a deep breath. “Louisa accepted an offer from Benwick?”

“We were all caught quite unawares.”

“But they are so dissimilar. He is so serious and his understanding so sound.”

“You would be surprised to see him now. She has so affected him.”

“And you Harville, are you—I mean given your sister—”

“It is difficult not to be put off. But to take offense on behalf of the dead accomplishes very little. Hard as it may be, it is only right for him to continue to live. We have wished them joy.”

Wentworth paced around the room, raking a hand through his hair.

Harville twisted in the chair to follow Wentworth’s frantic motion. “I did not come for my sake, but for yours. Was there not some understanding between you and Louisa before the accident?”

“No. I suppose it may have appeared so, but no words were spoken.”

“Then you were not—”

Wentworth stopped. “Attached? No. Mind you, I would have done my duty and offered for her if necessary...”

“So you are not unhappy?”

“Far from it, I am pleased for them both. You need not worry on my account.”

Harville leaned back in the chair and put his foot up on the stool. “That is welcome news indeed. “You cannot know what I have suffered knowing that I must bring news that I believed would wound you.”

“You need not fear any longer then. All is quite good. Now, let me go check on the tea.” Wentworth, hurried out, desperate for a moment to gather his wits. Louisa was to marry someone else—anyone else and he was free. He sucked in a gulp of air, sweet as if he had been drowning. He leaned against the wall and gazed at the ceiling. Free.

Bath. He must go to Bath. Anne...his Anne was in Bath. So was Lady Russell. Damn her. This time though, would be different. He was different. Anne was different. Nothing would prevail against his quest as he was buoyed by the one thing he had lacked for so long now—hope.

## **Anne and Lady Russell plan the wedding**

THE DRAWING ROOM IN Camden Place was by far the properest to receive Lady Russell for tea. But the room always felt cold and dreary. It was beautifully appointed to be sure, but not a bit of it felt comfortable or welcoming, so she set tea in the parlor, a room Father declared somewhat shabby by comparison. Elizabeth was not impressed.

Anne poured tea for Elizabeth, but Lady Russell turned aside, probably doing her best to ignore Elizabeth's curled lip and knotted brows. One might think she had been asked to take tea in the common room of a coaching inn.

"Is there something amiss with the tea?" Anne asked, setting the pot aside.

"Does it seem a bit odd to you?" Elizabeth sniffed.

"Not at all, I can assure you. I brought it myself, a little gift for Anne." Lady Russell sipped her cup. "Perhaps you might confer with your housekeeper. I



think it possible she has purchased some adulterated tea.”

Elizabeth's entire person went so rigid she might shatter if a sharp breeze cut through the room. “I shall be sure to inquire with her on that point.”

It would not be polite to point out the need to actually manage the household staff.

Anne fingered the pile of fabric swatches and trims fanned out on the table before her. Muslins, linens and wools, silks and velvets, lace, ribbon and cording, so many colors and patterns, a brief glance threatened to overwhelm.

Elizabeth's face wrinkled again. “I do not understand how it is with all your prattling on about economy that you are now contemplating purchasing such an array of wedding clothes. I would not have thought you so apt to...hypocrisy.”

Anne gasped. It was not as though Elizabeth had not said things equally unkind in the past, but not in the presence of Lady Russell who was prone to take offense on her behalf.

Lady Russell cocked her head and blinked several time. Oh, she was indeed offended.

Anne held her breath and dug her nails into her palm.

“Jealousy is a most unbecoming sentiment, but I imagine it is most vexing to be expected to offer full payment when goods are delivered when one is accustomed to credit being extended.” Lady Russell sipped her tea.

“Indeed it is. Most vexing indeed. When we extend to them the privilege of our patronage, it is only appropriate, nay it is their duty, to extend credit to a family such as ours. It is what is due the Elliot name.”

Elizabeth dabbed her cheeks with her handkerchief.

Anne covered her face with her hand. Little point attempting to explain again the necessity of paying one's bills, not once the 'Elliot name' was invoked.

