

-EXCERPT-

Tales of
Harriford Grange

Volume 1

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The Doctor's Daughter

E*xquisite*. It was the only word to describe her. Dr. Colm Byrne followed the vision of loveliness from the small stone chapel and paused to observe her as she spoke with Mrs. Stevens, the preacher's wife. Striding forward, he tipped his hat toward the two ladies, hopes high for an introduction. Mrs. Stevens gave him a knowing look before turning to her companion.

"My dear Edith, I don't believe you've met Dr. Byrne. Doctor, this is Miss Edith Caldwell, the daughter of..."

"The late Dr. Caldwell," Colm finished. "I'm so sorry for your loss, madam."

The lady's dark eyebrows rose in alarm as she regarded him. "I thank you, sir. I wasn't expecting your arrival until Friday at the earliest. I'm afraid we haven't completed our move to the guest cottage just yet."

"No matter," he replied, enjoying the picture her soft chestnut curls made with her slightly tanned skin. "I made arrangements at the inn until Saturday."

Watching with obvious interest, Mrs. Stevens inquired whether he had plans for luncheon. He did not. She heartily extended an invitation stating that he and Edith would nicely round out their foursome. He took his eyes off the beautiful Edith Caldwell long enough to thank her and happily accept. After the good lady excused herself, he extended his arm to Miss Caldwell, offering to walk her over to the parsonage.

Edith accepted his arm, and they strolled slowly toward the cozy stone structure. Upon entering the front garden, the gentleman at her side began to admire the colorful flowers. He quizzed her knowledge of the subject until reaching a large bush of blue-pink clusters. He leaned

closer to the bush, bringing his face level with hers. Then, he turned his admiring gaze on her.

“Hydrangea, Dr. Byrne. One of my favorites.”

“Beautiful.”

Her face heated slightly as she noticed the gold flecks in his dark brown eyes and his slightly crooked, freckle-covered nose. One side of his mouth tipped up as he resumed his full height. Suddenly realizing she was still clutching his arm, she dropped her hand to her side and turned toward Mr. and Mrs. Stevens as they entered the garden.

Once inside, Edith helped Mrs. Stevens finish her luncheon preparations, and they all sat down at the table. After praying for the food, they passed around the roast, carrots, potatoes, and freshly-baked yeast rolls. Edith watched the gentleman across from her as secretly as possible. He cut a fine figure, taller than her and not overly muscular. Something about his wavy light brownish-red hair and freckles gave him a boyish look, while his dark eyes and firm jaw showed a pleasing maturity. Yes, he would do nicely. The patients would adore him.

He caught her watching him but couldn't decipher her conclusion. She smiled freely and equally at each diner and held eye contact with him on more than one occasion. Her complexion was youthful and rosy, but her manners and bearing spoke of someone older than his eight-and-twenty years.

After custard and tea, Edith excused herself, saying she had work to do at home. Colm made to leave as well, and once outside, he offered to walk her home. She took his arm once again, and he noticed how well her hand fit into the crook of his arm. They strolled down the street and stopped before a large white clapboard house fronted with an even more impressive garden. A white sign read *Harriford*

Grange Clinic. She pointed to the small stone house next door.

“That’s the guest cottage, Dr. Byrne. My maid Tilly and I will be moving in there so that you may live in the doctor’s quarters in the main house.”

“I hate to uproot you from your home, Miss Caldwell. I’ll happily move into the guest cottage.”

“That’s very kind of you, Doctor, but we are quite satisfied with this arrangement. Plus, you may need access to the office during the night, and it would be...”

“No need to explain. I will do whatever you wish. I came here to serve.” He patted her lace gloved hand, wishing she’d left the gloves off. He stopped her as she started to pull her hand away.

“Will you be attending the evening service?”

“Indeed, sir. I wouldn’t think of missing.”

He swallowed before taking the leap. “Would you mind if I escorted you this evening? I can be here in plenty of time.” He almost added something about an office tour before biting his tongue and reminding himself she was busy.

She regarded him for a moment before nodding. “If you wish.”

His heart soared as he walked back to the inn. He may have just arrived in Harriford Grange, but Miss Edith Caldwell had already claimed his heart.

Edith smiled to herself as she closed the polished oak front door. Dr. Colm Byrne was delightful, and she was eager to work with him. She warmed at the remembrance of his gaze and invitation. Handsome, indeed he was. This reverie lasted until she glanced in the looking glass in the foyer. Brown hair showing a few silver threads and imperfect, pocked skin brought her back to reality. While her curly brown hair was often denoted as her best feature, small pox as a child, along with a slight problem with acne, had

rendered her skin less than smooth and often a little blotchy. At thirty-five, she was still considered “pretty,” but anything more than that had rarely been ascribed to her. Her heart panged at a long pushed aside remembrance, but she shoved it back into its corner. She ran upstairs to change. She had work to do.

