

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As she boarded the train for St. Antonin, Grace was filled with conflicting emotions; extreme sadness on leaving Mel at a time when she was in so much trouble and extreme elation at getting on with the journey that she felt sure would end in her meeting Edward. Once the train had left Paris, the journey took her through periods of sunshine interspersed with violent thunderstorms. With each change in the weather, her mood altered from optimism in the sunshine to apprehension as storms lashed the train. She began to feel concerned that she was being both foolish and selfish; first of all to have left her mother, and now Mel, when they both seemed to need her most. Many times on the long journey, she drifted off to sleep and her dreams were filled with images of Edward, talking, smiling and dancing in the countryside with her.

After a long journey, changing several times, she finally woke with a jolt as the train pulled into the station in a town not far from St. Antonin. A porter took her bags and hailed her a taxi. She jumped in, asked the driver to take her to a hotel in St. Antonin, and sat back, watching the road as it snaked through terrifyingly steep limestone gorges. At the top of two of the gorges were the small fortified Bastide towns of Bruniquel and Penn, which she had read had been built by the British for defence.

The taxi crossed a bridge across the river Aveyron and pulled up in a square in the town of St. Antonin. Here the driver told Grace that he could not drive down the narrow street she wanted so she would

have to walk. She got out and was overcome with the beauty of the mediaeval town, with its stone houses and beautiful church. She worked out where she was from the directions given her by the taxi driver, and set off for the hotel.

At the hotel, she enquired from the girl at reception if she knew where the artist Artemus Ruane lived. The girl herself was unable to help but happily went off to ask the proprietor and, after a few minutes, she returned with the necessary directions.

Hardly able to contain her excitement, Grace went to her room to have a quick bath to wash away the grime from the smoky train journey. Suitably refreshed, and with pounding heart, she finally set off on what she hoped would be the last leg of her long quest. She followed the directions she had been given, and soon arrived in a small square, at one corner of which was a large building. She surveyed the building for a few moments, shivering with excitement at the realisation that she might be at the end of her journey, and that she could well find Edward inside.

The place was quiet with no one around, and her footsteps echoed around the square as she nervously approached the front door. Her face paled and her legs became shaky. She was overcome with a sense of panic and had to force herself to continue walking up to the door.

For several minutes, she just stood there, taking deep breaths, trying to calm her racing heart and summon up enough resolve to knock. With a sudden burst of determination, she raised her hand to the large iron knocker and banged it firmly. For what seemed ages there was no sound from inside the house. She glanced behind her at the deserted square and, for a moment, a feeling of panic made her want to turn back to the hotel, have a long sleep and try

again the next day. Instead, she found her hand raised to drop the heavy knocker once more. Her heart missed a beat when a man's voice shouted from behind the door.

"Un instant. Un moment." The voice sounded irritated.

The door was partly opened and, looking into the darkness beyond the door, Grace was just able to make out the stooping figure of an old man.

"Qu'est ce que vous voulez?"

"Pardon, monsieur, mais je cherche Monsieur Artemus Ruane. Est-ce qu'il demeure ici, s'il vous plaît?"

"Peut-être, mais pourquoi cherchez vous cet homme?"

"Je suis venu le voir."

"Vous connaissez cet homme?"

"Non."

"Alors, pourquoi voulez-vous le voir?"

Grace was embarrassed because she was unsure of the French words but, after thinking hard for a moment, said "Je pense que je pourrais le savoir."

"Et vous etes...?"

"Je viens d'Angleterre."

"Ah, Angleterre. Angleterre – bien, attendez un instant." The door swung fully open to reveal the older man, dressed in loosely flowing clothes, supporting himself against the wall with an outstretched hand and breathing heavily from the exertion. For some time, he breathed with difficulty, while Grace waited for him to speak.

"You must be Grace," he said haltingly. "I am Artemus." He took her hand and pulled it gently to indicate that she should come in to the hall.

"However do you know my name?" Grace frowned.

"We don't get that many visitors now, you know."

