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OF THE *Lakes*

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A HISTORICAL
PROPER ROMANCE

THE *Lady*
OF THE *Lakes*

The True Love Story of SIR WALTER SCOTT

JOSI S. KILPACK



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*For the Walter in my life,
a creator and romantic in his own right—my dad, Walter Schofield.
Thank you for all the good things.*

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*Walter Scott has no business to write novels,
especially good ones. It is not fair.
He has Fame and Profit enough as a Poet.*

—JANE AUSTEN

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Introduction

Sir Walter Scott was a novelist, poet, historian, and biographer who had a profound influence on the world of fiction and is credited as having “given Scotland back its history.” Immersed in the pride of being a Scotsman from a young age, he immortalized the Brave Scot in works like *Rob Roy* and *The Pirate*. He pursued the course of his storytelling with a commitment to excellence and was known for his personal morality.

Before Sir Walter became renowned for his writing, however, he was a young man full of a young man’s passion and the desire to find “the sunshine of [his] soul.” This story covers the years of his early adulthood as he embarked on both his law career and his pursuit of love. This is not a nonfiction, historically perfect accounting of Walter’s life; rather it is a fictionalized version of true occurrences.

Readers familiar with the traditional pattern of a romance novel will notice the variations I have taken in my attempt at balancing artistry with creation and integrity with true events and timelines. This story became one where truth is stranger than fiction—and certainly not as well-organized. I tried very hard to reflect as much “truth as we

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know it” as possible, while still focusing on telling a good story with elements that fit a familiar course. It’s my hope that the resulting tale is one that you will enjoy reading as much as I enjoyed writing—because I enjoyed building upon the bits and pieces very much.

At the end of the book is a collection of notes, organized by chapter, which detail what is fact and what is fiction. There is also a bibliography that highlights the nonfiction works I used in my research should you want to further explore this window of time I peeked into. I hope that you will fall in love with these characters the way I did and see them as real people—with strengths and weaknesses, frailties and tempers—and share in my conclusion that, though the course was not easy, everything turned out exactly the way it was meant to.

*Scarce one person out of twenty marries his first love,
and scarce one out of twenty of the remainder has
cause to rejoice at having done so. What we love in
those early days is generally rather more a fanciful
creation of our own than a reality. We build
statues of snow, and weep when they melt . . .*

—SIR WALTER SCOTT, BARONET, 1820

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Prologue

EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND

September, 1791

I believe in God and Christ and long-suffering, but I do not feel that all three must be so densely mashed together as they are for a Calvinist Sunday sermon. I was glad no one could hear my thoughts. My mother—sitting at St. Andrew’s Kirk on the other side of town—would not be pleased.

“Now Wattie,” she would say in her soft voice, using the nickname I never minded despite the infernal teasings of my older brothers. They, of course, called me Walter, as did everyone but my mother and Aunt Jenny, who had been a mother to me in my early years. “Sounds to me as though you be needin’ more of such teachin’,” Mother would say if she knew of my complaining. “Then you woont be so at odds with the *Guid* Word.”

I smiled at the imagined reprimand, but I would never give her reason to serve it. A fair amount of my life took place in my head, and I was content to keep it that way, for now.

I returned my attention to Mr. Robertson’s sermon and tried to be attentive but found my mind wandering around the vaulted chapel and its meticulous craftsmanship until the minister finally finished

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and took his seat—the full stop at the end of his paragraph. I had attended Greyfriars Kirk before—it was the parish kirk my friend William Clerk belonged to—and I had chosen to attend services here today specifically so I could more easily slip away afterward. The Calvinist Sabbath was a stern day of prayer and meditation in my home on George Street, but my parents would miss me less if they thought I was taking a bit more time getting home from a kirk further away. I needed some solitude, which was hard to find now that I was fully employed beneath the heavy roof of my father's office. I would be home in time for supper—sheep's head soup that had been simmering since yesterday so as to avoid too much work on the Lord's day.

I resisted tapping my foot during the final hymn, glad that the windows were set too high along the walls for me to see through them from where I sat. It was easier to avoid the seduction of the world awaiting me on the other side of the stained glass when I could not see it. I had planned to while away the autumn afternoon hiking the majestic Salisbury crags around Edinburgh and soaking up imperial sunshine—God's creations, if ever there were—but the weather had betrayed me. As the sermon had droned on, heavy clouds had darkened the interior of the chapel. Not that rain would dissuade me entirely, but it might keep my ramblings confined to the pedestrian parks and streets of Edinburgh instead of the mighty hills I loved to explore while my mind became lost in the most fantastic stories.

One day I would try my hand at writing those stories. Father felt the pursuit of writing a foolish endeavor, but Mother encouraged me. She said if I had been born a few centuries before, I'd have been a bard—a reciter of stories, songs, and poetry that kept history alive. I did not see why I could not be a bard now, albeit a modern one. Instead of performing for royalty, I would put the stories on paper

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so everyone would know the tales of my forefathers and see heroes instead of barbarians.

Finally the benediction was offered, and the parishioners began to stir.

“Shall you abridge your afternoon plans on account of the weather?” William asked. The steady patter of raindrops could be heard over the conversations within the kirk.

“I shall simply enjoy my rambling all the more,” I said confidently. “And let the rain wash away any regrets.” Were I a better friend, I’d have invited William to join me, but I was selfish of my time. And I knew he preferred a fire, a book, and a kettle on Sunday afternoons.

I was braced for his teasing retort when I saw *her*—and forgot about sheep’s head soup, hiking the parks, or anything at all. The girl in the green mantle replaced every thought that had sustained me so far that day. She was water, bread, and wine all in one.

“*Och*,” I said under my breath, then grabbed Clerk by the wrist. “Who is that?”

He looked around, confused. “Who is who?”

“That girl,” I said, my eyes transfixed on the vision as I pointed with my chin. “With the green cloak.”

Clerk followed my gaze, and then smiled. “Her father is Sir John Belsches. He took a set of apartments off King’s Stable for the Court of Session, and his family’s come ahead of him.”