Colm arrived forty-five minutes before the service and pulled the doorbell. He was surprised when Miss Caldwell, not the maid, answered the door.

“Hello! I’m not quite ready. Usually Tilly answers the door, but today is one of her days off.” The last part trailed after her as she hurried down a long hallway.

Not wanting to be left behind, Colm followed her to a small enclosed porch at the rear of the building. Edith turned abruptly and covered her heart. “I didn’t realize you’d followed me. I needed to fetch my boots, and...” she glanced frantically about before spotting her query, “my hat. I’ll be ready in just a moment. You’re quite early, you know.”

“No hurry,” he said, following her back to the front of the house. She frowned before the glass as she pinned on her hat. He saw nothing which should have caused this reaction but decided not to state that thought aloud.

“Would you like a tour, then? Is that why you’re early?”

He forced his thoughts to concentrate on her words. “A tour? Yes. Why not?”

Nodding curtly, she motioned to a closed door to the left of the massive front door. They entered a dimly lit waiting room filled with mismatched chairs and a few small tables. Large windows covered in gauzy curtains let in the late afternoon light. A neat mahogany desk was stationed before the door to the examination room. He noted with satisfaction the space’s cleanliness before following her through the door. He was surprised to find not one, but two

exam rooms, as well as a well-equipped washing station, a lavatory, and a large doctor's office. Closets housed linens, supplies, and an extensive pharmacy.

"As you can see, we have everything a country doctor would need. My father insisted on only the best and most sanitary conditions. Marjorie Robards does the cleaning and front desk work, while Tilly Grant keeps the house and guest cottage. I'm trained as a nurse, and I also do just about every other job other than doctoring." She took a deep breath and waited for his reply.

"You're the nurse," he replied, hiding a grin.

"I am. Is that a problem?"

"No, no. Not at all. I think we'll get along quite well."

He smiled what he hoped was an award-winning smile.

She returned his grin. "As do I."

On the walk to church, conversation turned away from work to more neutral subjects. Once again, he marveled at Edith Caldwell, even more eager to beginning his new work.

Once inside the small chapel, Edith caught sight of Louisa Musgrave and caught her breath. The girl had always resembled her brother Roger but now more so than ever. While Roger had been dark, Louisa was fair. Otherwise, they could have been twins – only Louisa's strong jaw was softened with femininity and her broad forehead with curls. She had spent the last year abroad with an aunt and had bloomed and blossomed into a beautiful young woman. And, Edith smirked, Louisa seemed fully aware of that fact.

"Edith, dear Edith! I'm home!" Louisa squealed, pulling her into a hug. Edith returned the hug with equal vigor. She had always been fond of the girl.

"My dear Louisa, you look so well! I can't wait to hear all about your year. I imagine your letters only told half of all the things you experienced."

“Oh, yes! I could write volumes, if only I were given to writing.” At this point, Louisa noticed the handsome young doctor standing rather close behind Edith. She arched her brow and leaned close. “And who is this, pray tell?”

“Louisa Musgrave, I have the pleasure of introducing you to Dr. Colm Byrne, my father’s replacement.”

Louisa had the presence of mind to express her sympathy for Dr. Caldwell’s passing before turning her bright smile on the doctor. Edith stole away to her seat as they exchanged pleasantries.

“Is this seat taken?” said Dr. Byrne’s now familiar voice, causing her to jump.

“Why, no, Doctor. No one usually sits there.”

As Dr. Byrne situated himself next to her, she snuck a glance at Louisa. By her frown, Edith could tell she was not pleased, but the exact reason was unknown. Edith sighed. With Louisa, one knew the truth would come out eventually, whether one wanted to hear it or not.

“So, Doctor, I was raised in the church here.”

As with the many Christians he’d met, this remark held an unspoken question. He answered promptly.

“I was raised a Protestant, but my roommate during my undergraduate degree was a member of the church. He invited me to attend services with him, taught me the gospel, and I was baptized soon thereafter. I’ve been faithfully attending ever since.”

This response seemed to greatly please Miss Caldwell, who leaned toward him slightly. “I was twelve. It is such a blessing to be raised in the church, but it’s also so easy to take it for granted.”

Any further conversation was cut short as a deacon, Edith later pointed out, welcomed the group to the Sunday evening service of the church of Christ at Harriford Grange. He read through a short list of announcements before leading

the congregation in an opening prayer. This was followed by *Amazing Grace* sung *a capella*. As he always did, Colm smiled as the voices of brothers and sisters lifted in song to their Lord, unencumbered by mechanical instruments of music. A couple more songs were followed by a Bible reading, and a short devotion led by the elderly and kind Mr. Stevens.

