



## As High as the Heavens

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January, 1568, Grampian Region, Scotland

“Och, help me endure this winter. And help me accept the life that fate—and my father—have decreed for me!”

As the sun’s fading rays slanted through the birches lining the road to Dunscroft Castle, Heather Gordon bit back further entreaties—futile but instinctive after years of religious instruction—to a God who had long since ceased to care, and stepped back from the deep, stone-cut library window. Usually protected from within by heavy iron shutters that could be firmly bolted against possible attack, the window stood unobstructed this day to catch the watery, winter light. The meager illumination, however, did little to brighten the gloomy, tome-laden room. If not for the view of rolling hills and distant mountains, Heather didn’t know how she could’ve borne the sense of restless entrapment she always experienced this time of year.

She made her aimless way past the globe of the world and high-backed wooden settle covered with cushions to the bookshelves inset in the dark, wainscot-paneled walls. Ah, she thought, but she was so very weary of winter, and it was only mid-January. At least three months of cold, damp, and snow still remained here in the Grampians, the mountain range that formed a natural division between the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands.

If this year, though, were the same as all the years past, she’d only have to endure three more months and all would be well. Three more months, and she could once again accompany her father to Edinburgh to immerse herself in the heady charm and excitement that was Queen Mary’s Court. Always before, such plans had indeed been sufficient to pin one’s hopes and dreams on in the dreary days and weeks ahead.

But not this year. This year the queen no longer resided in Edinburgh. In truth, since her unwilling abdication last July in favor of her infant son, after the defeat of her and her third husband the Earl of Bothwell’s forces by rebel troops at Carberry Hill, Mary was no longer officially queen.

There'd be no banquets or outings or dances led by the beautiful, carefree monarch this spring. Mary was imprisoned in Lochleven Castle, ensconced on its tiny island in the middle of Loch Leven, and her brilliant but illegitimate half brother, James Stewart, the Earl of Moray, had no intention of allowing her to rule again. The kingdom would survive with Moray now as regent for the infant king, but life as they had all known it would never be the same.

Expelling a deep sigh, Heather ran her emerald-and-pearl-beringed fingers along the row of leather-bound books, considering then discarding a number of titles before settling on a book of Scottish verses by William Dunbar. She pulled out the small, gilt-etched volume, opened it, and read a few of the poems. For a change, however, none of the compositions caught her fancy. With an even deeper sigh, she carefully returned the book to its spot and lifted her gaze to the next higher shelf.

Plato, Socrates, Aristotle. Gavin Douglas's translation of Virgil's Aeneid into the Scots language. Heather grimaced. Somehow, their stirring words didn't beckon today. Though she wished for a book thought-provoking enough to distract and help wile away the hours until suppertime, when she hoped her father would be finished with his meeting with the Lords Fleming and Seton, and lesser noblemen George Douglas, John Beaton, and John Sempill, Heather wasn't in the mood just now for any heavy philosophical treatises.

Next to the ponderous tomes of the ancient Greeks and Romans sat yet another small volume, entitled *The Book of the City of Ladies* by Christine Pisan. Though Heather knew the writings of the famed French woman scholar and poet of the past century nearly by heart, she never tired of rereading her eloquent words in defense of women. Perhaps some of those declarations would soothe her restive spirit now. Perhaps, this time, she'd finally find the answers to what was really needed for a happy, contented life. Answers she'd of late so avidly sought and had yet to truly find.

Taking down the volume, Heather thumbed through the pages. The first words that caught her eye only plunged her heart deeper into the morass of confusion and resentment that had plagued her for the past year. *I considered myself most unfortunate*, she read, *because God had made me inhabit a female body in this world.*

Heather gave a snort of disgust and quickly reshelved that book as well. "God's injustice to women! As if, atop it all," she muttered, "I needed *that* reminder of yet another source of my discontent."

Just then the stout oak door swung open, ushering in a chill gust of air from the hall. Heather shivered, pulled her fine, crimson wool damask wrap about the shoulders of her tightly cinched, emerald green velvet gown with its high, stiff ruff collar, and turned. There, in the doorway, a preoccupied frown marring his strong, noble features, stood her father.