"But, you knew my name!"

"A woman rang me and told me you would be coming today."

Grace walked in to the hallway and waited while Artemus struggled to close the door.

"A woman rang?" Grace queried when the door was shut. "Who was she? Did she give her name?"

"I have no idea who she was, and no, she didn't give her name. She sounded English, though," he replied, panting hard as he walked slowly along the corridor. "Her voice did sound familiar and I've been racking my brains trying to recall where I'd heard it before. But I can't remember who it was. The mind sometimes plays tricks, especially when you get older." He continued slowly down the corridor, leaving Grace standing at the closed door.

"I haven't been in England for some time you see. It's quite a treat speaking English again. Languages are not my forte and I've never been able to speak French grammatically." Noticing Grace still waiting at the door he said, "Sorry, I should have told you to come on in."

"I just can't think who could have called you," Grace pondered. "As far as I can see, no one knew I was coming to this house. Did she sound young?" she continued, thinking that perhaps Mel had called.

"No, she didn't sound young. Seemed to me like an older woman."

"An older woman?" Grace shrugged her shoulders as she stood awkwardly at the doorway to the lounge, waiting for Artemus to catch up with her.

Suddenly, Artemus realised her predicament and moving slowly to stand aside, said. "I'm sorry, my dear, I'm forgetting my manners again. Do go in and sit down." She looked back as she entered and saw him struggling back up the corridor to push the heavy lock back into place on the front door.

"You go ahead, Grace, and find somewhere to sit. I'll follow you at my own pace," he called.

Instead of doing as he asked, Grace walked back, took his arm and supported him along the passageway. "Are you unwell?" she asked.

"Unwell? Yes, a little, but not in pain; just some nerve thing, that's all."

When they reached the room at the end of the hall once more, Artemus moved slightly ahead and said, "Do please sit down."

Grace looked round and saw that there were glasses and a jug on the table in the next room.

Following her gaze, Artemus said, "When the woman who rang told me you were coming, I had some drinks made for us by the housekeeper. They're in the studio, which I sometimes use as a lounge."

They walked into the room where the table was laid. It was flooded with sunshine. Grace looked around and saw a half completed painting of a woman on the easel. Before sitting down, she went to it to examine it more closely.

"That is beautiful," Grace said. "Do you mind if I move it so I can see it better?"

"Not at all, it's only there because it catches the sunlight in the morning." Artemus replied, as he collapsed into the couch. "And when you've done that, please get yourself something to eat and drink and sit down beside me. Could you pour me a glass of lemon, too? Help yourself to anything you want, but

nothing for me, as I've had lunch and my appetite is pretty meagre these days."

"Of course," Grace said, pleased to be asked to help and beginning to feel more relaxed. She gathered a few things to eat onto a plate, poured lemonade into glasses and placed them on the small table in front of Artemus. She returned to the painting, picked it up and turned it to catch the sun.

"The paint is quite dry but the image is only part finished, it seems," she commented.

"Yes," Artemus smiled wryly, "like so much in this house." He wondered if he should add 'in my life' but decided that would be too melodramatic.

Grace put the painting back on the easel, picked up their drinks and settled down next to him on the couch. After sipping a little of the cordial, he said, "That woman who rang said you were here looking for someone. I don't know how I can help. My circle of acquaintances is small and gets ever smaller, so I don't suppose I can be of much assistance, but it is nice that you've come to visit from such a long way. You came by train, I suppose. What sort of journey did you have?"

"It was a magical journey, full of light and shade, sun and storms, and I slept and dreamt a lot as well," Grace replied, taking another sip from her glass. She gazed in fascination around Artemus' studio. "This is a wonderful room. It must be marvellous to paint in such good light," she continued, nodding in the direction of the painting.

"I'm afraid my skills are deserting me. I don't paint much any more."

Grace was on the point of asking about Edward but felt that a little more polite conversation was called for first. She looked around and saw that the

room was almost empty, except for the one painting and dozens of books lying around the floor.