Elizabeth folded her arms over her chest. "I am quite serious, Anne. How is it you are able to find a modiste who will permit you to order all these things you propose to need—and why precisely do you believe—"

"Elizabeth! How can you question your sister's need for wedding clothes? She will be the wife of a well-respected and well-off naval officer, connected with Admiral Croft. She will move in some very fine circles. She must be dressed appropriately. You, of all people, certainly understand the issue."

Elizabeth glowered. Lady Russell well knew she did not like to be reminded that Anne's company might be highly desirable to some.

"As to why she is able to have such things..." Lady Russell raised her eyebrows and cleared her throat.

"Father has certainly not given her an allowance greater than my own."

"Frederick has been most generous in the settlement, and the clothes are a gift from him." Anne forced her features into a semblance of something pleasant, enough so that Elizabeth would mistake it for what it was meant to resemble. "I am taking nothing from you Elizabeth. What is more, Frederick has even offered to purchase a gown for you to stand up with me at the wedding."

Elizabeth nearly dropped her teacup, setting it down with a painful clatter. "I am your elder sister. It is irregular, even intolerable you are to be married

before I. Truly it is most unbecoming.”

“Mary married some years ago and I do not recall you objecting so strenuously then.” Surely Father could not be persuaded to change his mind about their wedding. Even if he did, they would not be dissuaded, not this time. With or without the blessings of her family, they would be married.

“She married someone of no account. No one knows or cares one whit about a Musgrove. But your hero, Wentworth, brother to an Admiral, that shall be noticed.” Elizabeth pulled out her fan and fluttered it in front of her face. “Even Lady Dalrymple has taken note. The last time we had tea with her, she spent the entire time asking after him and his family and connections. She is even planning on extending a dinner invitation to him and the Crofts! It is not to be borne. I am mortified.”

Mortified at the Crofts and Frederick, or the possibility that she and Father might have to share the attentions of their illustrious connections?

“Mortified,” Lady Russell said, her voice sharp as a violin string strained to breaking. “That is a very strong sentiment. What do you propose Anne to do?”

“Thank you, I am glad to hear you agree with me. She should wait to marry, wait until I have married first. It is a proper thing and the reason younger sisters should not be out before the older are married—”

“Or on the shelf.” Lady Russell muttered into her hand.

Elizabeth’s eyes bulged like a pug with a too-tight collar. “Are you suggesting...”

“Only repeating what has been said elsewhere.” Lady Russell’s smile was far too satisfied.

“Then if that is true, you must not marry, Anne.” Elizabeth braced her hands on the arms of the chair and half-rose. “Consider the reputation of our family, my reputation. I insist.”

“And I forbid it.” Frederick’s voice boomed from the door. He stalked in, boots ringing on the stone floor.

Elizabeth stood. “And who are you to be forbidding me anything?”

“Master and commander of my own destiny, madam. Eight years I have waited for my bride and I shall not tolerate a moment more.” He placed his hands on Anne’s shoulders and she leaned her head onto his strong arm.

Her heart thrilled. Oh, that voice! Did he know what it did to her? Should she tell him? She must not allow *that* smile to appear now. Elizabeth would not approve.

“I am not accustomed to being spoken to in such a manner. Anne, how can you permit this?” She looked from Anne to Lady Russell. “Will neither of you speak on my behalf?”

Anne looked to Lady Russell who only pressed her lips into a tight little not-smile and shrugged. “He is to be my husband. It would not do for me to disagree with him.” Frederick knew better, but Elizabeth did not need to.

“I am not accustomed to such treatment and will not tolerate it. Do not expect me to stand up with you, for I certainly shall not” Elizabeth swished her skirts and stormed out.

Frederick followed her as far as the door and closed it behind her, a deep laugh welling up.

What a wonderful sound that was, rich and warm,

filling every corner and crevice of the room.

