

For Laura Griffiths – one of my very favourite humans.

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charlotte says

ALEX BELL



Chapter One

Isle of Skye – January 1910

“Don’t be frightened yet,” the voice says. “I’ll tell you when it’s time to be frightened...”

I turn, looking over my shoulder, but there is nobody there and I am alone once again at Whiteladies – that house of confused spirits and cracked china dolls and slaughtered horses. From somewhere downstairs a grandfather clock counts down the six hours in deep, melancholy tolls and, like a magnetic force, my eyes are drawn with a terrible irresistibility to the door at the end of the corridor. Nothing else exists in the entire world but that door. It is closed but I can hear someone sobbing behind it. Sobbing, sobbing, sobbing. On, on, on. I must help them. I must open that door. I must do something. Now. While I still can.

I walk down the corridor, and the soot and blood mix together in swirls of black and red – on the walls, on my hands, on my skirts and in between the fine grooves of my fingerprints. The closed door looms before me, and it hides a secret that will be the end of everything I know and love. Yet, still, I move closer. I reach for the door, but I can never get to it. No matter how many steps I take, the door is always further and further away. My fingers grasp at nothing. Grief makes the air thick and heavy, and I choke on smoke and, all around, there is the smell of burning human hair...

Flames lick at my skin as my hand reaches for the doorknob.

“Charlotte says you shouldn’t open it,” a voice remarks, almost conversationally.

I turn and, through the fire, see little Vanessa Redwing sitting on the floor of the corridor with her back to me. She's playing with her dolls' house, and I see that she's wearing her riding habit, her dark curls drawn into a low bun beneath her top hat. From this angle I can't see her face, but I do see the scarlet streak of blood running slowly down her neck in a single trail from her ear. She hums as she moves her doll from one room of the house to another.

"Charlotte says don't open the door," she says again, not turning round.

"Why not?" I ask, my voice a croak.

"Something bad happened in that room," she says.

"But I must know," I say. "I have to remember."

"Charlotte says you'll regret it if you look," Vanessa says. She turns her head slightly, and I sense she is watching me, but her face is hidden by the netted veil attached to the stiff brim of her riding hat. "Charlotte says there are some horrors that burn," she says. The fire leaps taller, crackling with spite as it devours the house around us. The heat is almost unbearable; the smoke makes my eyes water; it hurts so much to breathe. Vanessa holds the doll up to her ear, as if it's whispering something to her. Then she giggles softly. "Charlotte says let it burn," she says, giggling some more. "Let it all burn right down to the ground."

"Wake up!"

I turn away from her, finally managing to wrap my fingers around the golden door handle embossed with the Redwing coat of arms, the eagle emblem with the cold, cruel eyes that blaze red hot. The gold smokes, burning and blistering my skin, but I don't care. At last, I will get to see what lies beyond, to find out what happened in this room...

"Wake up, miss," a man said again. "We've arrived. We've reached the school."

His fingers pressed against my shoulder, and I shoved his hand away before I could stop myself. In those confusing moments

between sleeping and waking, it was another man standing before me, another hand on my arm, purple bruises blooming under cruel fingers. But then the dream faded and it was only the carriage driver, shivering in the gloom, giving me a reproachful look.

“I’m sorry for waking you, Miss Black,” he said, his lilting Scottish accent making me feel a long way from home. “But we’ve arrived at the school.”

I looked out of the window but night had fallen while I’d been sleeping, and there was nothing much to see except the glow of lanterns, shining through the fog. The tang of salt and brine reached right into the carriage, telling me that the ocean was somewhere close, beyond the sight of the dark clifftop. There was no scent of smoke or ash or burning flesh. And when I looked down at my black kid gloves, they were not sticky with blood.

“Miss Black,” the driver said again, starting to look a little vexed. “We’ve arrived at—”

“I heard you,” I snapped. I had been so close to the door that time, so close to remembering. But it was not the driver’s fault, so I shook my head and added, “Please forgive me. It’s been a long journey. And I am fatigued.”

“Of course,” the driver mumbled, already turning away to see to the removal of my luggage.

The cold had bitten deep into my bones while I’d been asleep, and the blood rushed painfully back into my hands and feet as I got up from the uncomfortable bench seat. I was absolutely famished. I’d used my last pennies on a pot of tea and a plate of crumpets while waiting for the ferry in Mallaig but that had been hours ago, and now I was dreadfully hungry.