Afterwards, he offered an invitation to those who had not yet put on their Lord in baptism to come be washed in the blood of Jesus in a large baptistery set behind the pulpit. To those already Christian, he prompted them to reflect on their lives in case they needed to repent publically for any sinful actions. Time to partake of the Lord's Supper and giving of the contribution were set aside for those unable to attend the earlier service. Another song and a prayer commenced the meeting. Colm thanked God once again for his good friend who had loved him enough to show him the Way of Truth and for his own willingness to obey it.

He kept an eye on Edith while they both fellowshiped with various brethren. He confirmed at least a dozen times that the doctor would be "in" starting the following Monday. Until then, Dr. Vasser would be on call from nearby Blaketon Commons. He followed her to the vestibule where she appeared to be waiting for him.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked, conscious of her dark green eyes on his face. She nodded assent, and they left the chapel arm in arm. He wished to continue their discussion from before the service, but her yawn stopped him. At the door of the doctor's house, she pulled out her key and bid him good night. On impulse, he took her gloved hand and kissed it.

"Today has been a pleasure, Miss Caldwell," he said with her hand still clasped in his.

"Edith, please," she whispered, trembling slightly. She cleared her throat as if to gain her bearings. "We *will* be working together, Dr. Byrne."

He rubbed his finger over her knuckles before finally releasing her hand. "I'm looking forward to it, Edith." Her name rolled off his tongue like music.

"Good night, Doctor."

"Colm."

"Doctor," she grinned mischievously. "It wouldn't do in front of the patients anyhow for me to call you by your given name."

"See you tomorrow? I thought I might help you and Tilly."

"If you wish. Good night."

He watched her enter her home, which would soon be his, and wandered distractedly back to the inn.

The rest of the week passed like a blur for Edith. Monday and Tuesday, with the handsome doctor's help, were all which were needed to move her and Tilly's belongings to the guest cottage. That done, they spent Wednesday and Thursday moving in the good doctor. More than once, Edith felt a catch in her throat as Dr. Byrne slowly replaced her father's belongings with his own. *Time moves on*, she pondered, *but why must it leave such destruction in its wake?* It was in one of these moments that Dr. Byrne declared that come Friday afternoon, he would declare a holiday, which must of course come with a picnic.

Friday morning started out gloomy, but by afternoon, the sun was shining bright. Tilly had begged off to visit her mother, leaving Edith and Dr. Byrne to picnic on their own. He hefted the picnic basket, and they set off toward the creek. Upon finding a shady spot, Edith spread out a blanket and began removing their picnic fare. Dr. Byrne offered a prayer for the food, and they began to eat in earnest.

Colm lay back on the blanket and looked up at the tree canopy above him. Soft light fell through the glowing

leaves and lighted on his pretty companion. He grinned when he caught her watching him, causing her to turn away.

“That was the best picnic fare I’ve ever had.”

“Tilly will be pleased to hear it. She really is a wonderful cook.”

He raised himself to a seated position and turned toward Edith. She glanced at him before pretending to be absorbed in some wildlife across the stream.

“Edith, has anyone ever told you you’re beautiful?”

“Really, Doctor!” she replied, fanning herself as she turned away. But not before he caught a small grin.

“Indeed, it is true, my fair lady. You must have beaus lined up and down the street!” He said this in a jesting tone, hoping against hope she replied in the negative. However, when she grew pensive, he feared he’d fully blundered.

“I did once. Rather, I had a beau once. He was the only man other than my father who ever called me beautiful.”

Colm cleared his throat after her pause grew long. “What happened to him?”

She sighed deeply. “He went off to the war, and well, he didn’t come home alive.” She stated this matter-of-factly, but he could see the pain in her eyes and hear it in her voice.

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” Another pause, punctuated with an unseen tear. “He...he wrote me letters, asking me to wait for him, that he would...propose when he returned home.”

He turned away to give her a moment to compose herself. “What was his name?”

“Roger. Roger Musgrave. Louisa’s older brother.”

“I see.”

“It was a long time ago. Goodness, almost fifteen years.”

“And since then?”

“Harriford Grange isn’t exactly brimming with eligible men, Doctor. I threw myself into my nursing studies so I

could help my father. I'm happy with my life. God has blessed me despite my loss."

They sat in companionable silence for some time before Colm dared to speak again. Had he erred by bringing to mind her loss? His goal certainly hadn't been to hurt her.

"What might I expect come Monday?" he asked.