"I cannot say I intended it so, but I shall not forswear good fortune when she smiles upon me. I was never pleased that she should stand up with us." He returned to them.

Anne poured a cup of tea and handed it to him. He sat beside her, a mite closer than propriety allowed. Exactly where he should be.

Lady Russell sighed. "Pleasing though you may find the turn of events, it does present a real issue of concern. Who will stand up with Anne at the wedding?"

"You could ask Lady Dalrymple's drab daughter. I am certain your Sir Walter would find her quite acceptable." Frederick snickered.

"Do be serious please." Anne sniggered into her fist. "Can you imagine Elizabeth's face if I were to do so?"

"I fear she might have an apoplexy on the spot. It would be a most dramatic encounter in any case." Lady Russell straightened the collar of her chemisette. "Your father might be pleased with the notion though, if of course she were to say yes, which I doubt."

Frederick placed his tea cup on the table. "I do have another suggestion and this one is entirely in earnest. What of Mrs. Smith?"

"Mrs. Smith? A widow? That is most irregular." Lady Russell fingered the edge of her sleeve.

"Father will certainly not approve, and it would only further offend Elizabeth." Anne caught her lower lip in her teeth. "But she is a very good friend."

"To both of us. I can think of no one who has done us a greater favor than her." He kept his gaze averted from Lady Russell.

Anne held her breath. Pray, let not Lady Russell take offense.

“Do you think her health sufficient to be able to attend you?” Lady Russell’s voice was a bit flat and brittle, like sugar candy ready to break, but she was trying to be pleasant.

“I do not know.”

“I believe I may safely speak to that.” Frederick smiled broadly. “I spoke with her only yesterday and am pleased to report her health and spirits greatly recovered. She is not ready for a walk in the country to be sure. But, she is quite able to make a journey to the church by chair or carriage and stand up a few minutes with you.”

“You saw her? You did not tell me,” Anne said.

Frederick took her hand and raised it to his lips. “I hope to always have some surprises for you my dear.”

Lady Russell blushed and coughed. “If she is well enough, and the offer to provide a proper gown for your bridesmaid is extended and accepted, I believe she will be acceptable to stand with you.”

“I am glad you are *persuaded*.” Frederick lifted an eyebrow toward her.

“As am I.” She tipped her head and sipped her tea.

Anne’s eyes burned and she swallowed back the tightness of her throat. What better gift in the world than the two people dearest to her trying so hard to be acceptable to one another. Frederick was right, she must learn to brook being happier than she deserved.

## Chapter 16

### **Mrs. Smith Receives a letter**

“MRS. SMITH, A LETTER JUST come for you,” Nurse Rook called, shambling into the cramped, dark parlor. “Not through the post mind you, so there weren’t no pennies to pay. Don’t be fearing for your purse none. No, the boy who brung it was dressed right clean and proper.”

Mrs. Smith took the letter, hands trembling. The rest of her body quivered in time. Nurse took her arm and guided her to a stool by the fire.

Yes, the heat would help stop the shaking, at least enough to read.

But did she want to?

She expected no correspondence and the hand

look much like the solicitor's. His letters always brought bad news: further proof of Mr. Elliot's treachery and Mr. Smith's foolishness in trusting him.

If only—

No, if only solved nothing, and it tormented her soul, stealing the last vestiges of her strength. One more luxury she could ill afford.

The fire crackled with an offer to take the letter from her, unread. It well-knew she had not the strength to take in any more bad news. What difference would she make if she read it or not? Reading it would not change the state of her affairs, and it would make no difference in her behavior. There were no more measures of economy to be taken. Not knowing, for just a little while longer, might preserve her mettle just a bit.

Nurse Rook nudged her shoulder. "Well?"

Just a few months ago she would have accepted the fire's offer, but today ... it was different. *Sometimes thing can change, unexpectedly and suddenly.* Anne had smiled at her Captain Wentworth when she had said that.

And things had changed. She was no longer alone. She had friends now, friends that would not turn their backs no matter how desperate her circumstances. With their support, she could face this, whatever it was. The flames could sate their hunger from the coal bucket.