“Come ahead from where?” I asked, keeping my eyes locked on the girl, an absolute angel. She exited into the aisle ahead of me but turned to say something to the woman she was with—her mother, I’d wager—allowing me to look at her profile. She had light brown hair, curled in ringlets, rosebud lips, and features as fine as if chiseled from porcelain. The dark lashes framing her hazel eyes gave her face

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definition and completed the impression of her being quite simply the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, though likely not more than sixteen years to my nineteen.

Perhaps because of the chill brought on by the bad weather, she had already fastened her green cloak at the base of her graceful neck.

“Where is she from?” I asked.

“Perth, I think,” William said, giving me a teasing glance. “You seem rather taken with her.”

“She is . . . unparalleled.”

William laughed. “And you, my dear Walter, are apparently besotted without needin’ to know anything more than her fine looks.”

“Indeed I am.” But I could tell her beauty extended beyond her appearance. I could feel it.

“Then you should perhaps introduce yourself before some other lovestruck laddie beats you out.”

I nodded in agreement. “Indeed I should.”

She exited the building ahead of me, so when I finally stepped into the yard, I scanned the area in fear of having lost her. To my relief, however, she stood to the side at the edge of a gaggle of women gathered safely beneath the umbrellas they had pulled together to form a temporary roof. The girl in the green mantle, I noticed, did not hold an umbrella of her own and instead stood very close to her mother. I tapped my still-folded umbrella twice on the steps in triumph of having brought what might be salvation for us both, then opened it over my head as I stepped out beneath the overhang of the church’s roof.

Without bothering to find someone for an official introduction, I squared my broad shoulders, lifted my clean-shaven chin, and held my umbrella higher as I crossed the yard, my limp adding an unwelcome, but familiar, cadence to my steps. William’s chuckle from behind did not distract me, nor did my limp undermine my

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confidence. Nothing could prevent me from making myself known to this woman, this paragon of beauty, this . . . Venus.

She saw me a moment before anyone else in her party did, and I knew she felt the same awareness I did when our eyes met. I smiled and stopped just outside the circle of women, a few of whom were known to me. My mother would have lectured me on the impropriety of approaching without invitation, but the *proper* rules of introduction were silly English nonsense I had little use for.

In Scotland, couples could walk without a chaperone and ride together in a closed carriage. If a man wanted to meet a girl, he need only ask, and vice versa. British matrons, and those *noble* Scots trying to define themselves within the empire, would need smelling salts if they knew of all the interaction the average Scots allowed between young people. That young Englishmen and women were kept apart at such distance was bizarre to me and my friends. How was anyone to get to know one another if they were hovered over all the time?

“Good afternoon,” I said to the group of women, nodding to each of them in turn as their umbrellas tipped toward me. I stopped my gaze upon the woman I assumed to be the girl’s mother; I knew better than to discard *all* matters of propriety. “I am Walter Scott and am pleased to meet you.”

One of the women tittered, another shook her head, but I was not deterred. Boldness is what had healed my leg and honed my mind. Passivity, on the other hand, had never earned me any reward. Let the English keep their meekness.

“I am Lady Belsches.” Her eyes were cautious, and I knew right away that while I might disregard formal manners, she, as one of those noble Scots, did not. I would need to find a balance. She waved a graceful hand to her side. “And this is my daughter, Williamina.”

Williamina. I looked at her again, committing her name to

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memory. Now that I could see her more closely, I realized she was younger than I first thought, perhaps only fourteen years of age—*five* years my junior.

“Mina,” she said, lowering her eyes demurely. Rain ran off her mother’s umbrella in rivulets, creating a curtain of water between us.

“Mina,” I repeated, rolling it along my tongue and memorizing the sweetness of its flavor. The nickname fit her. I smiled wider.

“*Miss* Belsches,” her mother corrected, though she directed her look to her daughter and her tone was not severe. I sensed an ally in Lady Belsches—or at least, she had not already decided she was opposed to me.

Miss Belsches kept her eyes down. “Yes, of course, Mother.”

Lady Belsches returned her attention to me and explained that she and her daughter were recently come from Invermay, their family seat, but would be staying in Edinburgh while her husband attended Session. He was to arrive later in the week from London, where he’d had other business to settle.

I listened intently and commented appropriately, but my eyes found their way back to Miss Belsches time and again. Had I ever felt such a rush of invigoration? Had my heart ever fluttered quite like this?

“Might I walk your daughter home, Lady Belsches?” I asked when there was a lull in the conversation.

Lady Belsches’s eyebrows lifted, and I hurried to explain my hasty offer.

“Anyone here can vouch for my character,” I said, nodding toward the other women in the group. “And I could supply the aid of my umbrella.” Being as it was Sunday, there were no carriages for hire, meaning that Miss Belsches and her mother would have to huddle together beneath their single umbrella, which was not as wide as my own.

“Mr. Scott is as fine a lad as they come,” Mrs. Allaway said,

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earning my eternal gratitude. “His father is a Writer of the Signet, and Walter is apprenticing.”

Actually, I was working at full capacity—more hours than my father, truth be told—but I wasn’t about to argue.

Mrs. Duncan added her thoughts as well. “His mother’s father was the late Dr. John Rutherford. A fine physician here in the city and former professor at the University’s medical school.”

Lady Belsches’s eyebrows lifted. “Rutherford?” she repeated, looking at Mrs. Duncan. “Not Anne Rutherford’s father?”

“The verra same,” Mrs. Duncan said, her smile widening. She nodded toward me. “Walter is the third of five children belongin’ to Anne and Mr. Walter Scott.”

Lady Belsches returned her attention back to me. “Five children,” she said in a wistful tone. Her smile was softer. “I know your dear mother, Mr. Scott. We were girls together and companions as we grew. We lost touch after we both married.”

I knew they would have lost touch due to my mother marrying a Writer of the Signet and Lady Belsches marrying a baronet, but I only smiled wider, grateful for the connection that could only help me. I might be middle-class, but MacDougall and Campbell blood ran through my veins, and I had as much pride in my heritage as anyone who claimed a title.