"Well, I believe the whole county has been apprised of your arrival, so the office will most likely be busy with everything from stubbed toes to headaches. A few regular patients have their yearly exams, and we'll probably have one or two unexpected emergencies."

"I'd imagine you handle yourself well during emergencies."

"I do my best. It really opens your eyes, this job, but the rewards are worth every trial."

"I agree."

They were a great team, doctor and nurse working perfectly in sync as if it had always been this way. However, as soon as the door was locked behind their last patient each day, his concentration flew out of the window.

He sat in his desk one afternoon watching Edith flit about the hallway, refilling glass jars with cotton swabs and tongue depressors, re-rolling washed bandages, and rearranging the linens. At one point, she pulled out a line of cord and spent a few minutes trying to untangle it. Her brow wrinkled in concentration, and her plump bottom lip was caught between pearly white teeth. After taking in this picture for about two minutes, he jumped up from his chair and held out his hand.

"Allow me."

"Don't bother. I've almost got it." Her eyes didn't move from the knot. He stepped closer and covered her hands with his. At this, she slowly looked up. "Really, I'll have it in a moment."

“I’m sure you will. I just thought I could help.”

She relinquished the mass and stepped back as if searching for another task and yet, not wanting to leave. He spent a couple of moments studying the knots before finding the problem. As he coiled the cord around his hand, she thanked him.

“No need. I’m here to serve.”

“So you’ve said...The patients seem to like you. Mrs. Johnson was particularly expressive in her praises.”

He laughed, remembering the plump older lady and her shameless flirting. She had called him handsome so many times, he’d lost count.

“She’s not my type,” he teased, “but I thanked her nonetheless.”

“And what is your type, Doctor?” she asked in jest, turning away to put the cord on an upper shelf.

“You.”

Her motions stilled, one arm and both feet frozen in a long stretch.

“You flatter me, Doctor,” she laughed, although it was somewhat forced. “And flattery will get you anything around here.”

What about your heart? He barely stopped himself from blurting out that thought as he stepped up behind her, placing his hand on the small of her back as he put the cord on the shelf. When he turned to look down at her, she wasn’t looking at him. In fact, he thought she might be trembling. He pulled his hand away.

“I’m sorry. I...”

She brushed a loose strand of chestnut hair from her face. “No matter. I best finish up my work. I’m sure you would like some peace and quiet to go over your notes. Please excuse me.”

He watched her disappear into an exam room before shuffling back to his desk. He’d never been a ladies’ man, but

he thought he knew how to woo a woman. This one, however, was a bit of a mystery.

In the cool exam room, Edith placed her palm over her rapidly beating heart, wishing it to calm. After a few deep breaths, she looked about the room, seeing but not perceiving her surroundings. He was a flirt. It was as simple as that. After a few more weeks, his attentions would surely turn toward one of the many swooning young ladies who'd graced the office in the past week. That would be best, after all. She was too old for him. Goodness, seven years too old according to what she'd read on his file. Why, he was probably nervous adjusting to a new practice in an unfamiliar town. That was it. He was trying to make sure he was on her good side. The approval of Dr. Caldwell's daughter of the new doctor was very important to the patients of Harriford Grange Clinic. Yes, that was it. She breathed deeply as she forced herself to accept this truth and sweep away the longing she felt for love. They were co-workers and friends. Nothing more. Nothing more.

Sunday morning brought Colm to Edith's front door along with a lovely bouquet of roses, daisies, and dahlias. She answered seconds after his ring, eyes snapping open at the sight of the bountiful bouquet. He gave a slight bow and held it toward her.

"For you, my lady."

She laid the bouquet in her arms and gazed upon it as if it were a newborn babe. "It's lovely. Thank you."

"You're lo...welcome."

She disappeared to put the flowers in a vase, rejoining him a moment later. They walked to the chapel, making small talk about the weather, the flowers, and the upcoming gospel meeting. As he handed her through the door, his eyes lit upon

the fair Louisa Musgrave. He determined to have a chat with her as soon as possible.

That time came late Tuesday afternoon when Louisa came in for her yearly check-up. Edith was busy running an errand, making this the ideal moment to question Louisa about her friend.

“Well, Miss Musgrave, you are in perfect health.”

“Thank you, Dr. Byrne. That’s good to hear.”

“Do you mind if I asked you something?”

“Not at all.”

Her eyes held curiosity without the hint of flirtation he’d feared. He cleared his throat. “It’s about Miss Caldwell.”

“Edith?”

“Yes. I find myself in a bit of a predicament.”

“You’re in love with her.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Is it that obvious?”

“Indeed, sir. Have you told her?”

