

PROLOGUE

Nauvoo, Illinois

June 1842

Bronwyn twirled in front of the mirror in the brides' room, checking the back of the elegant gown loaned to her by Brigham's wife Mary Ann. Pale blue with ivory lace, it set off her sapphire eyes, her luxurious ebony hair, and skin the color of the finest porcelain—though she would never admit to thinking of her physical appearance in such romantic terms.

She almost laughed as she twirled again, enjoying her image in the mirror, skirts and petticoats billowing. She leaned closer to the mirror, pleased to see the sparkle of merriment in her eyes, the glow of anticipation in her expression. After all, it was the day she would be sealed to Gabe for eternity. Why not think of herself with a romantic notion or two?

A twinge of guilt pressed against her heart, but she turned her thoughts to Gabe and the look she hoped to see in his eyes as they

knelt, facing each other, and said their vows . . . which made the feelings of guilt return.

Mary Rose. Her dearest friend in the world. How could it be possible that she was about to become Gabe's second wife when she loved his first wife like a sister?

She pinched her cheeks until they were the hue of wild roses, thinking about the plan she and Mary Rose had devised to please the Church leaders, keep Gabe in good standing, and allow her to remain part of the family—just as she and Griffin and Little Grace always had been.

It would work, she told herself, drawing in a deep breath. It had to. For Mary Rose's sake, especially. It worried her that Mary Rose hadn't seemed well earlier that morning, and she planned to pull her aside and reassure her that never would she try to supplant her in Gabe's affections.

She only hoped that Mary Rose would arrive with Gabriel well before the ceremony started so they could spend those few moments alone.

She backed away from the mirror as other brides arrived to ready themselves. As the door opened and closed, the jangle and rattle of horse-drawn carriages and the low bursts of chatter carried toward her. After a moment, it became apparent that the excited voices that had drifted in from outside came from the grooms, not the brides. Most of the women appeared subdued, some of the younger ones even frightened.

As the time neared for all to have arrived, Bronwyn went to the door of the meetinghouse and peered out at the street. Carriages and horses lined up, empty of their passengers, but there was no sign of Gabe and Mary Rose.

One of the brides, a sad-looking young woman with red-rimmed eyes and trembling hands, spotted Bronwyn and slipped away from a group of three brides.

"I heard you're marrying Brother MacKay," she said.

Bronwyn couldn't help the little smile of pride that tugged the corner of her lips upward. She nodded as the woman continued. "I've noticed him before. He's a fine-looking man."

"'Tis true." Still standing at the door, Bronwyn let her gaze drift away from the woman's probing scrutiny back to the street, thinking about Gabe, how she'd admired him from the first moment she saw him, long before he and Mary Rose fell in love.

That first moment . . . the day they boarded the *Sea Hawk* in Liverpool and Coal climbed the topmast. He'd perched there, frightening the wits out of every passenger and seaman on deck. Gabe had climbed up after him as if he'd been born with all the strength and humor needed to rescue errant boys.

She could never have imagined how their lives would intertwine. Griffin, the man she would love forever, had been at her side, and they were expecting their first child. She didn't imagine then the loss that would soon break her heart. Neither could she have foreseen that one day—this day—she would become Gabriel MacKay's bride, his second. And that his first wife, Mary Rose, would have become the dearest friend she'd ever known.

Oh, Mary Rose, hurry! . . . She couldn't walk down the aisle without her. She hadn't asked, but she wanted Mary Rose to walk with her to Gabriel, their hands clasped in a silent agreement of sisterhood and faithfulness to their plan.

"Where is he?" The woman interrupted Bronwyn's thoughts. "Your Gabriel, I mean," she added, noticing Bronwyn's confused expression. "Shouldn't he be here by now?"

She snapped back to the present. Her Gabriel? "He . . . he should have been here . . . He felt things were getting awkward with Mary Ro— with his first wife and that it might be easier if . . ." Taking a deep breath, she began again. "Brigham came for Little Grace and me, and his wife Mary Ann helped me dress for the wedding at their home. She's keeping Little Grace for me

while I—” She stopped to listen as she heard another carriage round the corner.

She flew to the door and stepped outside, just in time to see it rattle by without stopping.