As dark as Heather was light, Lord Robert Gordon was a tall, robustly built man who, even in his fifties, carried himself with the athletic grace and vigor of a man a score of years younger. Well aware of the striking figure he still made, he dressed in the height of Court fashion, from his fine leather shoes with slashed decorations to his black knitted silk stockings and short trunks roundly padded with horsehair, to his ebony velvet doublet with its low, pointed waist, puff sleeves, and white linen ruff collar. Also in the current fashion, his graying, dark brown hair was cut close and short, as was his full beard.

Her despair and discontent dissipating in her renewed swell of affection for her handsome, dashing father, Heather hurried over. "Is the meeting finished so soon?" she asked, barely masking her eagerness with what she hoped was a beguiling smile. "Ah, I pray so. Being relegated all afternoon to the confines of the library has long ago lost its appeal."

"Gae awa wi' ye!" Robert Gordon exclaimed with a chuckle, falling back on a more primitive form of speech to express his incredulity. "Have my ears finally failed me, now to hear ye complain of a few hours spent with yer books? It's past time, then, I send off for a new supply. Ye must surely have exhausted our meager offerings to speak now so disparagingly."

"Nay, Father. It's but the weather of late, and the time of year." Heather's smile faded. "And the fact it's the first winter I've spent without Mither too. No matter how close to my wit's end I'd become when the snow lay long on the ground and the cold kept us indoors, she used always to have some plan to pass the bleak, boring hours."

"Aye, that she did, lass." Robert's mouth tightened, and a wistful look flared in his eyes. "That she did. Though my bonny Margery has been gone all of eight months now, I, too, find some days without her harder to bear than others."

He stepped close and wrapped an arm about Heather's shoulders. "Come, lass," he said, guiding her back into the library's confines and shutting the door. "What I've next to say to ye will, I'd wager, win yer interest for a time. There's trouble afoot and much I must discuss with ye."

"Indeed?" Heather shot her father a worried look. Though she was well aware today's meeting had been convened hastily and with the utmost secrecy, her respect and loyalty to her father had precluded any queries or idle curiosity.

"Has this trouble, then, aught to do with this day's council with the lords and other nobles?"

"Aye, it does." He led her to two box-seated, panel-backed oak armchairs standing before the small hearth fire. "Sit, lass," he urged, "while I warm this frigid room a bit."

Heather settled herself on the farthest chair's green, blue, and yellow tartan-covered seat, snuggled her shawl more securely up about her shoulders, and waited while her father knelt and added a few logs to the fire. It was strange, she mused, how cold the room had become in the hours she had waited. She hadn't noticed it before. Somehow, though, as she sat in tense anticipation of what was to come, her fingers suddenly felt like little blocks of ice and her cheeks and ears stung with what almost seemed like chilblains.

In the span of but a few minutes of prodding and poking, the feeble flames were coaxed back to their former intensity. Heat surged forth to bathe the little room in comforting warmth. Setting aside the iron poker, Robert Gordon then rose, walked over, and took the seat opposite his daughter.

Though Heather waited patiently for her father to speak, he failed to do so for what seemed an interminable length of time. Instead he stared down at his hands, hands that, as if they possessed a mind of their own, ceaselessly clenched and unclenched in his lap. Finally, Robert Gordon cleared his throat, lifted his gaze, and fixed her with a resolute stare.

“What I next tell ye, lass, ye must swear on yer mither’s grave not to reveal to a soul. Swear it now, or I can’t tell ye a word more.”

Apprehension plucked at Heather. This was far, far worse than she had imagined.

“Aye, Father,” she said softly. “If it’s of such import to ye, I give ye my word. I’ll not tell a soul. But I’d like also to know why ye require such a solemn oath.”

He averted his gaze, seemingly finding sudden interest in the fat, fluffy snowflakes beginning to fall outside the library window. For a moment Heather’s gaze joined his. The ethereal beauty of the crystalline forms floating languorously past the window panes caught her up, holding her in thrall. How exquisitely beautiful they were, she thought, yet, conversely, how painfully deadly if one was ever caught unprotected outside in a storm.

*Beauty and pain . . .*

The bitter contrast evoked memories of the day her mother had summoned Heather to her deathbed. Margery had sent the servants from the room, then pulled Heather close. The sickeningly sweet smell of death had tainted the air, and only her deep, abiding love for her mother had kept Heather there.

“A word . . . with ye,” Margery had whispered. “Of life . . . love . . . and a woman’s lot.”

Heather swallowed hard and nodded. “Aye, Mither?”