"Do you read a lot?" she asked.

"I do still read quite a bit, but rather less than I used to," he replied, glancing ruefully at the pile beside him. "But I do love to have books around. The sight of them, the feel of them and most of all, the information they contain, still give me so much pleasure. Sometimes I just rest my hand on one of the leather bindings to feel the power of knowledge inside. "

"You have only the one painting in this room. Why is that? I would have expected you to have the whole house full of your paintings."

Artemus looked around the bare walls of the room. "These walls, this house and my morning studio at the back certainly were filled with my paintings not so long ago."

"So, why not now?"

A look of sadness came over his face. Slowly, he raised his right arm, supported by the other arm and held it out in front of him. When he lowered the left arm, Grace saw that his right arm was shaking uncontrollably. "Can you see why I cannot do it anymore?" he said, with a sad smile. "Painting for me is an addiction, like alcohol is for some other people. But whereas they are able to indulge their craving even until death, I cannot." He raised his hand and put his finger to his temple. "In here, I can still paint. Every day I dream. Every day, a new scene comes into my mind. But it never gets out." He raised his shaking arm again and said, "This is what stops me. I last painted nearly a year ago. When I stopped, it was because my work was appalling. And it had been appalling for at least a year before that. My gallery claimed that I was experimenting with new styles and, for a time the

subterfuge worked. They called it my 'Softer Edge Period' and contrasted it with my 'Chiselcut Period'. People still bought 'Artemus Ruane' because they thought they would increase in value and sell as they always had." He looked around at the room and pointed. "You see on the walls, those lighter areas where my paintings used to hang. I suppose I should consider myself lucky. I had every room in this house, and my studio and the attic, filled with my work.

They are my pension, now. Each month, I sell one or more. Ironically, now my regular clients know that I can no longer paint, the old ones have gone up in value." He smiled wryly. "It's what in England they call a double-edged sword."

"How sad," Grace said, "I've never been an artist, but I do have a need to create in other ways. If I am prevented, I become desolate, so I understand how you feel." Looking over at the table, she said. "Shall I pour some more drink?"

"I'm sorry," Artemus said. "Once again my bad manners, I'm afraid. There's a flask of coffee or tea as well as the cordial, and you haven't yet eaten any of the things that my housekeeper, Claudine made specially."

Grace picked up the flask and savoured the aroma of coffee. "Would you like some?" she asked Artemus, and when he nodded, she continued, "And how about one of these marvellous-looking biscuits?"

"You help yourself, my dear. They aren't for me. I'm not supposed to eat wheat. The quacks have discovered it's not good for me, so Claudine only cooks them when we have friends in."

"Am I a friend already then?" Grace smiled, glancing over her shoulder as she poured.

"I hope so," Artemus replied, and smiling to himself, continued, "I'm just admiring the way you can pour a drink while looking away. I ceased being able to do that a long while ago."

She passed him his cup and seeing that his hand was shaking, held his wrist while he raised the cup to his lips.

After drinking, he laughed loudly and said, "Well, Grace, that's the action of a real friend. I've had lots of people in here - important people - people with lots of money, as well as some ordinary people. They've all sat in that chair there," he nodded in the direction of an easy chair. "They've sat there and watched me try to drink, and watched me spill drink on my clothes. It was obvious that they were embarrassed but they would look away and say nothing, pretending not to notice."

He drank noisily spilling the liquid. Grace mopped his mouth with a napkin. He nodded his thanks over the shaking cup and spilled a little more.

"Tell me why you've come to see me, Grace. Is it me, or my painting? You must have a very strong reason to come here. Not many people bother now." He looked down at himself and around the room. "Probably because of the messy state I get in," he laughed again, amused at his joke. "I don't care, though. Most of them came because they thought they could make money out of me. And I've noticed that the sort of people who only want to make money never smile and certainly never laugh when I try to joke with them."

"I'll make a point of laughing at your jokes, then" Grace replied with a smile. "I've had little humour in my life so far. There wasn't much of it in Loriston."