Brigham came up behind her, his forehead furrowed. He had no need to ask the obvious question. Bronwyn shook her head. “I don’t know what’s keeping Brother Gabriel.”

Brigham pulled out a pocket watch. “It’s not like him to be late.” He gave Bronwyn a piercing look. “I suggest you return to the brides’ room and await your groom. We’ll start as soon as Brother Gabriel and Sister Mary Rose arrive.”

“I’ll need a few minutes to talk to Sister Mary Rose before we begin.”

“Not unless they arrive soon.” He smiled. “There will be plenty of time afterward for sister-wife talk, believe me, Sister Bronwyn.”

He took her elbow to guide her back to the meetinghouse, reached for the door and opened it so she could enter.

Brigam stopped just short of entering.

Mary Rose.

It took only a half heartbeat for Bronwyn’s mind to whirl with the possibilities. The pregnancy. The swollen, distraught look of Mary Rose that morning. The sounds of weeping in the night.

What if . . . ? She didn’t complete the thought, remembering the weariness like unto death itself the morning before Little Grace was born.

Bronwyn took a step backward, almost knocking Brigham off balance; she turned, gathered her full skirts, and hurried toward the street. “I’m going to find them,” she called over her shoulder. “You can start without us.”

She didn’t bother to stop to ask for approval—or even to see what was surely a look of stunned disapproval on Brigham’s face. Instead, she turned her attention to the unattended carriages and wagons lined up in front of the meetinghouse.

She made a beeline toward a lone horse tethered to a hitching post just beyond the last carriage—a gleaming black beast with an arched neck, sleek head, and intelligent eyes. As she placed a foot in the stirrup and swung her leg over the hand-tooled leather and silver saddle, her dress bunching up to her knees, she swallowed a smile. She would have laughed if she hadn't been so worried about Mary Rose. In the old days, she and Mary Rose would have giggled together over such a sight.

She heard a familiar voice shouting from the front of the meetinghouse. Without a glance toward the man, she leaned close to the horse's neck. "Go, boy," she cried, pressing her heels into his flanks. She hoped the beast would respond to the voice of someone other than his master's—especially since it was his master doing the shouting, commanding him to halt.

But the horse—the pride of Brigham's stables—appeared to be quite content with Bronwyn on his back. He took off like a fox after prey, and as soon as they were on the open road, she let him take the lead. He seemed to sense the urgency and galloped with hurricane force toward the MacKay farm.

As they raced along, Bronwyn leaning low over the horse's neck, she watched the road ahead, hoping to see the telltale dust of a carriage coming toward her. She had no desire to return to the meetinghouse to go through with the marriage, but she wanted to know her friend was well. Right now, that was all that mattered.

They rose to the top of a small knoll, and in the distance lay the farm. She slowed the horse and took in the scene, searching for anything that seemed amiss. The landscape was bathed in sunlight, just as it had been earlier that morning. Even with the warmth of the sun on her shoulders, a shiver traveled up her spine.

Something was wrong. The house was too quiet. Where were the children? And Cordelia, who'd offered to watch them during the marriage festivities?

Her mouth went dry, and her heart thudded with fear for her friend as she urged the horse to a gallop once more.

Gabe must have heard the thundering hoofbeats. He ran from the house, and even before she reached him, she could see his pale, disheveled appearance. And the blood on his shirt.

Bile rose in her throat as she drew back hard on the reins. The beast halted and reared. She patted his neck to calm him and then dismounted. Gabe ran to her and grasped her hands. His expression told her more than words ever could.

“Mary Rose?” she whispered.

His voice choked. “How—” His gaze shot to the horse, then back to her. “How did you know to come? She needs you . . . We need you.”

“Is she upstairs?” She didn’t want to cry, so she kept her focus on his eyes instead of his blood-stained shirt. “How bad is it?”

“Go to her. Quickly.” He squeezed her hands before letting go. When she glanced at the panting horse, he added, “I’ll take care of him. Just go to her, please.”

Lifting her skirts, Bronwyn raced up the front steps.

Mary Rose’s face was the same shade of white as the pillowslip beneath her head. Her closed eyelids didn’t flicker, and her soft breathing was almost inaudible.