“I’ve always loved yer father. Who wouldn’t . . . love him?” Her mother’s eyes misted with tears. “He was always so braw . . . so bonny.”

Taking her mother’s hand in hers, Heather waited.

“H-he never loved me, though. Leastwise, not as I wished him to.” A fat tear rolled down Margery’s cheek. “Aye . . . just as Rose’s man never loved her . . .”

She clutched Heather’s hand, as if afraid that letting her daughter go just then would be to surrender her to a similar fate. “Beware, my bonny Heather . . . beware of giving yer love to a man. They cannot help themselves . . . cannot help breaking yer heart and crushing yer spirit . . . aye, and even killing ye.”

Disbelief, then horror, swamped Heather. Could it be? Had both her mother and older sister fallen prey to the same fate?

Rose had wed but two years ago. Donald Campbell had been every woman’s dream—dashing and handsome, if a trifle shallow. Her sister had fallen wildly, passionately in love. After a brief courtship they had been wed. Rose had quickly become pregnant.

Donald, however, though he greatly valued the Gordon fortune Rose would one day inherit, put no such store in his vows of marital fidelity. One night, when his wife was only weeks from her childbed, he had become careless. Rose found him with one of her serving maids. In the terrible fight that ensued, she had somehow lost her balance chasing him and fallen down the stairs. Rose and her babe had died three days later.

Yet, though her sister's death had been a terrible blow, now to discover her mother's long-kept, devastating secret was an even greater shock. All these years, Heather hadn't imagined her mother unhappy in her marriage, but then, when had she ever closely thought much on it? She had always been so engrossed in her books and, in her youthful naïveté, she had just assumed . . .

"Nay, not Father." Heather choked out the words. "Not Father."

"Aye, lass." Her eyes burning pits of agony, her mother managed a weak nod. "Even my braw, bonny Robert."

*Beauty and pain . . .*

The rich, tangy scent of wood smoke wafted by. The familiar odor only intensified Heather's awareness of the contrast between the now warm and cozy room, and the sense of uncertainty and betrayal in the world outside. Uncertainty and betrayal so perfectly exemplified by a beloved father, an unfaithful brother-in-law, and the God who had allowed such a travesty of justice in the world.

As if for the first time, Heather saw her father with a new perspective. Saw him, in the rapidly waning light, as a man besieged by cares that had aged him in ways she had never before noted. Saw him as a man who, perhaps with the best of intentions, used others for his own means.

*They cannot help themselves . . .*

At the memory of her mother's sorrowing words, guilt at her own disloyalty, followed swiftly by a fierce resolve, flooded Heather. She was a woman in a man's world, and not even God would come to her aid. She had no other choice. Her father was all she had and, like her mother before her, she'd stand by him.

She would just never allow him, or any man, to pierce the barriers she had been forced—in the aftermath of her sister's and mother's deaths—to build about her heart. The belated realization of their marital torment had been hard enough to bear. She'd not play the fool and risk that same pain and betrayal herself.

"Tell me, Father." Leaning forward, Heather took her sire's hand in hers and gave it an encouraging squeeze. "Ye know I can be trusted. Ye know, as well, that I'll do aught ye ask." She managed a taut little smile. "When everything's said and done, we are, now that Rose and Mither are gone, all that is left of the Gordons of Duncroft."

He smiled sadly and patted her cheek. "Aye, my poor, bonny Rose and dear, sweet Margery. Well, it won't be long now, will it, before ye're wed?" His brow clouded in thought. "The ceremony's but five months away, isn't it? And once ye've wed that handsome son of Alastair Seton, ye'll soon see to bairns running about within these old walls again. Then I'll truly be content, what with my daughter and her husband and their bairns brightening Duncroft once more."

She knew he meant well, knew he had done what any conscientious father would do, in betrothing her, as his now only child and heir, to Charles Seton. Of good stock and breeding, Charlie was also a younger son who stood greatly to gain in joining with the prosperous Gordons. And, if the truth were told, there were many men far less pleasing than Charlie. Indeed,

in the few visits they had shared in the past months, Heather had found him to be quite pleasant and well read. He seemed, if nothing else, a man who'd treat her kindly.

The fact that Heather didn't love him, or even find him particularly exciting, must never be permitted to influence her acceptance of the betrothal. Indeed, the fact she *didn't* love him was perhaps for the best. She'd make no errors clouded by love—neither those that broke the spirit *nor* the body. Still in her heart of hearts, Heather wondered if there wasn't—*shouldn't be*—more. More to a relationship between a man and a woman. More to life itself.