“My family attends St. Andrew’s Kirk or I would reacquaint you with my mother,” I said. “I came to Greyfriars today with a friend.”

“Another time, perhaps,” Lady Belsches said. She looked at her daughter. “Mr. Scott may escort you home, Mina, but see that you do not dally along the way.”

“Of course,” Miss Belsches said. I imagined she had received ample instruction on how to keep her thoughts from showing on her face since I couldn’t read her expression.

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I put out my arm, and she took it, quickly stepping from beneath her mother's umbrella to the protection of mine. I did not mind that the necessity to keep herself well sheltered brought her closer to me than she likely would have stood otherwise. I withdrew any complaint I had ever made against the rain.

I thanked Lady Belsches, bid good day to the other women, and turned Miss Belsches toward the path that would lead us through the Kirkyard, with its ornate gravestones and tombs, to High Street. Once we were an adequate distance from the party, I leaned toward her. I was taller than she was—a great oak compared to the gentle slenderness of her figure.

“I hope my boldness is not too overpowering,” I said, feeling nervous for the first time and wishing I'd been more attentive to my dress, as my friends had often encouraged of me. She clearly had taken care with her dress today; she was impeccable. I'd been so struck by this vision of beauty that my course had seemed obvious, but now it was just the two of us, and I did not have a great deal of experience with romantic exchanges outside of the books I loved to read and the poems I often constructed in my mind. I *had* learned, however, that when in doubt, there was nothing better to do than be honest. “But I have never in my life been so quickly affected by anyone before.” I glanced at her as though I needed a reminder of her loveliness. “You are the most beautiful young woman I have ever seen.”

She blushed, as I thought she might, but she also laughed. “*You* have a silver tongue.”

It was my turn to laugh. Words were, in fact, my greatest allies in every field I found myself in—literature, law, theology. Could my gift of words be an asset to this meeting as well? While I had indulged in a flirtation or two in my youth, they had been as much entertainment as affection. This, however, was different. This girl would play

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a powerful part of my life. I knew it to my core. Thus, I needed to make a good impression on her.

“My tongue may indeed be silver, but I never speak a lie,” I said. “You are recently from Invermay? You must tell me all about it, for I have never been so far north.”

“Well, Mr. Scott—”

“Do call me Walter,” I cut in, “so that I might feel as though we are friends.”

“Friends?” Miss Belsches said, looking sideways at me. “We have only just met.”

“Ah, but you will like me,” I said with confidence, navigating her to the side of a rather large puddle. Everyone liked me. “And I already like you a great deal—only I know so little about you. May I call you Mina?”

She giggled, strengthening my confidence. “You are *very* bold, sir.”

“Yes, but I am more interested in learning about you than focusing on my own assets,” I said, patting her hand that rested upon my arm. “Tell me of the Highlands. I am a great lover of stories and eager to hear yours.”

“Very well,” she said, still smiling. “There is not much *story* in it, but I grew up an only child in Invermay, which is somewhat north of Perth . . .”

We left the Kirkyard and started along High Street. I already knew the walk would be far too short for my tastes and determined then and there that I would walk her home next week, and every week after, so that I might get to know her bit by bit. If her company was this invigorating by half the next time I saw her, I would scarcely be able to stay away.

Chapter One

EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND

November 21, 1795

Walter did not try to hide the fact that he watched the door with focused attention. Mina—his muse and his future—would be entering at any moment, and he was determined to be the first set of eyes she saw. Her family had traveled to Edinburgh every winter since he'd met her, four years ago, and though Mina had been in the city for almost a week this time, Walter had not yet seen her.

"She might not be comin'," William Clerk said from Walter's side. "And yer leg's gunna give oot if you stand here like a tree much longer."

"See, this is why you have not formed an attachment of your own, my friend," Walter said, speaking with the tone of a tired teacher. "You have no mind for romance nor have you any understanding of the fairer sex." He sighed dramatically and added more flower to his words for effect. "Mina has been away for nearly six months, during which time she and I have only grown more attached to one another." He put a hand to his chest in a false display of humility. "With all that time apart—save for our letters and my poetry—she is apt to wonder at my devotion and be anxious about whether or not she can trust the mere words on a page that have sustained us for so long. When she walks

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through that door, I want her to see the way she fills me with the pure sunshine we have not seen in the city for weeks. *Then* she will know that my heart beats only for her, that I have counted the days to this meeting since last we shared sight of one another, and that the passion of my heart has been in no wise dimmed by the distance between us.”

Clerk rolled his eyes. “I’m gunna get me another stout.”

Walter watched his friend’s retreat for a moment before facing the door again. He shifted his weight from his right foot to his left and considered Clerk’s warning. Should Walter’s leg buckle beneath him, as it had done before, his imagined welcome for Mina would be an embarrassment rather than a token of romance. He sometimes brought a cane to social functions when he knew he would be on his feet a great deal, but what barrister of twenty-four years of age wanted to greet his eternal love while leaning upon a cane like an *auld* man? His imagined scene of adoration did not factor in the cane nor his falling to the floor because he was without support.

Walter scouted the foyer for a chair. The nearest seat was out of view of the doorway, but not so far that he couldn’t hear the arrival of guests. At the slightest sound of entry, he could rise and hurry to greet the new arrivals. Content with his plan, he sat, stretching out his leg and smiling at the overall energy of the evening.

The Assembly Hall where the Saturday night balls were held was relatively new, having been built in 1787; his parents’ generation had not had such events. Balls and dinner parties, soirees, and garden gatherings were historically English, but as the two countries’ cultures had blended these last decades, Edinburgh society had attempted to mimic that of the fashionable *ton* of London more and more. Here in Scotland, however, everyone who attended an event actually *enjoyed* themselves.