Bronwyn bent over the bed and gently took Mary Rose’s face between both hands. “Dearest one,” she whispered, “can you hear me?” No response. She embraced her friend, kissed her cheek, and whispered again. “Mary Rose, it’s Bronwyn. I’m here.”

“She fell,” Gabe said from the doorway. “She’s been unconscious since. I don’t think she even knows about the . . .” His voice choked, and he walked across the room. “I did the best I could . . . but the infant was so small, so delicate. He couldn’t even take his first breath. I tried . . . I even tried to clear his throat with my fingers. Breathe air into him.” He had reached the bed and came around to kneel beside it opposite Bronwyn. He reached for Mary

Rose's hand, kissed it, and, still holding it, dropped his head.

His voice was ragged as he whispered, "Forgive me, my love. I brought this on you . . . on us. Our baby . . . Too much to forgive . . . Oh, Mary Rose . . ."

Behind him, in the cradle he'd spent weeks working on in the barn, lay the baby's body, wrapped in a soft patchwork quilt that Bronwyn had sewn to celebrate the child's birth.

Bronwyn left Mary Rose's side and moved toward the cradle. She sat down beside it, her soiled and wrinkled skirt billowing around her. She gathered the baby into her arms, bringing its still warm body close to her heart. For a moment, she just knelt there, at first rocking and humming a lullaby from her childhood, and then covering the baby's face with kisses, just as she knew Mary Rose would do.

The sting of tears rose in the back of her throat. Mary Rose had been there for her to help save the life of Little Grace, but while Mary Rose lay suffering, while her baby tried to make its way into the world, Bronwyn was primping in front of the mirror in the brides' room. She dropped her head and wept silently.

She opened the blanket, and holding the wee child in her lap, she touched each finger and toe, and gently smoothed the baby's head, and examined his tiny seashell ears.

"I'll need a pan of warm water," she said to Gabe after a few minutes. "And some clean rags. It's time to prepare him."

Still on his knees, Gabe turned to her, his expression raw with grief. "I was so busy, first trying to save him, then so afraid I would lose Mary Rose," he said, "that I didn't get a good look at him."

She swallowed hard. "Would you like . . . to hold him?" She found the answer in his eyes and laid the child in his arms.

Gabe drew in a shuddering breath and drew the child close. He bowed his head, touching his forehead to his son's. His sobs seemed to come from someplace deep within his being, a sound almost unbearable to hear.

Bronwyn moved closer and wrapped her arms around him, her embrace encompassing both father and son. She laid her head against Gabe's heaving chest and found unexpected comfort as he leaned into her arms.

September 1842

Bronwyn walked along the creek, her hands clasped behind her, trying to find peace somewhere within the muddle of thoughts and feelings. Outwardly, no one could have known the war that waged within her heart; she made sure of that. She went through her days with her usual smiles and laughter, lightening the load where she could for Mary Rose and Cordelia, taking on more than her portion of housework without complaint, teaching the children their lessons, reading to them, singing to them . . . but always aware of Gabe's presence when he was near.

Tonight, the household had fallen quiet, the children were in bed, and upstairs Mary Rose sat at her desk, probably writing in her journal. The last crickets of summer sang, and here at the creek, frogs croaked in unison with the babbling of flowing water.

The stars were just beginning to throw their spangled glory across the sky when Bronwyn heard the back door open and then close. The crunch of footsteps came toward her, and even before he spoke she knew it was Gabe.

"There you are," he said, making his way through the foliage. Though she'd taken to coming to the creek each night to sort out her feelings in peace, this was the first time he had followed her.

She turned as he came toward her.

"I'd hoped to find you here," he said. A slow smile took over his face.

"Did you talk with Mary Rose?" Bronwyn met Gabe's liquid

gaze, trying to keep that tender place in her heart from melting. “Did she give her permission?” She disliked the way her hands shook and her heart pounded as she awaited his answer.

He took a few steps closer, tucked his crooked index finger beneath her chin, and tilted her face toward his. What the starlight didn’t accomplish, his touch did. She blinked and tried to step back, but her feet remained rooted to the ground. There was a time when she might have run in the opposite direction, but tonight his eyes, his touch, kept her from moving. She was sorry when he withdrew his touch from her face.