But such thoughts were far from the issue just now. What mattered was hearing what her father had come to say, and supporting him in whatever he desired. Heather turned to the hand that lingered on the side of her face, kissed it, then pulled away.

“Tell me, Father. Tell me and be done with it.”

He leaned back then and sighed. “It's the queen. She must be freed from Lochleven.”

“Aye, that she must.” Heather frowned. Though she was well aware her father was part of a group of loyalists who had never accepted Mary's abdication, she had hoped he'd have allowed the younger, more hotheaded members of the faction to lead any plot to rescue the queen. It was beginning to appear, however, that that wouldn't be the case.

“What has that to do with me,” she prodded when no reply was forthcoming, “or with the secret ye asked me to keep?”

“We can't rescue her with force of men. Lochleven is too well-fortified. It would withstand us long enough for Moray to send a superior army against us. We must, instead, enter the castle by more devious means, and spirit away Mary before they can sound the alarm.”

“A wise plan.”

Her hands outstretched, Heather leaned toward the fire to warm fingers again gone suddenly cold. The flickering light bathed her hands in red-gold hues, casting them into brilliant illumination, then shadow.

“It'll take a clever scheme, however,” she said, “to fool Lochleven's chatelaine, the Lady Margaret Douglas, and her son William. They know the Gordons are loyal to the queen. We can't just float up to the castle and ask their permission to visit Mary.”

“Nay, we can't,” her father admitted. “In fact, we can't appear to be in any way involved in the queen's rescue. If the plot should fail, Moray's vengeance would be swift and harsh. But we *can* send a man the Douglases view as friend and ally into Lochleven to aid in Mary's escape. A man who, though they assume him loyal to their cause, is, in truth, loyal instead to the queen.”

Her hands still spread to the fire, Heather glanced over her shoulder at her father. “Indeed? And who would such a man be?”

Robert Gordon smiled. “A man the exact double of that young fop Colin Stewart. Ye remember him from yer days at Court, don't ye? As luck would have it, the Lady Margaret dotes on him.”

“A man who looks exactly like Colin?”

Heather turned to face her father. She was well-acquainted with the handsome if dissolute Colin Stewart. For the past two years, he had been in attendance at Mary’s Court the same months Heather and her father were there. He had even for a time been a suitor for her hand, until her father had adamantly squelched that. His vast estates and noble lineage notwithstanding, Colin Stewart’s conversion to the new church headed by John Knox had been more than the Catholic Lord Gordon could stomach.

“A man the exact double of Colin?” she repeated, forcing the memory of Colin Stewart’s flattering if rather superficial courtship from her mind. “But how can that be? And how did ye come to know of this man?”

“It’s a long story.” An enigmatic expression shuttered his eyes.

“Well, I’ve the time to hear it, if ye’ve the time to tell it.”

Her father grinned. “Ye’ve yer mither’s blunt way of speech. I like that. Unlike her, though, ye know when to temper it with good grace.”

Warmth stole into Heather’s cheeks. Her mother, Margery Mackenzie, though of noble birth, had been a Highlander through and through. She had been as feisty and fiery as they came, leastwise until her unrequited love for Robert Gordon had finally crushed her spirit. Yet though Heather strove hard “to temper with good grace” her own tendency to the same bluff ways as her mother’s forbearers, on occasion those inclinations escaped to betray her.

“I try, Father,” she murmured, “to be all ye wish of me. Truly, I do.”

“I know ye do, lass. As I know ye won’t fail me in this, either.” He sighed and settled more comfortably in his chair. “The man I spoke of . . . the double of Colin Stewart . . . lives in the Highlands amongst Clan Mackenzies. He’s more, though, than just an uncanny double for Colin. He is, in fact, Colin’s twin brother.”

“How is *that* possible?” The shock of such a revelation sent Heather’s heart to pounding. “In all the times I spoke with him, Colin never once mentioned a brother. Indeed, he said his mither had died birthing just him.”

“Aye, and that’s what Colin and everyone else were led to believe. Times were unsettled then for Lord Stewart. He feared a clan uprising that might overthrow him. So he came to me for help. It was I who suggested he send one of his sons away to ensure, if the uprising succeeded, at least one would live to inherit.”