Walter smiled to himself, recalling the tales of stuffy manners and

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critical eyes amid the posh London extravagance. None of *that* had yet been adopted by the Scots. Rather, the lads and lasses from a variety of social classes came to a social gathering with the expectation of enjoying themselves, and though Walter was unable to dance, he had yet to turn out for an event and leave disappointed. There was always plenty of ale for the drinking, women for the watching, and cards for the playing.

As the night went on, the guests became louder, the dancing more Scottish, and the entirety of the event more fun. Half the enjoyment would be recalling the extreme antics with friends the next morning, determining which parts they remembered and which parts they had lost somewhere between their fourth and fifth mug. Walter was not naturally inclined toward drinking—he did not love what it did to his otherwise keen thinking—but he chose to participate out of politeness. Good manners, after all, were important.

Walter heard the front door open and hurried from his seat to the entryway, only to be rewarded with a cramp in his hip and an awkward smile shared with Mrs. Beattie, a friend of his mother's, who likely wondered at his hurry to greet her. He smiled and nodded, then turned back to his chair. After only two steps toward his waiting spot, he heard the sound of another arrival. He turned, only to have his breath stop in his chest at the sight before him.

The first time Walter had seen Mina at Greyfriars Kirk, she'd captured his heart completely. Tonight, she captured it all over again as she scanned the entryway. Dare he hope she was looking for him? When her eyes met his, she smiled, then ducked her head.

Walter smiled in return and began walking toward her, trying his best to hide his limp. Sir John, Mina's father, had recently inherited a new title and changed his family name to Stuart. He and his wife

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stood on either side of their only daughter, removing their outer garments and handing them to the awaiting footmen.

Out of propriety, Walter would greet her parents first, but he fantasized for a moment how it would be to greet Mina alone, just the two of them, and to speak aloud what they had shared in their letters. She was nineteen years old now, and he was perhaps only one year away from being situated well enough to support a family. It would not be much longer before he could court her openly, and thanks to her letters, he knew they shared the same hopes for a future together.

“Sir John,” Walter said, inclining his head.

Sir John returned the nod, looking at Walter the way a man might inspect a questionable horse.

Walter swallowed and tried to ignore the pessimistic thought as he turned his attention to Mina’s mother, similarly blessed with the same good looks and easy grace as her daughter. “Lady Bel—forgive me—Lady Stuart. It is wonderful to have you returned to Edinburgh.”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Scott,” Lady Stuart said.

Finally, Water was able to give his full attention to Mina. “Good evening, Miss Belsches, you look . . . enchanting.”

Her rosebud lips pulled into a smile, and she had the good manners to blush at his compliment. She was not always so meek—certainly not during the several times they had met in secret and not in the letters they’d exchanged of late—but Walter knew she did not want her parents to know of their attachment just yet, which made making such a bold comment in their hearing that much more exciting for him.

“Thank you, Mr. Scott,” Mina said demurely.

“She is Miss Stuart now,” Sir John cut in.

“My apologies,” Walter said, ducking his head in an apology for the slip he hadn’t even noticed making. “Miss Stuart.”

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Sir John gave a crisp nod, and Walter resisted the urge to run a finger along the inside of his collar. The family had been Belsches for as long as he'd known them; it had been an innocent mistake made by a man who did not care enough about titles to be overly attentive to the changing of them. Walter would need to work on the proper address, however, even if it felt like splitting hairs to him. *Stuart, Stuart, Stuart.*

"Shall we head for the ballroom?" Sir John asked, checking the watch hanging by a gold chain from his waistcoat. "We are already late."

"You cannot be late for a ball in Scotland," Lady Stuart said, taking her husband's arm and giving Walter a teasing glance. "The dancing will go until early morning, no matter what time we arrive."

Walter's concern over Sir John's feelings toward him was eased by the fact that Lady Stuart held a good opinion of him. She had renewed her friendship with his mother, though they were not the bosom friends they had once been, and Lady Stuart never did or said anything that made Walter feel that she would not welcome his open attention toward her daughter.

With Mina's parents making their way toward the other guests, Walter held out his arm for Mina. "Might I accompany you to the floor, Miss Stuart?" he asked in his most affected tones.

"Of course you may." Mina put her hand, feather light, upon his arm.

He purposely slowed his steps, creating a distance between them and her parents, affording the young couple some measure of privacy. "How was your journey to Edinburgh? I worried the snows might keep you."

"We were too long in Fettercairn, if that is what you mean. It is nearly December already! I don't know why we didn't come earlier, and then the weather nearly kept us there all winter." She shook her head.

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“Fettercairn is a fine place, but I have missed Edinburgh and its entertainments.” She waved her free hand around the elaborate foyer of the Assembly Hall, though Walter was never overly impressed with finery.

That Mina *was* impressed with such things worried him from time to time. Walter was a barrister by trade, a significant improvement in circumstance from his position as a Writer of the Signet, but he did not expect to live as fine a life as the Belsches—the *Stuarts*. Clerk had cautioned Walter that Mina might expect more from a man than pretty words and nice eyes. Walter had thanked Clerk for the compliment on his eyes and told his friend that he’d underestimated Mina and the power of love. Love could conquer all things. Years of letters, encouragement, esteem, and a single parting kiss when she’d left Edinburgh last spring was proof. If Mina had concerns regarding a simpler lifestyle, she’d have raised them by now.

They entered the ballroom, and Walter watched Mina as her eyes scanned the dance floor, currently occupied by the minuet that was drawing to a close.

“Oh, how I love a dance, Walter. I have missed these parties so much in the north.” She squeezed his arm slightly, then turned toward him with her lovely eyebrows pulled together. “Oh, that was unkind of me.”

Walter had not let his smile slip, and he patted her hand. “It was not unkind,” he said, though in truth such comments always pricked a bit. “And I love to *watch* you dance.” He winked at her, and her expression softened. “I only hope you will sit out a set with me tonight so we might become reacquainted.” He was eager to have her all to himself, even if it were only for the length of a dance. “I have counted the days until you—”

“Miss Stuart.”