“Mary Rose is fragile, her feelings barely under control. I wanted to speak with her this afternoon, as the prophet suggested,” he said, “but when I saw again the toll that grief has taken on her, I couldn’t find the words. I intend to speak to her tomorrow. Hard as it may be, she needs to be reminded of the prophet’s teachings, the good in it for us all. Individually, we are weak. Together, we are made strong. He sees the need for our family to be united in every way. Not just now, but through eternity. It will bring us all great joy to increase our family.” He smiled.

“United, aye,” she breathed, not taking her eyes from his. “What happens if we are not?”

“I don’t think we need to worry about that. Mary Rose will understand and accept what needs to be done. In fact, I think she has already.”

“She hasn’t spoken to me about it.”

“She wouldn’t. She may have a difficult time at first. Many of the men have told me their experiences. At first, it is a shock, especially to a first wife, but eventually they get over it, and actually begin to enjoy the thought of having a sister wife to share the family’s work, their joys, and even their sorrows. Even a baby’s birth is cause for the sister wives to rejoice, each as glad as if the babe were her own. Because you and I are married in the sight of God and the Church, we’re meant to share everything

as husband and wife.” He smiled and touched her face again. “Everything. We are meant to bring God’s spirit children to earth through our bodies.”

She felt her cheeks warm and scarce could breathe for the thought of his meaning. Was the prophet right in this? Could she trust her emotions when she gazed into her husband’s eyes? Was it love she felt? She’d never once felt this way when she looked into Griffin’s eyes, or melted in quite the same way when he touched her.

Gabe, her husband!

How her heart wanted to sing the words. How could loving each other physically as husband and wife be wrong?

If she truly believed the prophet’s teachings, she could gladly welcome Gabe into the marital bed, knowing it was right and holy in the eyes of God.

But if she remained true to her promise to Mary Rose, she could not. And that meant she would denounce, at least in her soul, all she had come to believe about the prophet and the truths he taught. She too could be accused of apostasy.

“And she must understand about the baby,” Gabe said. “She must do everything possible to make sure we spend eternity together, that our families are not torn asunder by apostasy.”

“If she doesn’t allow this . . . our . . .” Her thoughts flew around her mind like a wild bird in a cage. “Are you saying that if she doesn’t say yes, you will not call her into heaven?”

He shook his head. “I love Mary Rose. That hasn’t changed. I will not hurt her by suggesting such a thing.”

“But you believe the prophet’s words are true.”

“It is his teaching . . . teaching that he receives directly from the Heavenly Father.” He paused and when he continued, his voice was hoarse with emotion. “I don’t like it, but I believe it to be the truth.” He furrowed his brow and looked away from her, toward the house to the second floor where through the foliage a

light flickered in Mary Rose's bedroom. From behind them came the soft, plaintive call of an owl, only to be answered a moment later by another near the barn.

A breeze teased a lock of Bronwyn's hair from its plait, and she reached up to tuck it behind her ear.

"Mary Rose," he said. "She's hurting, yet. I grieve for our baby as much as she does. I want us to be together through all eternity." He turned back to her, and she saw the sheen of tears on his cheeks. "Our baby . . . my part in his death. All of it, the memory of holding his lifeless body. The feelings ripped into me like some sort of ragged sword. They left a raw wound that will not heal."

She reached out to him then, first drying his cheeks with her fingers, then she gathered him close and held him, much as she did the day his baby died. He wrapped his arms around her waist, holding tight as if her solid warmth might cause life to flow again through his veins.

After a moment he pulled back. "Sometimes when I think about where we are, what has happened to us . . . to Mary Rose, our baby . . . my part in it, I can't . . ." His voice was thick with tears.

She touched his lips with her fingers. "There's no need to explain. I understand."

He cupped her face with his hands, and for a moment, just stood there, searching her eyes.

The tender place inside her melted again, and when he lowered his head toward hers, for a half beat of her heart she thought about pushing him away. But instead, she tilted her face upward and caught her breath as his lips touched hers, softly at first, and then with a hunger that frightened her even as it turned her blood to warm honey. As she experienced the fullness of his kiss, all thoughts of the promise she'd made to Mary Rose faded as surely as the dusk faded into the night darkness.