“And the child was sent to the Mackenzies because they were Mither’s kin and could be trusted,” Heather supplied, her agile mind quickly picking up the thread of the tale.

“Aye.” Robert Gordon cocked his head. “Yer Uncle Angus took the bairn and hid him with a trusted clansman and his childless wife. There he has grown to manhood, unaware of his true heritage, living the rough if wholesome life of a Highlander.”

“But he’s a full thirty years old now.”

There was something amiss here, Heather thought. There was more to this than just a simple fostering of a helpless child until the danger passed.

“His father did indeed die in the uprising,” she said, watching her own sire now with more care, “but Colin survived and was raised by his grandparents. Why, in all this time, hasn’t this other twin been brought back?”

Something passed across Robert Gordon’s face. Something dark and furtive. Almost too casually, he lowered his gaze to flick a speck from his padded trunks.

“It seemed best not to complicate things,” he finally offered. “Only one twin could inherit at any rate. Until now, it was decided that it was kindest to let the Highland-reared lad live out his life unaware of what he’d never have.”

“And who made that decision for him?” Unease twined about her heart and twisted her gut. “Indeed, who was left of his real family to decide such a thing? Surely not Colin? And his grandparents died several years ago.”

“Colin doesn’t and must never know. It would be the ruination of our plans.” Robert Gordon shrugged. “What does it matter anyway, at this late a date? What’s done is done. Better to thank our good fortune that few know the truth of his existence. It’ll serve our needs well in the rescue of the queen. And that, lass, in the end, is all that truly matters. The queen . . . *our* queen . . . and the ultimate welfare of our nation, matters more than the twisted path one man’s life has taken.”

“Aye, I suppose so,” Heather admitted reluctantly.

Though the manipulation of the other twin didn’t set well with her—and even more so because her father apparently had been involved in that decision—she had been raised to believe the good of the many must outweigh the welfare of one. It was best to face the fact that the less she delved into the reasons for this unfortunate sequence of events, the better she could accept it.

“It’s sufficient that this man will well suit our plans,” her father was saying, already moving on to his next point. “There *is* but one minor problem. His education, I am sorry to say, has been sadly neglected. In truth, he has been raised as a common Highlander. It’ll take some schooling to fashion him into a noble who can pass muster with that Douglas shrew and her brood.”

Heather gave a wry laugh. “So, ye wish a man reared as an uneducated peasant to impersonate Colin well enough to worm his way into Lochleven?” She shook her head in bemusement. “And pray, how much time do ye imagine that task will take?”

“It doesn’t matter. We’ve only three months left. By the beginning of May, when all threat of winter is surely past, we must strike. It’ll be the best time of year for the queen to rally the support she needs to regain her throne.” He paused for a moment. “And that’s why we need ye, lass.”

“Need me for what?” Heather asked, suddenly wary.

“Why, what else? To school the lad to appear the noble, of course.”

“Me?” Her eyes widened in surprise. “Ye want *me* to journey into the Highlands in the dead of winter to teach some man who is scarce educated—”

She stopped. Her eyes narrowed.

“Can this man even read? It’ll be nigh impossible to teach him if he cannot read.”

Nervously, her father slanted his gaze from hers. “I can’t say for certain. There’s been little opportunity to question the particulars of his upbringing all these years.” He glanced back and managed a wan smile. “But surely yer uncle saw to it that he was taught to read.”

“Och, aye,” Heather said with a disgusted snort. “And haven’t I already seen many times over what attention to detail Uncle Angus puts into things? It’d be the greatest fortune if this man can even eat with knife and fork, much less wash more often than once a fortnight.”

“It doesn’t matter, lass.” Her father leaned forward and took her hand. “We can’t risk involving additional people in this plot, or word of it will leak out and we’ll all be dead before we’ve the chance even to attempt Mary’s rescue. It was why I offered yer services. Only a woman could well and quickly teach the manners of Court and the proper way a noble comports himself. And only a woman—if it can be done at all—could get a proud man to mold himself in ways foreign to his nature.”

“So, ye mean to use me to manipulate this man.”

Anger flared in Heather’s breast. In some inexplicably painful way, she was beginning to feel as used and manipulated as this mysterious Highlander. Only a woman, indeed!

“I don’t like it, Father.” She shook her head, a frown on her face. “I don’t like it at all.”