Walter turned to see William Forbes bowing to Mina. Forbes

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straightened and gave her a dazzling smile that made Walter grind his teeth even though he and Forbes were friends.

“Good evening, Mr. Scott,” Forbes said to Walter. “I hope I am not interrupting, but I wondered if Miss Stuart would care to dance?”

Mina looked at Walter with a questioning, yet hopeful, expression.

Walter wished she would stay by his side and make up for the months they’d been apart, but he nodded his consent, even though she did not need his permission. The minuet ended, which meant the next dance would soon begin.

Mina, obviously relieved by Walter’s gesture, turned back to Forbes. “I would be honored, Mr. Forbes.”

So smooth was the transition between Mina being on Walter’s arm to her being on Forbes’s arm that Walter barely noticed the movement. He kept his smile in place until the couple had moved away, then let out a disappointed breath and turned to leave the ballroom, his limp more pronounced; he’d attempted to walk confidently when Mina had been on his arm.

He reminded himself not to be selfish or impatient, but it was hard not to be. From the time he was a child, when infantile paralysis had taken the use of his leg, he had pushed forward with energy and determination beyond his years. He had worked harder, walked longer, and studied more than anyone he knew. He never flagged in proving himself capable and dependable in any matter set before him. Because of that determination, he had regained the use of his leg, sharpened his intellect, learned four languages beyond English, Gaelic, and Scots, and excelled in any way a middle-class Scotsman could excel. He could walk thirty miles in a day and keep a fine seat on a horse, but due to the stunted growth of his leg when he was young, he could not execute the balance and rhythm of dancing.

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That he could walk at all was a miracle, and he was careful not to seem ungrateful, but he wanted to dance with Mina.

“Abandoned already?” Clerk said when Walter sank into a chair across the table. Walter glared at his friend, and Clerk’s expression sobered. “My apologies. I dinna mean it.”

Walter accepted the apology with a nod, then signaled the footman serving drinks to bring him a mug. Likely such pub-corners didn’t exist at London society events; they probably had liveried servants with glasses of champagne. One more reason why English society held little appeal for Walter.

“Did you hear *Damon and Pythias* is opening in December?” Clerk asked, aptly changing the subject.

Walter was glad for the reprieve. “I have already reserved seats for two showings.”

Clerk laughed and shook his head. “You are the only man I know who’ll see a show twice.”

“I’d see it three times if I could,” Walter said. “And be on the stage myself if it were proper.”

Clerk laughed again, then leaned forward. “Any hope that a certain young woman might claim the seat beside you one of those nights?”

Walter smiled, his good nature returned. No matter what blue devils set upon him from time to time, he was rarely caught by them for long. There was too much beauty in life—too much goodness—that would be missed if he let the doldrums take root.

“I certainly hope as much,” Walter said. “I can think of nothing better than enjoying good theater in the company of a fine woman.”

Walter *was* going to marry Mina, and he was closer to that goal than he had ever been before. Neither Forbes nor any other man who led her to the dance floor could undo the connection between them.

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No one knew Mina like Walter did, and she had never shown any preference to anyone but him.

Walter's ale arrived, and he lifted the mug toward Clerk. "To the Belsches-Stuart family spending their winter in Edinburgh. May their time here yield a hearty harvest."

Clerk laughed, Walter smiled, and they both drank to his future.



Mina danced the Scottish reel with Mr. Forbes and enjoyed every minute of it. She had been introduced to Mr. Forbes years ago but had never danced with him. No sooner had she stepped off the floor than Cospatrick McCann asked her for a dance, and they danced a jig. Next came a quadrille with someone new, then another reel, and finally, when she could barely catch her breath, the orchestra took a break so the guests could enjoy a light supper of bread, cheese, and cold mutton.

Dane Campbell led Mina to a seat next to her mother.

"Thank you for the escort," she said when they reached the table. "I hope that your journey tomorrow to Glasgow is a fine one and that Miss Fairsled is as pleased to see you as we are sad to have you go."

He smiled widely at the mention of his fiancée. "I thank you for your well wishes. Have a good evening, Miss Stuart." He nodded to her mother. "Lady Stuart."

After he left, Mina shared a smile with her mother. They had known the Campbell family of Moray for years. "It seems everyone I know is courting and marrying," Mina said as she surveyed the couples seated together around the table. The energy of young love was as intoxicating as the wine her parents allowed her to drink with dinner now and then. The air seemed to shiver with that energy, and she found herself feeling very drunk.

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“Tis the time and season for it,” Mother said as she inspected the dishes of food lined down the center of the table. “You must be famished.”

She handed Mina a glass of water, and the mint-flavored liquid felt like rain in high summer. Mina closed her eyes as the coolness traveled down to her toes. When she opened her eyes, her mother was smiling at her. “I am happy you’ve enjoyed yourself, Mina. You’re glad we’ve returned to Edinburgh?”

“Oh, it is wonderful to be back.” Ah, the city and all its desserts. “I have not danced since the Gordons’ ball, and there were not nearly so many attendees as this in Fettercairn.” The family’s recently inherited estate in the Highland shire of Aberdeen was a lovely estate with a grand house that made Mina feel like a princess. But the location was remote, and the family was still getting to know the gentry in the area. Father did not want them to make connections with a lower class, which had resulted in a fair amount of loneliness for Mina. Coming to Edinburgh and becoming reacquainted here with people she knew was all the sweeter.

“It seems you are the darling of more than one county, now,” Mother said.

“I am no one’s darling,” Mina said meekly. But she *had* been asked to dance every dance tonight, just as she had at the Gordons’ ball last August. She knew she had grown into herself this last year, and it seemed the men of her acquaintance had noticed. Being back in Edinburgh with seemingly endless prospects and social events only exaggerated the heady sensation she felt. She was nineteen years old, and for the first time in her life, she felt as though she had power to wield for her own sake.

“Miss Stuart.”

Mina turned in her chair toward the voice, then froze when she

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saw Walter's bright blue eyes. Earlier in the evening, she had promised to sit with him—a promise she had promptly forgotten.