She reached for him, and when he pulled her close she wrapped her arms around his neck and melted against him.

He pulled back only long enough to kiss her again. And then once more.

She rested her cheek against the rough cloth of his shirt as he stroked her hair. She felt his breath on her ear when he spoke. "I'll talk to her tomorrow," he said. "We must do as the prophet says."

"Aye," Bronwyn breathed, "let it be."

The following night, Bronwyn lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Beside her, Gabe snored softly. Tears trickled from the corners of her eyes, rivulets of regret, of known betrayal, of disappointment in her weakness.

He'd whispered no words of love, no endearments. Rather, he spoke of her great beauty as he caressed her, as he outlined her face, letting his fingers trail down her forehead and nose, across her parted lips, her chin, her neck.

His eyes seemed to glow in the dim light, but not once did he tell her he loved her. But surely he did! Otherwise, the thought of what they'd just done was too terrible to consider.

She blinked back her tears, attempting to rid her mind of sorrow as heavy as a thousand large stones. Not because of the words he didn't say but because of Mary Rose, her friend.

How could forgiveness be possible?

She drew in a trembling breath. Unable to endure the agonizing guilt, she thought back to what Gabe had said the night before.

And she forced herself to remember that Gabe was her husband. She had obeyed him, just as the prophet said a good wife must. She had obeyed the prophet's words, spoken to him from God himself about the sanctity of marriage. The holiness of their

state. The prophet himself had chosen her for Gabe above all others.

Chosen. Shouldn't that mean something? Shouldn't it take away the feeling that she'd committed a troubling, soul-deep wrong?

She let out a ragged sigh. If this marriage was God's plan for her salvation, why did it hurt so much?

She turned her head and considered the man sleeping next to her. She couldn't deceive herself; she'd wanted him as passionately as he seemed to want her.

Did he really feel the same way?

Or had edicts of the Church just been convenient or, worse, welcomed.

Gabe stirred in his sleep and reached for her hand. She withdrew it, afraid he would turn toward her and pull her into his arms once more. And crushing guilt would again enter her heart.

The bedclothes rustled and the corn-husk mattress shifted under his weight as he rolled over. She waited, almost afraid to breathe.

One touch, and she knew she would again melt into his embrace.

He did as she knew he would. Her heart raced, and she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out what had just happened between them. Maybe if he would just say the words of love she longed to hear . . . maybe then her heart would leap with joy and sorrow—and guilt would flee.

But the words he whispered spoke again of passion, not love, of her beauty, the soft feel of her skin, the shape of her lips.

"I can't . . ." Tears closed her throat, and she couldn't finish.

Gabe breathed heavily as she pushed away from him and moved to her side of the bed.

"Just one more kiss," Gabe said, his voice gruff. He caught her hand and moved closer.

"I can't . . ." Her words were lost as he covered her mouth with

his. Before sinking into the velvet darkness of his kiss, her last thoughts were of love.

Surely, he loved her. If not, he wouldn't desire her so . . . would he?

As the sun streamed through the window and fell across Bronwyn's face, she bolted upright in bed. Then thoughts of the previous night filled her, and for a moment she relived each detail. Smiling, she stretched lazily, unwilling to let go of the memory. Though Gabe withheld the words she longed to hear, the second time they made love, his passion spoke louder than words ever could. She was certain he loved her.

Outside the open window, sparrows sang, and downstairs the children giggled and laughed and carried on as usual. She hummed a little tune as she washed and then dressed.

A few minutes later, she stood at the top of the staircase, hoping to catch Gabe's eye. But without a glance in her direction, he busily played with the children and helped Mary Rose and Cordelia set the table. He ruffled the twins' hair, grinned at Coal, bounced Little Grace into the crook of one arm, and, still holding her, moved toward Mary Rose. He circled his opposite arm around her, drawing her close, and then nuzzled her temple as if to show her all was well between them.

He looked into his first wife's eyes, and said, "I love you."

Bronwyn's daughter circled one chubby arm around Mary Rose's neck, the other around Gabe's. "I love you too," she crooned.

Bronwyn thought her heart would break.