The heel of my boot crunched on the frozen gravel as I stepped out and saw the horses steaming in the lamplight, snorting and shuffling their hooves, anxious to be on their way. The driver must have been eager to leave, too, for he had barely set my trunk down on the drive before climbing back into his seat.

“The school is straight through those gates,” he said, pointing with his whip. “Thought they might have left them unlocked and then I could have dropped you off at the door. But you can get in through them side gates just there easy enough.”

He paused, and I wondered whether he was waiting for a tip. Perhaps if I offered him one then he might even get down from the driver’s seat and help me with my luggage? But I had no money left in my purse. And I was damned if I was going to beg. So I simply offered him a tight-lipped thank you. He shrugged in response, flicked his whip at the horses, and the carriage trundled away, taking the warm lamplight with it. I was left shivering in the dark outside the black iron school gates, scowling after the retreating carriage as I reached down to grip the handle of my trunk.

It was devilish heavy, and my arms and back ached with the effort of dragging it along behind me. Thanks to the boats running behind schedule, I was later than I had said I would be in my letter, but I thought they might have left the gates open for me just the same. I looked up at them, tall and imposing, with the words *Dunvegan School for Girls* spelled out in the ironwork at the top. ‘An exclusive industrial school, founded to provide for the maintenance and training of destitute girls not convicted of crime,’ read the job advert that Henry had sent me. It was, in other words, a place for those who had nowhere else to go.

I found the side gate the driver had mentioned and passed through this to the school grounds. The building was larger than I had expected and loomed overhead. The wind whistled through the open tower in the centre, causing the faint echo of a ringing bell to carry through the air. Most of the school was cloaked in darkness, the nearby black windows lifeless and opaque with ice, but a light glowed here and there in the otherwise dark façade. I searched the windows for faces but saw none. The building seemed without warmth, or pity, or interest in me of any kind. Well, that suited me perfectly. More than

anything, I wanted to be left alone. To be invisible.

Unfortunately the fog chose just that moment to turn into misty rain that clung in droplets to my travelling cloak, soaked through the soles of my boots and dampened my gloves, causing them to shrink and cling tightly to my hands.

I had no idea which way I was supposed to go, so decided to make for what looked like a main entrance. My breath smoked before me, and the hem of my black mourning dress became bedraggled and wet from the frosted stones as I dragged my case to the doorway. There was no answer when I knocked, so I tried the handle but the door was locked fast.

I sighed and gazed around hopelessly. There wasn't a soul about, and the night seemed to become colder and colder by the second. It had been a long, tiresome journey – I was bone-weary and hungry, and now I was locked out in the dark. It would easily have been enough to make most other seventeen-year-old girls weep in my place, but I knew what real horror was and this was nothing on that.

I straightened my shoulders and glared at the closed door before me. If I knocked long and hard enough, eventually someone would have to hear me and let me in. And I would knock all night until my knuckles were bloody stumps if I had to.

I gripped the brass knocker and brought it down on the door relentlessly, over and over again, as hard and as loud as I could, channeling all the fear and frustration and grief I'd felt over the last few weeks, relishing the aching muscles in my arm and back. At least the pain told me I was still alive, which was more than could be said for my mother...

I gritted my teeth against a fresh wave of longing. I would have sold my soul to have been back in our little rented townhouse with her. Mother could play the part of mysterious medium, purveyor of séances and communicator with the dead, extremely well but in private, her default was always a ready

smile, a cheerful nature and a boisterous laugh. For a moment I could see her so clearly in my mind's eye, plump and pretty in one of her flamboyant flowery bonnets, her head thrown back as she guffawed at some joke she'd probably made herself.

But then the image dissolved and blew away, like little pieces of ash plucked apart by the ocean wind.

I swallowed down my sorrow with an effort. Now was not the time to fall apart.

"The Black women are strong," Mother had often told me. "The Black women don't give up, Jemima, no matter how bleak things may seem..."

The front door was suddenly yanked open, startling me. I found myself face-to-face with a maid, probably a year or two younger than myself. She was extremely pretty, with cornflower blue eyes and glossy blond hair tucked beneath a white cap. I disliked her immediately. She had a sulky look that many pretty girls seemed to suffer from, and I could tell she wouldn't hesitate to make things difficult for me the first chance she got.

"Yes?" she said in a hostile tone.

"I'm Jemima Black," I said. "I've come to take up the assistant mistress post. I believe you're expecting me?"

"You're late," the girl replied with a sniff. "We thought you'd be here hours ago."

"The boat was delayed," I said. "Because of the weather. There was nothing I could do."