"Loriston?" Artemus asked. "Why do you say that name? Is it just a little joke?"

"Oh, I grew up in Loriston and lived there up until a couple of months ago."

"Did you, really? That's quite a coincidence, you see, I once lived there too." His face clouded. "I spent what were probably my happiest times there." With his head shaking as though he was constantly nodding approval, he turned to look more closely at Grace. "What is your family name?"

"Belari."

"Belari? The Reverend Belari? You're his daughter?" he almost shouted. "I'm glad I wasn't told that!"

"Why?"

"I have never found it in my heart to hate anyone but that priest that you would call father was the one person whom I came closest to hating."

"Whatever did he do to you?"

"What did he do? He took away what I lived for; that was what he did."

"How could he do that?" Grace asked, frowning.

"You're probably a little too young to have experienced an all-consuming love, but that was what I had in Loriston." His breath came in ever more laboured bursts, turning his words into a staccato rhythm. "I never expected it to happen to me, but it did and it was the most beautiful experience of my spoilt life." He looked in the direction of the part finished painting. "Your father destroyed it."

"Destroyed your love? I'm sorry, I just don't understand. How was he able to do that?" she asked, "and who it was that you loved so much?" sure that he would tell her that it was Zelda.

"I'll show you if you pass me that book on the table," was his response. "Can you reach it for me?"

Grace went to the table, picked up the book and handed it to him. Artemus struggled for a moment with a clasp on the side of the book, but being unable to open it, he passed it over to Grace. When she opened it, she saw that it was not a book after all, it was a box. Inside was a single letter, crumpled with use. She took it out and gave it to Artemus.

"No, I'd like you to read it. I've read it so many times that I almost know every word.

"You don't mind me reading it, it looks like a personal letter?"

"It is personal," Artemus nodded, "but I would still like you to read it. It's a letter from someone I knew, called Zelda."

Grace raised her eyebrows. "Zelda Alleyne?" she inquired.

"You know about Zelda then? How was that?" he said, raising his eyebrows in surprise. "I can't imagine that your father told you about her," he paused to catch his breath, "she meant more to me than anyone else ever has." He looked down at the palms of his shaking hands. "I have been blessed or cursed with a sensitivity which few people understand. Most people filter out sensations, but I don't. It is all there for me; I notice everything, everyone's tear, everyone's smile, the slightest significant movement of a hand, the smallest frown. I wonder about what it all means when I see the dawn bringing new scenes; when I see the sunset, closing up the day, it makes me feel part of the God of Nature. It is a gift that I think few people seem to have, but that gift has meant that there are not many people I can communicate with. They just don't understand. They see the grand picture,

not the brush strokes that go into making it." He spread his hands apart. "So it has meant that I have always been alone; there was never anyone I could tell my feelings to, because most people are too superficial and my feelings go from the top of my head to my extremities. I feel them but I can't explain them. That's always the way I was, and it was the way I became after Zelda died. She was the only one who felt sensations as deeply as I do. When I was going through turmoil at the sight of something beautiful, she would see it too. She would put her hand on mine and, without any words passing between us, would make me aware in her silence that she felt exactly as I did. What you have there is a letter she sent me when she was going through a bad time." He raised his eyes and continued, "The letter will let you see the depths of love, and why I feel the way I do about your father."

"But you said that if you had known before I came that I was his daughter, you wouldn't have seen me." Grace looked at him questioningly. "Does that mean you've now forgiven me for being his daughter?"

"Now I've met you, it is obvious that you are not at all like him."

Feeling quite relieved at hearing such an encouraging remark from Artemus, Grace began a careful examination of the letter, and noticed that it had been torn and stuck with tape in several places. She started to read it to herself.

"No, no," Artemus cried. "Read it to me, please."

"You really want me to read it aloud?"

"I do. You see, it has never been read by anyone else." He reached out and with a shaking hand, touched her shoulder. "And in a way, your voice is like

hers although she was French and you are English. Please, I'd like to hear you read it to me, if you would."