February 1846

Crossing the Frozen Mississippi

Wrapped in heavy buffalo blankets, Bronwyn, Mary Rose, and Cordelia sat on the wagon bench of the big Conestoga. All the

children were in back, tucked beneath their own buffalo blankets. A canopy of stars glittered in the clear midnight sky; temperatures had been dropping since sundown, and had been for days. The Mississippi River was frozen solid—at least that’s what the lead scouts claimed.

Bronwyn shivered as she watched Mary Rose sit forward in readiness, reins in hand. At the signal, they would cross behind the lead wagon. Gabe, as captain of the first brigade of wagons, rode alongside the train from the rear, coming steadily closer to the MacKay wagon.

Bronwyn didn’t have to turn to look to know his eyes were on her as he drew closer. The sound of a second horse, riding hard to catch up with him, carried above the sounds of creaking wagon wheels and the shouts of the wagoners.

Though Mary Rose kept her unblinking gaze on the frozen river, Bronwyn turned. Enid now rode beside Gabe, her chin lifted high, her shoulders back, her red hair gleaming even in the dim light. As always, her demeanor was regal.

“We’re getting married!” Enid’s smile was joyful and triumphant. “Gabe and I are getting married as soon as we reach Winter Quarters. Mary Rose has finally agreed that it will be the best for us all.”

Bronwyn’s stomach clenched tight, and for a moment she couldn’t breathe. She stared at Mary Rose, seated next to her and Cordelia on the wagon bench. “You didn’t . . . you couldn’t have.”

Enid’s laughter rang out, and the thud of her high-stepping horse’s hooves drummed as if in rhythm with the sound. “She did, bless her, she did.” She looked as if nothing could quench her joy.

“Dearest,” she said as Gabe rode toward her. “I’ve just let everyone know our good news.”

Gabe’s eyes went to Bronwyn’s first, and then to Mary Rose, who kept her gaze on the backs of the oxen. She popped the whip

harder than she had before, frightening the beasts even though the leather tip didn't touch them.

The children had fallen silent as mice in the back of the wagon.

He rode closer, his gaze now on Bronwyn's again, searching her face as if looking to her for permission to love another. The look was so fleeting, she thought she had imagined it, but before he could speak, Enid rode up beside him.

"We'll discuss this later," she said to the three women, "and what it will mean to the running of our household." She flashed them another smile before riding off with Gabe.

"The running of our household?" Cordelia laughed heartily. "Methinks if she tries, she'll have quite a time of it, considering the likes of us." The older woman had come to live with them right after Mary Rose's grandfather's death. Though not married to Gabriel, she had become the matriarch of their family, full of love and laughter and spunk.

Bronwyn paid little attention to Cordelia's words or even to the rollicking laughter from the back of the wagon as Little Grace perfectly mimicked Enid's parting words.

She was too busy thinking about Gabe, too filled with wonder at his expression when his eyes met hers, too surprised at the strange stirring of her heart. The look was different than any he'd given her before. His passion for her was unmistakable. But could it be that he at last loved her? *Really* loved her?

Why now? She fell back against the wagon bench, trying to take in the jumbled emotions. Why just as he was going to take another wife?

She'd accepted that he loved Mary Rose and didn't love her—at least not with the same kind of love. She craned to look back at Enid and Gabe riding toward the back of the wagon train, silhouetted against the orange sky of the burning city of Nauvoo.

Mary Rose looked over at her. "Are you all right?"

"I think so," she said.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you,” she said.

“Why now? You said you would never give permission for him to marry her.”

Mary Rose swallowed hard, and her expression softened. “It had to be now.” She handed the reins to Cordelia and turned sideways on the seat. “I couldn’t wait.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

The wagon wheels creaked in the snow, the oxen snorted, and behind them, the voices of the other travelers could be heard. Finally Mary Rose spoke. “It’s because of you.”

“Me?”

“Because you are falling in love with Gabe. And he with you.” Mary Rose gave her a small smile. “I’ve seen it in his face long before tonight.”

They fell silent again, and then Mary Rose circled her arm around Bronwyn’s shoulders. “I gave my permission for him to marry Enid to save you from the heartache of loving Gabriel MacKay.”

To learn more about The Brides of Gabriel series, visit:
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