“That’s the problem. I believe I’ve courted her from the moment I first laid eyes on her, but my methods don’t seem to be working. I’m almost afraid I’ve frightened her.”

“I see.”

They were both quiet for a long moment before Louisa breathed a response. “She was practically engaged to my brother Roger when he was killed in the war. She was devastated. I haven’t seen her with another man since. Oh, Dr. Byrne, I would wish more than anything for her to be happily settled! If you truly love her...”

“I do,” he whispered, the realization knocking him in the gut.

“Splendid! But, oh, what is you wanted to know?”

“Do you have any idea how I might win her heart?”

Louisa’s youthful brow wrinkled in thought. “Flowers?”

“Tried that.”

“Dark Chocolates? She loves those.”

“I’ll put them on the list.”

“Um...have you told her how you feel?”

“Practically.”

“I’ll keep thinking, Doctor. I think this will make a wonderful new project.”

“Don’t breathe a word of this to Miss Caldwell.”

“Of course not, Dr. Byrne! I won’t say a thing.”

Edith spun away as the exam room door opened to reveal a giggling Louisa followed by a grinning Dr. Byrne. As soon as they caught sight of her, they grew quiet. Louisa scurried away with a breathy “hello” to Edith. The good doctor’s face was bright red.

“Hello, *Dr. Byrne*,” she said, hating how jealous she felt. He had every right to show attentions to any lady he chose. Had she not recently determined they were not compatible? She was far too old to take his attentions seriously.

“Miss Caldwell. Did you find what I asked for?”

“I did. You sent me on quite a wild goose-chase,” *on purpose, no doubt*, “but I’m very good at that sort of thing.”

She looked pointedly at him, hoping for...what? A confession?

“Ha, sorry about that...Um, I was thinking about going out for dinner this evening. Would you care to join me, my lady?” he asked, stowing his discomfort and slipping smoothly into chivalry. She barely stopped her jaw from dropping. Had he not just been flirting with Louisa? Maybe she should suggest he ask her instead.

“I’d love to.”

“Good,” he said, rubbing his hands together.

“I’ll have to clean up first.”

“I’ll come over at six?”

“That should give me enough time.”

“Good. Very good.”

She watched him practically skip to his office and shut the door behind him. She checked the time and got right to work.

Colm arrived promptly at six with a small box of dark chocolate hearts. He would have bought the largest box they had, but he feared that might be overdoing it. The beauty which opened the door took his breath away. She'd redone her normally tightly knotted chestnut curls into a loose updo, a few escaped ringlets framing her heart-shaped face. Her thick white nurse's dress was replaced with a light green muslin gown which brought out her emerald eyes. He held out the chocolates, unable to form a cohesive thought.

“Dark chocolate hearts. My favorite! How did you know?”

“A little bird told me.”

She thanked him and grabbed a light wrap, locking the door behind her. As she took his arm, he noticed she wasn't wearing gloves. He placed his hand casually on hers and relished in the smoothness of her skin. They wandered down the slowly darkening lane toward The Tea Biscuit, the best local eatery. Inside the simply decorated dining room, he led the way to a table in the back corner and pulled out her chair. He seated himself and picked up his menu, glancing frequently over it at his dining companion. After they'd ordered, he leaned forward, not wanting to miss a thing.

“So, Doctor, how are you liking the practice and Harriford Grange?”

“I love...it,” he stammered, as if changing his words mid-sentence. He gulped down half of his glass of water.

“I'm glad to hear that. I hope you'll stay for a while. I think you're a perfect fit for our little town.”

“Oh, I do plan to stay. Most definitely!”

She laughed at his enthusiasm, even as the seed of jealousy threatened to sprout. She tamped it down and changed the subject.

“Louisa Musgrave is a lovely young woman. I’ve known her since she was born. I’d say it’s about time she was settled happily.” Why on earth did she bring that up? She quirked her eyebrow at his reddened face.

“I suppose so.” Another gulp and his glass was empty. “Has she any suitors?”

“No one in particular, but I fancy quite a few young men have noticed her since she returned. If one was interested, he better step up now and claim her heart before the others work up the nerve.”

“Ah.” He looked everywhere but at her before dropping his eyes to his lap. “Say, do you like cricket?”

Stunned for a moment by his sudden change of topic, she shook her head. “I’ve not had much experience with it, but many of my schoolmates played during recess. Do you?”

“Ever since I was a boy. That’s how I,” he pointed to his crooked nose, “broke my nose.” His equally crooked smile made her grin.

“How did that happen?”

“I was eleven, and one of my mates swung the bat back and hit me square in the face. Not only did I come away with quite a bloody nose, I also discovered my true calling.”