The paper crackled in her hands as she straightened it out.

"It's from The School House," she read. "'To my Dearest Love...'" She let her eyes run down the page and then looking up at him, said. "Are you sure you want me to read this, Artemus? It is only for you to read, I think."

"And, until now, it always has been. Yes, I do want you to read it, please." He touched her hand again. "She is gone now but I think if she is here in spirit, she would like you to read it."

"Why? I don't understand why you would want me to read what can only have been meant for you."

"I think you will see how we were to each other from her letter. You are the Reverend's daughter; look on it as expiation."

Grace looked puzzled, trying to understand what he was saying but, slowly and in a quiet voice, she began.

*'I want to tell you this, dear man.*

*When we are together and are so happy, all the time I am with you, I can think of no one else and nothing else. At these times, it seems that words are unnecessary. But words are there in my mind and all the time when you smile at me, when you look at me, when you touch me, the words in my mind are saying. 'I love you so. Let this go on forever. I never want to leave you. To be away from you for even a moment is a torment.'*

*And when you are painting, especially when you are painting a picture of me, my spirit links with yours so that I know what paradise must be like. But this love*

has suffused me. 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning,' I will remember you. During the night and throughout the day, even when I am in school teaching the children, your mind is my mind and your hands seem to caress me. I am so overcome by the sensation that I wonder the children do not raise their hands and ask 'Please Miss Alleyne, why are you so. Why do you glow and light up the room?'

I have read novels and poetry of the Victorian period when love was never more romanticised, but almost nothing I have read comes even close to the feelings I have when I am with you. Let me quote Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She comes closer than anyone else to my feelings.

*'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of being and idle Grace.  
I love thee to the level of everyday's  
Most quiet need by sun and candlelight.  
I love thee freely as men strive for right;  
I love thee purely as they turn from praise  
I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints, - I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles and tears of all my life - and, if God  
choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.'*

I wish Artemus, my heart, that I shall always love thee as Elizabeth loved Robert Browning. Yes, I know

*that you are disturbed by my adulation; that your masculinity feels uncomfortable to be so adored. I know that, although your painting is so full of love it is plain for anyone to see, that is where it stays - in the painting! In real life, you do not want to be constantly adored. But I can't help myself and I can't change. Even if you turned away and went back to the other women in your life, Eva, Sasha, Alexei - any of them - I would not mind, because I have shared you in all the places a woman desires, but most of all, in my heart.*

Good night, my dear love. Take me with you everywhere.

Zelda.'

When Grace had finished reading, she was unable to speak, overcome with sadness.

When she could speak, she said in a voice shaking with sadness. "So sad! She died, Artemus?"

Artemus nodded silently, looking at the floor and said, "Before the year was out, only seven months after writing that letter." He cast his gaze down. "She didn't know that at the time she wrote it, she was expecting our child."

"Edward?"

"Edward, yes, you've heard of my son? She died giving him life."

Grace was lost for words, aware that this was certainly not the time to tell him that Edward was her only reason for being there. She had already examined the room in detail, desperately searching for any sign that he might still be around.

"But, Artemus, how fortunate to be loved with Zelda's love; if I can be so fortunate one day, I will die happy." She said, "But what did my father do which made you dislike him so much?"

Artemus sighed and slowly shook his head. "It is hard to talk about it to you, his daughter. It may be unfair of me to say this but I think he, more than anyone, was responsible for her death. The 'Reverend,'" as he said the name, his face distorted, "was a governor at the school where Zelda taught. It had become obvious that she was pregnant. Your father called her into the office at the school and what he said destroyed her in front of the headmistress. 'This woman cannot stay another minute in this school. She will corrupt the children and infect our community with evil.' The headmistress, who was actually very fond of Zelda, was weak when confronted by the priest who brought with him the wrath of God. She allowed Zelda to be taken from the school. To Zelda, religion was very important, you see and to be rebuked by Belari made her feel so ashamed that she felt herself to be a sinner. She was put on a train with a few things and did not even have time to come to tell me what had happened. Her things were collected from the house she rented and were to be sent to her. But the headmistress was ashamed and sad to see Zelda treated so badly. She personally took Zelda's belongings to the house her sister owned and where Zelda remained until our son was born."