"Oh, Mr. Scott," Mina said, heat filling her cheeks. "Won't you sit down?" As she spoke, she looked around the table. Every seat was filled. "Oh dear . . . uh."

"I was just stopping by to tell you I would be at the other table," Walter said, as kind as always. "I only wanted to be sure you knew I hadn't forgotten you."

Am I being reprimanded? Her defenses rose in reaction to his comment. She liked Walter Scott very much and knew that her self-confidence had bloomed under his ardent attention, but there was no official understanding between them. Certainly, she had relived their kiss from nearly nine months ago a thousand times, sometimes wishing it hadn't happened, other times wishing they'd enjoyed more such intimacies during her last stay in the city. It was all so confusing.

He walked away before she had to think of a reply, and she watched him a moment before picking up her fork and serving herself some slices of cheese. She felt guilty for not having sat out a dance with him as she'd said she would but reminded herself there was time enough to keep her word.

"It's a shame Mr. Scott does not dance," Mother said.

Mina did not look up from the table. She always felt nervous when either of her parents talked about Walter. Her parents had read the letters passed between Walter and herself back when the letters were mostly about literature, but they had eventually lost interest in managing the correspondence. They would be furious if they knew what some of those letters said now and would ban her to Fettercairn if they knew she'd let Walter kiss her last spring.

"Yes, it *is* a shame he does not dance," Mina said, then busied herself with her plate. To her relief, the woman on Mother's other

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side engaged her with questions about how long the family would be in Edinburgh—four months—and how the journey had been from Fettercairn—long and cold. Fettercairn was nearly a hundred miles from Edinburgh, which took three long days of travel by carriage.

Mina attended her plate and considered her situation with more depth. She'd been encouraging Walter's attention for years, but was she prepared to elevate their attachment to actual courting? The idea gave her butterflies. The way Walter teased and flirted with her made her feel grown up and desirable. But she had been so young when he had first paid her such attention that sometimes she wondered if what she felt was obligation toward him because of the compliments he'd given her when no other man had.

In the months since they had seen one another, they had not been writing regularly; she'd been traveling with her family a great deal and settling in at Fettercairn. But then in July, Walter had written her a bold letter, stating that his affections had only increased during their separation and asking if her heart had changed. His letter had been so poetic, lyrical, almost . . . sensual. He said in a dozen different ways that he loved her, and she was thoroughly seduced by every word.

Mina wrote him back with her best attempt at matching the tone of his words, pouring out the fanciful thoughts of her own heart but ending with the request that they continue to keep their level of regard from reaching her parents. Her request stemmed in part from her fear of Father's reaction toward her encouragement of Walter. But the other reason was that the idea of marriage and children had always been a fantastical one until recently. Walter's letters and poems—and that kiss—had increased the dreamlike quality of such thoughts.

But she had friends and cousins who were married now, some had had children, and the contrast between their lives and hers was extreme. She wasn't sure she was ready to take on the responsibility of

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a husband and the children that would surely follow. It would happen one day—she wanted it to—but was she ready *now*? And was Walter the man she wanted to pledge her life to? She felt horrid to even think otherwise after the intimacy they had shared, and yet . . .

Mina glanced up and felt her eyes drawn to Walter, who sat at the other table beside Mr. Clerk and Miss Cranston. The three of them laughed and talked with an ease Mina envied. Though she had a good many friends, Father always made a point of reminding her of her place, which was a select and admired position in society. She had always been the daughter of a baronet, but the Belsches name was inferior to that of Stuart, which her father had inherited through his mother only a few years ago. Though still a Barony, the title was of older duration and came with more holdings. Now she was looked to as an even greater example. Because she had been educated in England, Mina had never learned Gaelic, and Father insisted she not fall into the common Scots in public either. English only, and finely spoken too.

Mina worked hard to please her father, but it meant she did not laugh easily in public, nor feel comfortable in every social event. More and more often, she felt herself weighing a person's own place in society against her own and judging the cut of their coat or the shine of their shoe.

Walter made himself comfortable everywhere he went, which was one of the things that pleased her about him. He never treated her delicately, yet she knew she had his respect. He was below her class, but he did not seem to factor it, and he could talk easily with anyone, regardless of their position.

Mina wished she dared join Walter and his friends, but it would be awkward presenting herself. She did not know Mr. Clerk or Miss Cranston very well.

She turned back to her plate and was promptly engaged in

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conversation by an older man seated to her right. She appreciated the distraction, even if he spoke too much about his rheumatoid, which had been acting up in the increasingly cold weather. He was kind, however, and called her “Lassie” in his thick brogue, which reminded her of her grandfather, the Earl of Leven and Melville. In recent years, the more gentle classes of Scotland had smoothed out their speech. They did not sound like the British by any means, but the *auld* timers’ brogue was not often heard at society events such as this.

The music started up in the other room, making Mina realize how much time had passed. She stood with her mother, and Mina’s dinner companion bid her a *guid nicht*. Mina turned toward the ballroom to find Walter standing beside the doorway. He met her eyes and smiled, causing a warm sensation of importance to wash through her.

He was a handsome man, though boyishly so due to his round face, light blond hair, and merry grin. He had fine teeth and blue eyes that were mesmerizing in their brilliant sparkle. Right now those eyes danced just looking at her, and she knew that to him she was the only woman of any notice here tonight. She *could* see herself beside Walter, in a church, making vows before God. There were days she longed for a match to such a romantic man who fairly worshipped her. And, in honesty, her father’s disapproval of Walter made her want him for another reason all together.

Being a young woman on the precipice of adulthood was a difficult piece of ground to hold.

“How was your supper, Miss Stuart?” Walter asked when she reached him.

She put a hand on her stomach, determined not to let her conflicting thoughts show on her face. “I fear I ate too much.”

“All that dancing will leave you quite famished, I imagine.”

Was he reprimanding her again? She watched him carefully, but

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his smile remained, and she sensed that he genuinely wanted her to enjoy herself and if that meant dancing, he wanted her to dance. What a truly kind man he was. Was she worthy of such a man when she second-guessed her feelings toward him?