“It made you want to become a doctor?”

“Yes, it did,” he replied with a laugh. His brown eyes warmed as he held her gaze, sending delightful chills down her arms.

He leaned forward and motioned for her hand. She gave it to him, half hoping he would kiss it. He didn’t, but as he held it, he traced circles on its back.

“I told you you were beautiful. I was wrong.”

Taken aback, she tried unsuccessfully to pull her hand away. He leaned closer, jostling the table. He dropped her

hand as they both scrambled to catch their glasses and tea cups.

“Oh, bother,” he exclaimed, tossing his wet napkin. Their food came at that moment, and they ate the rest of their meal in awkward silence.

Wednesday evening's worship service brought Colm a private moment with Louisa. Edith was happily engaged in conversation with a Mrs. Woodburn when he caught Louisa's eye and motioned to the vestibule.

“We've got a problem,” he blurted, combing his hair with his shaking fingers. To her inquiring look, he explained. “She thinks I'm in love with you!”

At this, Louisa blanched. He scowled at her, his indignity tempered by relief. He didn't think he was that bad-looking.

“I'm sorry, Dr. Byrne,” she replied, once recovered. “I can't imagine what gave her that impression.”

“It's alright. So, what do I do about it?”

A sly smile slid across Louisa's pert mouth. “I say we use this to your advantage, Doctor.”

“I don't follow.”

“Don't you see, if we make her jealous...”

“No, I don't think that's a good idea.”

Louisa stomped her foot and crossed her arms. “And why not?”

“Wouldn't it be like lying?”

“Oh, I suppose so. I didn't think of that. So, what do you propose to do?”

“Propose! That's it!”

“You're going to propose to her, even before you know how she feels about you?”

“Yes, and you'll help me!”

She peered dubiously up at him. “And how will I do that?”

“Get her to talk about me. Find out what she thinks, if she would ever love me. While you do that, I’ll think about my proposal. It’ll have to be the best.”

Louisa smiled conspiratorially. “I believe you’ve come up with a sound plan. I think it just might work!”

“Very good. And thank you, Miss Musgrave, for your help,” he replied, bowing gratefully over her hand, at which time, she giggled.

“You’re very welcome, Dr. Byrne!”

Edith gawked at the sight. The nerve of him whisking Louisa into the privacy of the vestibule, whispering in her ear, and kissing her hand! How improper! Stomping to the side door, she was out of the chapel and halfway home before she heard fast footsteps behind her.

“Why did you leave without me?” Dr. Byrne asked between gulps of air. She refused to take his arm and hastened onward.

“I think you know very well, Doctor! Louisa is a beautiful young lady, and I consider her my sister, so you best watch yourself! Sneaking off for a private moment, indeed! I’ve never seen such, such...let go of me!” She jerked away from him, ran inside, and slammed the door in his face.

The chill in the clinic the next morning was palpable. During a brief break, Colm shut himself in his office and slumped into his chair. He never should have confided in Louisa. Edith seemed determined to play matchmaker, albeit a sullen and spiteful one. Could she not see his devotion to her or feel his love? He groaned before slamming his crooked nose into a stack of papers. This was a disaster! At least he still had his proposal to plan. Maybe *that* would get through to her.

Edith greeted Louisa warmly that evening, despite her misgivings about likely topics of conversation.

“What a pleasant surprise, my dear Louisa! Tilly is almost finished with supper. Please join me!”

Louisa looked searchingly about the room. “I was expecting Dr. Byrne to be dining with you.”

Edith felt a pang in her heart as she remembered their quarrel.

“He usually does, but he preferred to dine at home this evening. But do join me, my friend! We've not had a chance to catch up!”

Louisa heartily agreed and soon their light soup and sandwich supper was served in the small dining room. While they began with discussion of Louisa's trip abroad, the little minx wiled the conversation back to the handsome Dr. Byrne.

“He is handsome, don't you agree, my dear Edith?”

“Indeed he is, very handsome.”

“And his eyes...”

“What about them?”

“Well, what do *you* think about them?”

“They're kind. Have you noticed how the gold flakes perfectly compliment his hair?”

Louisa appeared rather blank at this observation. “I quite like freckles, don't you?”

“I do, and his are rather abundant!” Edith giggled nervously. What was wrong with her? She was fawning over the doctor more than fair Louisa!

Louisa grinned as if she had a secret. “He'd be quite a catch, don't you agree?”

Edith couldn't keep the wistfulness out of her voice as she nodded. “If I were younger, well, never mind.”

She cast her gaze down a moment, determined to be happy for her friend, and rose to find Louisa smiling at her.

“What is it?” Edith asked.