She held her breath and tugged away the seal. The pages came loose and her hands protested, quaking. They doubted she was strong enough for more bad news and turned the words into an indecipherable blur.

She dropped the paper on her lap and shoved her



hands under her thighs.

Strong, bold loops formed words.

*Mrs. Smith,*

*I am not a man to stand by idly whilst one who has done me great good suffers ill-fortune. Thus, I have taken it upon myself to manage those affairs left undone by your late husband's death. I can offer no assurances, but know I will pursue you interests as vigorously as though they were my own.*

*Cpt. F. W.*

A cry tore from her throat and her head swam. Such friends she had, such friends! She tried to rise, but her knees failed her.

Perhaps good news required great strength as well.

## Wentworth helps Mrs. Smith

ANNE SAT IN THE parlor of her very own house in Bath. How much friendlier, if less well-appointed, it was than Camden Place. Even without the finest appointments, or perhaps because of it, the place felt like home in a way nowhere ever had. She might direct the servants—and the budget—as she pleased. There was comfortable moderation and economy in her home. That did not preclude entertaining, though. Friends—and Frederick had many—were always welcome, and very often present.

Mrs. Croft—she insisted on being called Sophy now—called often, so often Frederick offered her a room of her own with them, to which Sophy replied ‘only if she might share it with the admiral’. What a lovely couple they were. If she and Frederick might be like them in as many years, she would count herself well-blessed.

It would be hard to leave it when the time came to set sail. But Sophy promised Anne would be pleased

by the opportunity to travel with him, so she determined she would set worry aside and enjoy what came.

"Mrs. Smith," the housekeeper announced from the doorway.

Gracious, she had been lost in wool-gathering! "Do come in."

Mrs. Smith tottered a bit in the doorway. The housekeeper caught her elbow. Anne rushed to her side.

Mrs. Smith shifted her walking stick to the other hand. "Perhaps I should have accepted more help on those steps. I am a bit more winded than I expected." She laughed. "But I dare not complain. I have been unable to get around for so long now; it is a blessing to be able to walk, even a little"

"Well, do sit down. The chair I sent for you—"

"Was wonderful, I assure you. It was very gracious after you have already done so much."

They made their way across the room and to the couch. Though still weak and frail, Mrs. Smith's color was nearly as good as her spirits. Even the little that she was able to walk now was a delightful improvement.

Anne prepared tea. "What have we done? You stood up with me at our wedding when my own sister refused me. And I know it taxed you greatly."

"No nearly so much as it taxed your sister." Mrs. Smith snickered.

Perhaps not entirely kind, but wholly true. Anne swallowed back a laugh. Elizabeth had nearly refused to attend the wedding at all when she found out who would be standing with Anne. Only Lady Russell's dire warning of how it would look in the society pages

changed her mind.

"The lovely gown you had made for me is hardly nothing. I hope one day I shall be well enough to have occasion to wear it again." She took a tea cup from Anne. "Nurse Rooke has been asked ever so many questions about it and you and Captain. Wentworth."

"Is there anyone or anything in Bath she does not know?"

"If there is, she will ferret it out before long, no doubt. It is one of her chiefest pleasures, you know."

"And what of you? What are your chiefest pleasures now your health has turned for the better?"

Mrs. Smith brushed the idea aside. "I have little of interest to talk about. I should much rather hear of you. You are, after all, a new bride, with so many adventures ahead of you. Tell me, what is it like to be married into a naval family? You have been keeping some interesting company recently, have you not?"

"Not nearly as interesting as the news I bring." Frederick boomed from the doorway.

His command deck voice sent delightful shivers down Anne's spine. Had he any idea of what it did to her, he would probably use it all the time. As it was, he probably suspected.

She met him halfway across the room, and he twirled her around by the waist. Elizabeth hated it when he did that, but Sophy considered it a most proper form of marital greeting. Anne agreed.