"Did you hear from her, while she was there?"

"I did, yes; the headmistress brought me letters from her, but only on condition that she did not put her address on it. You see, I was blamed for corrupting her. Your Reverend had ruled that I should never be allowed to see her again," Artemus put his head in his hands and in a muffled voice, said, "and I never did see her again, even though I tried. God knows I tried, but I had no idea which town she had been sent to, and even if I had, I would not have known the

address." After a while, he looked up and said, "So you can see that I have no love for the man who calls himself your father.

Grace nodded. "Yes, Artemus, I understand."

She put her hand on his. "I know it is wrong to feel the way I do about a parent but it is, and always has been, very difficult for me to love him. And now I have left home, I may never see him again. He is so alien to me that I wonder sometimes if he is my real father."

Artemus looked up quickly, his lips pursed. "Did you mother say that to you?"

"My mother? Did you know her?"

"Yes, I knew her. She helped a lot after Zelda died. It was not easy because your father wasn't away for long but we met whenever possible. She helped me to accept the situation as much as it was possible." He looked up. "She helped me and it also helped her to talk about her own life."

"Did she mention a man, Raphael?"

"You know about Raphael?" Artemus leaned back in his chair for support.

"Yes, she told me what had happened. Of course, I never knew Raphael but, from what she told me, you are more like him than the man you call 'father'."

"Do you mean you think I might be the daughter of Raphael?"

"I'm not saying that, because I don't know. But what I do feel sure about is that your mother is convinced that you are Raphael's daughter and, from what I have heard of Raphael, you have a lot more in common with him than you have with Belari."

"I'd like to meet Raphael," she said. "In a funny sort of way, I am convinced I will one day, but mother told me that even she had no way of contacting him."

"I think you should accept that meeting him is probably impossible. No one knows anything about him; he could well be dead. He was much older than your mother. Did she tell you that?"

"No, I had no idea. I just assumed that he was about her age."

"No, he was old enough to be her father, probably about sixty, she told me."

"Whatever his age, she loved him more than anyone else she had ever met."

"I think that too, whenever we spoke, Raphael was always part of the conversation," obviously tired, he leaned his head back, "I think it's time you told me what you want here in St. Antonin."

"Edward..." she began hesitantly.

"Edward, yes, what about him?"

"Is he here? I want to meet him."

"Why should you want to meet him? You've never seen him in Loriston, have you?"

"No I never did but I just know I must meet him. Is he here?"

"No, he is not here but he doesn't live far away, why?"

"Could I meet him now?"

"Not tonight. He isn't here and there are reasons why you can't see him, which will become clear to you. Also, he may not want to see you... we never know."

"Why wouldn't he want to see me?" Grace's voice began to shake in her anxiety. "I feel that I know him already. In my mind I've talked to him a lot."

"Imagination is not enough. I would need to be sure that you are ready to meet him. He doesn't meet many people."

"What do you mean? I don't understand. Is he too important to see me or something?"

"He is away for the next couple of days. When he returns, he may see you, but if things go wrong he may not."

"But this is all so strange. Is there some sort of mystery about him that requires me to answer all these questions?"

"Let's say no more tonight, Grace. I'm sorry but I am very tired. This illness, you see. I'd like you to leave me now. "

"I'm sorry, Artemus, it's just that I've come such a long way and it means so much to me but, I will wait. I'll go now. Is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

"No thank you, Grace, my dear. I am able to manage on my own, even though I don't do it very well." He smiled, looking down at his unkempt appearance. "I don't get up very early but come and see me around mid-morning. Claudine will have been in and tidied up by then and gone home to look after her own family."

Grace helped him out of the chair and waited for a few moments as he struggled to move around, before walking back to the hotel.