“All in due time, sweet sister. All in due time.”

Edith rushed to the kitchen to grab their dessert and tea, as well as to soothe her aching heart. If only she were young and pretty, then maybe the handsome doctor would notice her instead.

Louisa lost no time in informing Colm of Edith's regard for him. She found him snugly at home, nursing his wounds.

"She's in love with you, Doctor. There's just one problem. She thinks she's too old for you."

His delighted expression fell. "Too old for me?"

"You're...what? Thirty-two?"

"Twenty-eight," he huffed. This girl was not good for his ego.

"Ah, that explains it. She's thirty-five."

"I know. It's on her chart," he added quickly.

"How much does she weigh?"

"A hundred and thirty... that's none of your business!"

She giggled uncontrollably until he too gave in to humor.

"Have you decided on your proposal yet?"

"No, I'm still thinking."

"Want some help?"

"No, not yet anyway. I've got a few ideas."

"Alright. Well, I'll let you know if I find out anything else."

He watched her wander down the sidewalk to the street. His heart sank at the movement of the curtains next door.

Edith barely heard the door to the pharmacy closet close as she searched for a bottle of aspirin. Turning, she ran smack into Dr. Byrne and dropped the glass bottle. He caught it just before it hit the floor and blocked her exit.

"I think there's been a misunderstanding."

“About what?” she asked, smiling more brightly than she felt. Goodness, he was handsome! When would she ever get over him?

“I’m not interested in Louisa Musgrave.”

“Oh.”

He took a step closer. “Someone far more intriguing has caught my eye.” His eyes twinkled as he leaned in close. She couldn’t look away.

“I...I see. Louisa will be disappointed.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“No?”

“No.”

As she struggled to come up with a response, he placed his hands on her cheeks and tipped her chin up. She let out a soft gasp.

“This woman...I find she quite captivates me,” he said. Her lips parted, but no sound came out. His face was within inches of hers. Would he kiss her?

“Doctor!” yelled a voice from the hallway.

Dr. Byrne quickly kissed her forehead before rushing from the closet. He had kissed her forehead. She wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

The pharmacy closet was hardly the proper place for a first kiss but kiss her he had...in the same place he might kiss his mother. Around Edith, he was as joint knight in shining armor and court jester. No wonder she misread his signals! On top of that, he’d shortly thereafter invited her on another picnic which he’d had to cancel due to being on call in place of Dr. Vasser. A knock at his office door forced him to remove his face from his hands. Edith stood in the threshold with a concerned look on her face.

“Are you alright, Doctor?”

“No, not really.”

She hastened forward, reaching over his desk to touch his forehead, of all places. "You're not feverish. How about I ask Tilly to bring our supper over here?"

The thought of spending the evening alone with Edith sent his heart racing. "I don't think that's a good idea," he managed to choke out.

He almost gave in when her smile drooped. She was precious to him, so precious that he didn't trust himself around her if they were to be alone.

"Alright, if that's what you wish," she said, her long brown eyelashes kissing her cheeks.

"I'll be fine. Hopefully, it will be a quiet evening."

He watched her leave the room, congratulating himself on his godly decision, while wishing with all his heart to hold her in his arms.

Dr. Byrne's manner toward her had changed. His flirtatiousness had been replaced with something more serious, and he seemed unwilling to be too close to her. She shook her head. What a confusing man! Unless she was sorely mistaken, he had feelings for her, but for the life of him, he wouldn't show them. Perhaps he was embarrassed. What would people say? They spent long hours working side by side and dined together frequently. Would people think she'd thrown herself at him?

A few weeks had passed since their encounter in the pharmacy closet. He'd not made a single romantic move since then, but she felt his eyes on her constantly. What was on his mind? She'd rather have out with it than be kept in the dark.

She decided to consult Mrs. Stevens and was just on her way to do so when she saw the doctor exiting the parsonage. He was whistling as he tucked something into his pocket. He turned away from her to head down the lane toward The Tea Biscuit. She decided to continue on her errand rather than spoil his happy mood.

“Dear Edith! This is a pleasant surprise,” cried Mrs. Stevens, pulling her into a hug. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I’m hoping for some advice.”

“Well, well. I’ll do my best. Would you like some tea?”

“No, but thank you. I don’t think I could eat a bite at the moment.”

They settled in the cozy parlor, and Mrs. Stevens motioned to Edith to have out with her concerns.

“It’s a matter of the heart, Mrs. Stevens.”

“Ah. The heart is a very fickle thing, never being sure of what it wants.”

“How do you mean?”

“As you know, the Bible tells us to follow our head, not our heart. The heart can go off on a whim which the head would never go.”

“Yes, you are right.”