"I have news to share! The housekeeper told me of Mrs. Smith's arrival, so it could not wait a moment more."

"You know I never object to your company." She kissed his cheek. "Have tea with us and tell us what

news must be shared in the presence of my friend.”

Frederick took a cup of tea, but could hardly sip it for the smile he wore. “Oh it is of no use. I am not a man for waiting.” He glanced at Anne. “Not anymore.”

“I would not suspend any pleasure of yours by standing on ceremony. You wish to speak and I am all too pleased to listen.” Mrs. Smith set her teacup on the table.

“You do not know this, Anne.” Frederick leaned forward on his elbows.” But before the wedding I met with Mrs. Smith to discuss her husband’s affairs.”

“His affairs? I thought—”

“Yes, they had utterly collapsed, largely on the count of Mr. William Elliot. He had the power, if he chose to exert it, to bring some of it to rights, but I have little power to persuade.” Mrs. Smith leaned forward.

“You have worked on my cousin? I know you are not fond of him.” But when could he have done such a thing? Mr. Elliot had been gone from Bath for some time.

Frederick snorted. “Hardly, he is as intractable as he is untrustworthy. Even if he agreed, I would have no faith in anything he said or did.”

“He has done little to warrant trust from any of us, especially considering Mrs. Clay.”

Frederick sneered. “You are too kind, my dear. He is despicable. I would hardly leave anything important in his hand.”

“You?” Mrs. Smith’s eyes grew very wide. “You have undertaken it?”

“Indeed and most honored to do so.” Frederick puffed his chest. His self-satisfied expression was so

dear.

“What are you talking about?”

“On behalf of our very good friend, I have carried out the task of righting what Mr. Elliot has refused to be bothered with. This came in the post today.” He handed Mrs. Smith a letter with a bow.

Her hands shook as she opened it. “Oh! Oh! What you have accomplished! I cannot believe it!”

“What is it?” Anne looked from one to the other, struggling not to bounce like a child in her seat.

“It should be enough to allow you to live quite comfortably now. Perhaps not in grand style, but I never thought that your preference in any case.” Frederick folded his arms over his chest and grinned Anne’s favorite lop-sided grin.

“I do not know what to say. It is so much.” Tears flowed down Mrs. Smith’s cheeks.

“I am the one who is most grateful. You have been instrumental in giving me everything I have desired.” He took Anne’s hand and kissed it. “I can think of no one more deserving of my efforts.”

“Oh, Frederick! Why did not you tell me?” She clutched his hand.

“I like to surprise you. Since I had no way of knowing how this would resolve, I did not wish you disappointed. I never wish to see you disappointed again.” He caressed her cheek and winked. “And I wish to encourage those friendships that have done me so much good. I believe something a little stronger than tea is in order. A toast?” He strode to the decanters at the side of the room and poured three glasses.

Anne took the amber liquid, sparkling in the faceted glass.

*Half Agony,, Half Hope*

Frederick lifted his glass. “To persuasion in all its right and proper forms.”

“Persuasion!” Right and proper indeed.

## Author's Note

These scenes were all inspired by Jane Austen's classic, *Persuasion*. They are part of a project by Austen Variations entitled *Persuasion 200*, in celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Persuasion's* publication.

The full book containing these scenes and many others will be available on Amazon and other major retailers. Proceeds from that book will go to a Jane Austen related charity.



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## *About the Author*



Though Maria Grace has been writing fiction since she was ten years old, those early efforts happily reside in a file drawer and are unlikely to see the light of day again, for which many are grateful. After penning five file-drawer novels in high school, she took a break from writing to pursue college and earn her doctorate in Educational Psychology. After 16 years of university teaching, she returned to her first love, fiction writing.

She has one husband, two graduate degrees and two black belts, three sons, four undergraduate majors, five nieces, six novels in draft form, waiting for editing, seven published novels, sewn eight Regency era costumes, shared her life with nine cats through the years, and tries to run at least ten miles a week.

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