“I am sorry I forgot my promise to sit with you,” she said. “I meant to—”

Walter surprised her by putting a finger to her lips. She felt her eyes go wide at the intimate touch, and though she wanted to look around to see who might be watching, she could not take her eyes from his face. His touch made her think of their kiss from last spring. That enchanting and confusing kiss.

“You owe me nothing, Mina,” he said so soft and quiet that the words moved over her like a breeze. “And you love to dance.”

He removed his finger and put out his arm while Mina blinked at him.

“You are a surprising man, Mr. Scott,” she said, taking his arm. She glanced around now and noticed a few knowing smiles on the faces of the guests near enough to have seen the exchange. She did not feel embarrassed by their notice. Instead, she felt admired, even envied. Such feelings went against the meek and humble attributes a woman was supposed to value, but they made her feel powerful.

Her parents wanted her to make a smart match with someone above her in social station in order to elevate the family and ensure a worthy heir, since Father’s title would pass through Mina to her firstborn son. But Mina was determined to please herself, and Walter’s romantic attentions pleased her very much. Besides, she *had* promised to sit out a dance with him, and were not her parents always chiding her on the importance of fulfilling her commitments?

As they neared the dance floor, Mina slowed. Walter looked at her with his eyebrows raised. Such intense energy and interest reflected

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from his fresh face that sometimes it was hard to believe he was five years her senior.

“I fear I am not yet recovered from the first half of this evening, Walter.” His eyes sparkled with approval at her use of his Christian name. She rarely addressed him as such when they were together, though her letters were more personal. “Perhaps you and I could sit with one another. It has been such a long time.”

He smiled widely, enlivening his dancing eyes even more. “Are you sure, Mina?” he asked quietly. He could not hide how much he liked the idea, and she would enjoy being the center of his world for a while.

She nodded. She was sure. No one treated her the way Walter did.

Walter put his other hand over hers, which was tucked by his elbow, and squeezed her fingers. “Then I know just the place,” he said, steering her away from the floor toward an antechamber. It was not isolated, but removed from the dancing portion and set with chairs and tables to facilitate visiting between the guests. The faster Walter walked, the more pronounced his limp became, but Mina pretended not to notice. His disability further pricked the soft place in her heart she reserved only for him. How difficult it must be to be unable to dance as other men did. Poor Walter.

Mina glanced over her shoulder to see if anyone noticed their removal and locked eyes with her father on the far side of the room. He did not look pleased. She looked away quickly, wishing she could pretend she had not seen him. Sir John would have words for her later, but she would not be bullied into accepting *his* choice for her future.

She leaned closer to Walter and pushed her father’s disapproval from her mind. “It is so good to be back in Edinburgh.”

Walter grinned even wider.

Chapter Two

LONDON, ENGLAND

November 21, 1795

The curtain lifted at the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane, and Charlotte Carpenter—her last name changed from Charpentier to better blend with English society—leaned forward, ready to be swallowed up in the imagination of William Shakespeare. There were few things Charlotte enjoyed as much as theater, and it had been months since she had last been in London. For this visit, she had been in town for three weeks, yet this was the first play she'd been able to attend. The month of November was nearly through, and she would only stay through the middle of December.

The first three acts did not disappoint, and Charlotte was completely immersed in *The Winter's Tale*, despite having seen it three times before. The passion with which Leontes delivered his insane ranting against his wife was particularly intense in this production, and the set design created a feeling of intimacy despite Drury Lane being such a spacious theater.

When the curtain lowered for intermission, Charlotte joined in the applause, though many of the aristocratic company around her did not. That such adulation was beneath them confused Charlotte.

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What was the benefit of accessing the luxuries of life if you did not enjoy them *avec enthousiasme*?

The applause, primarily from those watching from the pit, eventually died out in place of conversation and rustling skirts as patrons made their way to the concessions. Charlotte stood, smoothing the gauzy top layer of her evening dress—new for this trip to London—and turned toward the conversation taking place behind her in the second row of the box. The women seated to her left were talking of their plans for Christmas, but Charlotte had not expected to be included. She rarely was.

Charlotte's guardian, Lord Downshire, was already immersed in a political discussion, never mind that Parliament would not sit for another four months. Charlotte remained standing while the men finished their conversation, and then followed them, silent as a mouse, to the coffee room. Lord Downshire would continue to talk to his men, and she would remain near enough that he could see her, but far enough away that she did not interfere. Being seen but not heard was her life in London, but she never felt bitter about her place when she was at the theater. They were magical nights; she would mop the floors if it were the only way to get admittance. Fortunately, she had been saved from such poverty by Lord Downshire when he assumed guardianship of her and her brother, John, when they were very young.

She was of age now, twenty-five-years old, and Lord Downshire could have turned her out, but she remained under his generous support—including trips to the theater when she visited him in London twice a year. Being in London made her want to blend in and not draw attention to herself. By the time she returned to the country, she always felt near to bursting from the restraint. Then she would spend her days riding, drawing, dancing if she were of a mind to, and feeling

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her spirits rise in direct proportion to her distance from the sooty capital city. If only they had this quality of theater in Bracknell, then she would never have to come to London at all.

Halfway through intermission, when Lord Downshire's conversation had turned from politics to the war with France—the country of her birth—Charlotte began looking for a distraction. Jane Nicholson, her former tutor turned paid companion, had not felt well tonight, leaving Charlotte more alone than usual.

There was a wall filled with portraits of former theater patrons on the far side of the room, and Charlotte made her way toward them, standing to the side near a large vase so she would not draw attention to herself or block anyone else's view. She sipped her tea and studied the features of each man. The subjects often stood in full regalia with a hand on a hip and some nostalgic scene in the background, perhaps a hunting dog or two.