“What is it, my dear?” Mrs. Stevens asked, patting Edith’s hand.

“I love him,” Edith blurted out, long withheld tears tumbling down her cheeks.

“Who?”

“Dr. Byrne.”

The preacher’s wife pulled her into her arms and held her while she cried out all her pent up feelings. When Edith finally leaned back, Mrs. Stevens handed her a clean handkerchief.

“So, you find yourself in love with the doctor, and this knowledge brings you to tears.” It wasn’t said in condemnation but rather a statement of fact. Edith nodded miserably and blew her nose.

“I don’t know...what to do. I thought at first he was just flirting, and then when I believed him to be in love with Louisa, I was torn between jealousy and happiness for her.

Well, he's not in love with her, and he seemed to return my affections, but now he's grown...distant."

The good lady sat patiently while Edith contemplated her feelings. Then, she grasped Edith's hand and squeezed it.

"Edith, in cases like this, you have to trust God's timing. I know losing Roger was very hard for you and now your father as well."

"I never expected to feel like this again, and with a younger man, no less. What interest could he really have in me?"

"You are a beautiful and godly woman, my dear, and you're still young. You have much to offer a husband. What is seven years between you if he's the one God's chosen for you?"

"But *has* God chosen him for me? My heart says *yes*, but my head questions everything."

"Shall we pray about this?"

"Yes, please." They bowed their heads, and Mrs. Stevens led them in prayer.

"Most Holy Heavenly Father, only you know what's best for these two dear souls. Lead them to the future you want them to have, whether it be together in love or apart in friendship. Comfort my dear sister Edith, and give her peace and guidance as she makes decisions about her future. In your Son's name, we pray. Amen."

Edith left the parsonage with a light heart and a high step. God's will was best and would prevail. If He wanted her to become Mrs. Byrne, he would open that door. If not, she would await even more wonderful promises in service to her Lord and the patients of Harriford Grange Clinic.

Colm held the ring up to the light. The modest diamond chip would have to do for now, until he could afford something larger. It sparkled brilliantly in the morning sun, throwing a rainbow of colors on the stark walls of his office.

He placed it back in its box and slipped it into his desk drawer.

After visiting the jeweler, he'd spent a long time with Mr. Stevens. The preacher had listened patiently, prayed with him, and sent him away encouraged. He now felt he could move forward with his plan. He smiled to himself as he pictured the ring on Edith's slim finger and her hand clasped in his. When she knocked on his office door to ask about one of their patients, he rose calmly and strode toward her. As he answered her question, he noticed the serenity of her countenance and the light of her smile. On an impulse, he bent down and kissed her cheek. He relished in her blush as he left her to tend to Mr. Robertson's gout.

Saturday dawned with a pleasant crispness. Edith opened her front door to find Dr. Byrne on the other side, clad in his finest suit and carrying a picnic basket.

"Good morning, Miss Caldwell! Would you do me the honor of accompanying me on a picnic?"

She curtsied dramatically. "I would be honored, Dr. Byrne...Colm."

A comfortable ease had blanketed their friendship since her talk with Mrs. Stevens. She smiled at the pleasure in his eyes as she used his given name. After grabbing her shawl and parasol, she took his arm, and they set off.

No one was about while they set out their meal, a delicious spread catered by The Tea Biscuit. They talked of their medical practice, church affairs, and the fine weather until they were stuffed. After cleaning up, Colm held out his hand.

"Will you take a walk with me?" He held onto her hand as they walked, intertwining his fingers with hers.

"I love this place," she whispered when they stopped by some small rapids.

"And I love you."

She pivoted toward him as he put his arm around her.

“I love you too,” she breathed. Looking up at him, she prepared for a kiss, but it didn’t come. Instead, he dropped to one knee and pulled out a small velvet box. He opened it to reveal a gold band set with a sparkling diamond.

“Edith Caldwell, love of my life and queen of my heart, will you marry me?”

She covered her mouth as a happy tear slid from her eye.

“Yes, most definitely yes!”

He slipped the ring onto her finger and stood to take her in his arms. She tipped her face up again, and this time, she was rewarded with his kiss, full of love and promises.

Walking back to their picnic blanket, she reflected on the power of perception. She’d made assumptions which were untrue based on what she perceived rather than on the facts. She resolved never to give in to such thoughts but to diligently search for the truth. The light of love shone brightly on this new chapter of her life, and she thanked God that Dr. Colm Byrne had come to the practice at Harriford Grange. By her fiancé’s grin, she knew he was thinking the very same thing.

Thank you for reading
The Doctor's Daughter!

If you enjoyed your sneak peek and want to
know the fate of Louisa and Tilly...

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