The girl sighed. "I'll fetch Miss Grayson," she said, beckoning me inside.

I stepped over the threshold into an entrance hall. Although nowhere near as grand as Whiteladies, it was nevertheless more impressive than I had expected, with a sea-green tiled floor and a tall wooden staircase that led steeply up to the first floor. I thought of the portrait hall that had formed the entrance to Whiteladies, with its magnificent stained glass window filled with hawks, and all those glistening oil paintings, the face of a

dead girl staring back at me from every gilded frame. No matter how bleak and unwelcoming the school may be, I was glad to be here, hundreds of miles from London.

I'd grown accustomed to the new electric lighting that had been installed at Whiteladies and had forgotten how gas lamps sucked all the oxygen from the room, making the air as dry as old paper. Even the potted plants by the front door were wilting. Gaslight produced a much softer glow than electricity, and much of the room flickered in shadow. I could make out the exposed gas pipes, though, running along the ceiling, marring the elegant décor.

"Wait here," the maid said, then turned and disappeared through one of the side doors.

I had expected the place to be noisier, considering there were twenty or so girls boarding here, all seven to ten years old. But the place was silent. *Silent as the grave*, I thought, and had to stifle the sudden urge to giggle. I longed for bed and hoped I wouldn't be kept standing around in my wet clothes for too long.

I took out my pocket watch and was shocked to see that it was almost eleven o'clock. No wonder the place was so quiet. All the girls would be asleep by now. I hoped my knocking hadn't woken any of them. I glanced up at the staircase, wondering where the dormitories were, and immediately saw the flash of white nightdresses, pale fingers curled round the balustrades. The knocking had clearly woken the girls after all, and now there were perhaps two or three of them up there, watching me. I wondered how long they'd been there.

I raised my hand in greeting, but there was a startled gasp as they saw I'd spotted them and then the girls vanished, scattering like birds. At just that moment a door on the other side of the entrance hall opened and a woman came striding out. I realized this must be Miss Grayson, and, despite the fact that Henry had provided me with a colourful description of the schoolmistress

in his last letter, my heart sank at the sight of her. She wore a dressing gown, implying that my arrival had roused her from bed but, strangely, her grey hair was arranged in a perfect pompadour, decorated with a fussy little bun that perched on top of her head. Her hair must have been long enough to sit on when it was loose, and the elaborate hairstyle did not match the sternness in her watery blue eyes or the pinched look of disapproval around her mouth. She was in her mid-fifties, and life's many disappointments had clearly twisted her features into a shrivelled look of bitterness. I'm quite certain that she'd resolved to hate me before she ever set eyes on me.

"Miss Black, I presume?" she snapped. In my heeled boots I was tall for a girl but Miss Grayson still loomed a head taller than me in her itchy-looking woollen slippers.

"Yes," I began. "I'm—"

"You're late, miss." She cut me off sharply. "I'm Miss Grayson, the mistress here, and I must warn you that lateness will not be tolerated at Dunvegan School for Girls. Timeliness is next to godliness, and I run a punctual school."

"I'm very sorry," I said. "But the boat was delayed and—"

"I will overlook it this once but a second occurrence will lead to your wages being docked. Am I clear?"

"Abundantly," I replied coolly.

"I will show you to your room," she said. "The servants have retired for the night. Your trunk will be carried upstairs in the morning."

She kept her eyes fixed on me and I could tell that she wanted me to protest. There were things in my bag I needed after all, my nightdress and my slippers and my wash kit, but I refused to give her the satisfaction so I simply said, "Very well."

The schoolmistress turned away to pick up a candlestick from the sideboard, lighting this before she extinguished the lamps.

"This way," she said, already heading for the staircase, guarding the candle's flame with her hand.

The heels of my boots seemed to click too loudly on the wooden boards as I followed her up to the first floor. I glanced at the balustrades as we went past, but the girls had obviously hurried back to bed and I wasn't about to get them in trouble by mentioning them.

"My quarters are here." Miss Grayson gestured to a nearby room. "The girls sleep in a dormitory at the far end." She pointed into the gloom. "Your room is located there as well, at the top of the servants' stairs. This will enable us to keep an eye on the girls between us, in case anyone gets it into their head to start running around the place at night."

"Is that something that happens often?"

"Last week I caught some girls trying to sneak down to the kitchen to steal food," Miss Grayson said. Her thin mouth tightened. "Needless to say they were all whipped and sent to bed immediately. Dishonest behaviour will not be tolerated here."