France had destroyed hundreds of noblemen's portraits during the Revolution, determined to exorcise the wasteful aristocracy from their midst. Charlotte and her *petit frère*, John, were already in England when the Revolution began. After their mother abandoned them in favor of her lover, Father sent them to England with the intention to join them and start a new life. Instead, he died alone in France, heartbroken over his wife's desertion and lonely without his children.

John was now part of the East India Company, and Charlotte, after being educated in a French convent, had reunited with her mother until Mama's death some six years ago. Charlotte now lived a rather solitary life with Jane in the dower cottage of Lord Downshire's Easthampstead Estate.

Lady Downshire, whom Lord Downshire had married nine years ago, was not particularly fond of her husband's charges and preferred to spend time with her own children. The family remained mostly

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at the estate in Hillsborough, Ireland. Charlotte had not seen Lady Downshire in years.

“All the best actresses are French,” a man’s voice said from the side.

Charlotte glanced his way to confirm he was not speaking to her and saw another man standing beside him. Both men were dressed to distinction with perfectly tailored coats and shiny buckles on their fine shoes. They did not seem to see her, and she stepped closer to the wall, glad to hear the country of her birth spoken of in positive ways. It happened so rarely.

“And all the best mistresses, too,” the other man said in a leering tone.

Charlotte’s smile fell, and she lowered her eyes to the floor.

The first man laughed. “Passion is passion, after all.”

Charlotte ducked her head and turned away from her secluded corner so she would not hear their bawdy talk. They glanced her way as she exited the vicinity but then dismissed her, likely surmising she had not been near enough to overhear.

Charlotte wished she could tell the men that such judgment could not define each individual born beneath a country’s flag. And yet, was Charlotte’s own mother not an example of the immoral fervor so often associated with the French? And were not the number of Frenchwomen under the *sauvegarde* of English men further evidence of low morality? The English did not seem to care that such choices were often forced upon these women because of war and loss and the need to survive. The Revolution was over, but France was now making war with everyone else, it seemed, further decreasing the opinion of her country throughout Europe and fanning the desperation many women felt to find security anywhere they could.

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Charlotte was making her way back to Lord Downshire when she heard mention of his name.

“ . . . Lord Downshire tonight?”

Charlotte stopped and glanced at the three women, none of them looking her way, clustered just a few feet to her right. She did not know them.

“Yes, he is here with that *woman* again,” a second woman answered the first.

“His *ward*?” the first woman asked skeptically. “I wonder how much longer we are expected to pretend we believe such an explanation. And with his wife remaining in Ireland, no less.”

Rather than walk away and maintain what was left of her dignity, Charlotte simply turned her back to the women, though she could still hear what they said. She gripped the teacup too tightly in her hand and stared at the dregs at the bottom of her cup.

“To have a mistress is one thing, but to have a woman kept in your own home under the guise of Christian compassion is a mockery.”

The voice of the third woman joined the conversation. “I understand she and her brother came to stay when they were very young. Wasn’t Lord Downshire friends with the children’s father?”

“Well, yes, he took them in because their mother eloped with her *lover*. They’re all French, you know. I feel for the *late* Lord Downshire. He must be turning in his grave to see his son behaving so sordidly. To say nothing of the current Lady Downshire. Surely she must know what’s taking place under her nose.”

Charlotte tried to swallow the embarrassment, but her cheeks were on fire and her heart raced. She relaxed her grip on the poor teacup. It was not as though she’d never heard such whispers, but two conversations in one night disparaging first her nationality and

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then her very person made her feel as though everyone was talking about her, thinking scandalous things, believing horrid accusations. Perhaps the draw of the theater was not worth the edge of society that too often left her bleeding. She placed the cup and saucer on a small decorative table, afraid her hands would shake and the clink of china would betray her.

“There you are, Charlotte. Are you ready to return to the box?”

Lord Downshire had spoken loudly enough that the women surely heard him. Charlotte was only glad he had not approached so silently as to overhear *them*. She forced a smile as he stood beside her and put out his arm.

Charlotte inclined her head, not wanting to speak for fear her subtle accent would give her away. No amount of elocution lessons could completely hide her difficulty with the *th* sound. As Lord Downshire guided her toward the exit, she glanced at the gossiping women. One woman offered her a repentant look, but the other two raised their chins in a silent challenge and then turned back to one another, dismissing her entirely.

“Did you get refreshment?” Lord Downshire asked as he escorted her back to their box.

“Yes, dank you,” she said quietly, not making eye contact with the people they passed.

She wanted to defend the fact that Lord Downshire had never been anything but a guardian to her and that Mama had lived out the rest of her life in agony over the choice she had made. Charlotte wanted to shout that *she* had a moral heart and sought God’s direction for her life. But she could not win a good opinion, and she knew it. Her complexion was too dark, her face too round, and her accent too lilting for her to ever be free of the censure that followed her.

Those aspects she could not change about herself were also why

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she was unmarried at the age of twenty-five. She was too far below Lord Downshire's class to warrant the attention of a gentleman but raised too high above the class that might accept her nationality and mother *scandaleuse*. Lord Downshire had offered to facilitate a match, but Charlotte did not want a husband who needed her for her income, generously provided by her brother and investments Lord Downshire had made on her father's behalf. Nor did she want some man with a scandalous past using her as proof that he was reformed.

Charlotte wanted someone to love her. She wanted to belong in a place of her own choosing and have children who grew up to respect her as their Mama. A mama who would never do to them what Charlotte's mother had done to her children. Repentant though she had been, Mama could not undo the stain she had left that marked Charlotte and John for life.

Lord Downshire returned Charlotte to her seat in his private box. She thanked him, then faced forward and tried to center her mind on the fourth act of the play, which she knew would turn lighter than the darker scenes of the first three acts. Leontes would realize the mistake he'd made and be reunited with his banished daughter and wife. All would be forgiven; all would be made right. Charlotte longed to lose herself within the story, and yet when the curtain lifted, she was trying to wipe her eyes without anyone noticing her self-pity. The only thing worse than feeling her *embarras* and shame would be to try to explain her tears to someone else.

As was often the case, Charlotte was alone with her thoughts while surrounded by people.