“Neither do I or any other of us, lass,” he said, patting her hand to soothe her. “I know it’s most unusual—sending ye so far afield at a time like this. But ye’ll be well-chaperoned in that fine tower house of yer Uncle Angus. And ye can bring a serving maid, and even one of the cooks to keep ye in all the dainties ye’re accustomed to.

“Why,” he forged on eagerly, as if warming to his subject, “if ye’ve a mind for it, while all the preparations for yer journey are being made, we can take a short trip to Aberdeen to buy ye enough new books easily to entertain ye for the next three months.”

When Heather remained silent and most obviously unconvinced, he squeezed her hand. “Ah, lass, lass, what choice do we have? And it’s for the queen. In the end, we must all sacrifice whatever it takes to save the queen.”

True enough, Heather thought in grudging agreement. They must all be willing to sacrifice for the sake of the queen. But to journey north in this weather, and deal with some potentially illiterate and most definitely unwashed Highlander . . .

Gazing at her father’s pleading countenance, Heather knew she couldn’t refuse him even this. She sighed her acquiescence.

“Well, a sojourn in the Highlands with Uncle Angus and Aunt Jean and some barbaric peasant wasn’t quite how I envisioned passing the remaining winter, but I too wish to see Mary regain her throne.”

When her father gave a small cry of joy and leaned forward to hug her, she lifted a warning hand. “I only said I’d do what ye asked. I can’t promise what can be accomplished with this man in but three months’ time.”

“Och, dinna fash yerself, lass,” her father, once again falling back into more ancient dialect, said by way of assurance as he took her into his arms. “Ye’re a well-read, intelligent, and most bonny young woman. Ye’ll win this man over like ye’ve won the hearts of so many others of his sex. Ye must be a wee bit patient with him at first, though. It’ll all be so new to him. It’ll take time for him to adjust, once he knows what is expected of—”

Heather went still, then pushed out of her father’s arms. “He doesn’t know about this? Have ye even asked him if he wishes to help us?”

Robert Gordon inhaled a deep breath. “He’ll help, and no mistake. Angus is his laird. He’ll do what Angus asks. Besides, the Mackenzies have always been intensely loyal to the throne. There’s no reason to doubt his—”

“Ye presume much, Father, in making plans for this man’s life without even first consulting him. It isn’t right or fair.”

His lips pursing in thought, he considered that for a moment. “Well, ye’re most likely right, lass, but we also can’t spare the time. First, I’d have to meet with him personally to gain his agreement, then return for ye. It’s just as well I bring ye along, prepared immediately to embark on his lessons. The worst that can happen, for the price of yer journey, is that he refuses.”

Heather eyed him wryly, then rose and walked across the library to stare out the window. Twilight had fallen and the land was shrouded in a hazy, snow-muted light. The skeletal trees swayed and clacked their branches in the rising wind, until the frigid air swirling against the stout, stone walls finally found a chink at the window and surged triumphantly inside.

Awash in a sea of mixed emotions, Heather pulled her damask shawl more tightly to her. Not even an hour ago, she had stood at this very window and wished mightily for some event to rescue her from the days of endless boredom. Yet now that the opportunity was presented her, she wasn’t so certain she wouldn’t far prefer the safe, predictable existence that had always been hers. To journey far afield in such unstable times was frightening enough. But to set out on an undertaking that could well be life-altering for some mysterious man. . .

A man who, Heather realized with a small shiver, was the darkly handsome Colin Stewart’s identical twin. Yet a man most probably as unlike his brother as any man could be.

What if he were content with his life as it already was? What if he were wed and had a family to protect and feed? How would he feel to be asked to join such a dangerous undertaking? An undertaking, at its heart, fraught with deception and manipulation?

Heather’s fingers clenched in the shawl’s warm, rich wool. It wasn’t right what they planned for this man. Even if he agreed to an outward transformation to make him appear what he had, in

truth, always been born to be, he hadn't any way of knowing what it might cost him in the end. And all because her father now sought to use them both—Heather included—as he had once used her mother and, in the doing, broken her heart.

Indeed, she thought with a ripple of presentiment, there was no way of knowing what her complicity in this deliberate trickery might cost her, either. It was, at the very least, a foolish, danger-fraught way of easing the winter's boredom. And, at the worst, a sorry solution to the gnawing sense that life should hold more for her than a loveless marriage to a kind if unexciting man.

With all her heart, Heather now wished she had never set such a course of events into action—even if only with a selfish, ill-conceived, and ultimately futile prayer.

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