You horrid old shrew, I thought, disliking the schoolmistress even more intensely. *We are not going to get along at all.*

Miss Grayson led the way down the corridor and opened the door to my room, her slippered feet creaking over the bare wooden boards as she stepped inside. By the light of her candle I saw that the little space was every bit as spartan as I had expected it to be, simply comprising of a washstand, a bedside table, a chest of drawers, a dressing table, a rickety chair and a narrow bed. A single coal smouldered in the fireplace, but the room was icy cold.

"The fire was made ready for your arrival but I'm afraid you've missed the benefit of it, given your tardiness," Miss Grayson remarked.

If she expected me to apologize a second time for something that was not my fault then she was going to be disappointed. I walked into the room behind her. "Thank you for showing me up, Miss Grayson," I said, peeling off my wet cloak. "Please

don't let me keep you from your bed any longer."

Seeing my bombazine mourning dress, trimmed in itchy black crepe, Miss Grayson pursed her lips and said, "Please accept my sympathies for your loss, Miss Black."

I inclined my head but said nothing. I couldn't talk about it, not without breaking down, so I was relieved when the schoolmistress let the matter drop and lit the candle on the bedside table with an obvious show of reluctance. "You'll be provided with one candlestick per week," she told me. "If your use exceeds this then you must pay for any additional candles from your own private funds. I'd urge you to do without as far as you can. Candles lead to wax drips on the floor, and they are also, of course, a fire hazard."

I gave her a sharp look, wondering if this was a reference to my past. Surely news of the fire would not have carried as far as the Isle of Skye? That was part of the appeal of coming here in the first place, after all. To leave all of that behind.

"You will have one day off per month, on the last Sunday," Miss Grayson went on. "The bathroom is down the corridor, the third door on the right. And there is a chamber pot beneath the bed. Lessons start at eight and breakfast is at seven. Please present yourself for a prompt start."

"Of course."

At the mention of breakfast, hunger rumbled again in my stomach and I briefly considered asking Miss Grayson whether it might be possible to get some refreshment sent up from the kitchen. But she'd already told me the servants had retired for the night, and I couldn't bear to receive another lecture about my lateness.

"If that's all, then I'll wish you goodnight, Miss Black."

And with that she was gone, leaving me alone in the room.

I went over to the fireplace, hoping to add some more coal to the fire, but the scuttle was empty. Clearly this was another thing that was rationed. I sighed. There was nothing for it but

to go to bed.

By the feeble light of the single candle, I struggled out of my wet clothes, draping them over the chair by the fireplace so they could start to dry out. Once I had stripped down to my undergarments, my teeth immediately started chattering. But mere physical discomfort barely had the power to touch me any more.

I sat on the edge of the bed and ran my fingertips lightly over the many cigarette burns that scarred my arms and wrists, all the way up to my shoulders. My arms were a mess of scar tissue – ugly, ruined skin that felt tough and leathery to the touch. I recalled how some of the original burns had become infected, bleeding and weeping, and these scars were even uglier. As they'd healed, the skin had tightened around the scars, which now made it difficult for me to bend my arms at the elbows. I couldn't properly feel the material of my mourning dress, or the touch of my fingertips brushing over the scarred surface.

I tried to think back two weeks ago to the night of the fire but, almost at once, I could feel my heart speeding up, my breath turning shallow in my throat, my chest constricting as if an iron weight were pressing down on it, hard enough to crush my ribcage.

Don't be frightened yet, his voice whispered in my mind once again. So clear and close and loud that it was like he was really there in the room, taunting me.

I'll tell you when it's time to be frightened...

I tasted cigarette smoke on my tongue, breathed in the overpowering scent of Macassar oil, felt fingers digging into my skin hard enough to leave bruises. The smell of blood filled the air.

Sit here, the voice went on inside my head. *And hold this doll—* “Shut up! Shut up!” I gasped. “You are not here. You are not here.”

I opened my eyes, pushed Whiteladies from my thoughts,

and concentrated on breathing slowly until my heart rate finally returned to normal. I was out of London now, escaped from that dreadful place. Jemima Black was not a medium any longer, she was a schoolmistress, and life was to be plain and ordinary from now on. Completely plain and ordinary.

I went over to the washstand and poured icy water from the jug into the bowl, then splashed it over my face, relishing the bite of the cold. Crawling between the freezing sheets, I wrapped my arms round the black grief I carried with me everywhere, trying not to mind the sting of its claws and teeth as I cried myself to sleep.