

CHAPTER ONE

Sara Lyttle was nervous. It was her wedding day. After eighteen years of waiting and almost breathless anticipation, she would finally become an adult.

As her guardian, Eliza brushed out her long golden tresses and began to secure flowers to the crown of her head, Sara reflected on her childhood, and how much more exciting life would hopefully become from that day forth.

She had, like all the other children, been taken into the clan as a baby, but she didn't know her parents. Abbeyville was a small community nestled in a picturesque valley. It was surrounded by large hills and rivers, beyond which were a few villages and slightly larger towns – close enough for travel to be reasonably easy, yet also far enough away to ensure complete privacy. The whole area, located as it was in a very rural part of eastern Ireland, did not have a large population density, and Abbeyville offered the only orphanage around for miles and miles. And so it came to pass that most orphaned children from the towns and villages in the district were taken to the Abbeyville “Nursery” if they had no relatives left who wanted to take care of them.

The Nursery was like a community within a community, completely segregated from the adults' population. Boys and girls lived their lives separately, the boys brought up by male guardians, the girls by females. The guardians were “outsiders”, adults who had responded to job advertisements that the Abbeyville Elders placed in specialist newspapers when required. It took a certain type of person to become an Abbeyville guardian or Nanny, so whilst the advertisements hinted at the unusual circumstances of the position, it wasn't until the ensuing interview that applicants found out exactly what the job entailed. The selection process was thorough and only those who could display the right combination of nurture, discipline and commitment were invited to join the reclusive community. These adults who came to Abbeyville in order to work were childless themselves, or didn't want to marry, and it was generally understood that, once they had joined the community, they would remain there until retirement. The married couples kept to their own, and the entire village had its own way of living.

“Will you sit still?” Eliza chided, struggling to comb a particularly resilient knot out of Sara's hair. “I know you're excited, but you have to conduct yourself in a ladylike manner! Chuh, honestly, has nothing I taught you taken seed in your mind?”

“I'm sorry, Eliza, I'm just so excited!” Sara muttered.

No more being treated like a little girl. From that afternoon, she would be Mrs. David Hawkinson, a wife, and an adult. She would join the grown-up part of the community, and be treated as a lady, not as a disobedient child. No more spankings, cod liver oil or corner time. No more boring school lessons, no more church if she didn't want to go. And she would be able to mingle with men, at last! Having been kept separate from the male gender entirely, her curiosity was at boiling point.

“Eliza?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Why wasn't I permitted to choose my husband? I have never even met David!”

“Now Sara, you know that's the way we do things here in Abbeyville. You are a woman now, and it is time for you to wed. The Elders suggested you to David, and he has agreed. You will have plenty of time to get to know him... the rest of your life, in fact.” For a moment, Eliza's voice softened. “I shall miss you, little one.”

“I shall miss you too, Eliza.”

“Well, there we go, your hair is all done. Time for you to put on your dress.”

Twenty minutes later, Sara stared at herself in the mirror. She looked so different - almost unrecognisable, even to her own eyes. The white silk dress flowed to the ground - no more childish,

short hems for her! Her hair gleamed, free of the usual pigtails or braids. Her plump lips had been rouged, and her fingernails polished until they shone.

"Is that me?" she gasped, breathlessly. "Is that really me, Eliza?"

"Aye," her guardian nodded. "You are a woman now. You look beautiful."

"Thank you. For everything." Sara turned and enveloped the burly woman into a hug. "I love you."

Eliza was glad that Sara couldn't see the blush creeping into her cheeks. "Now, poppet, no need to be sentimental. You're not married yet, I could still take the paddle to you!"

"Eliza! You wouldn't!"

"Don't be too sure! Now, hurry and put your slippers on. The altar awaits!"

Sara averted her eyes as she walked down the aisle. So many people were staring at her; it made her feel downright uncomfortable. The bouquet of white roses she was clutching quivered in her clasped hands, and the path to the altar seemed almost endless.

Yet slowly, the figure waiting for her with the priest became larger and more discernible. David. The bridegroom. In a few minutes, he would be her husband.

As she reached him, he turned and she saw his face for the first time.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a shock of black hair and dark, hooded eyes. He seemed very old to Sara, but in fact he was only twenty-six. His gaze was stern, and she tensed with a sudden onslaught of fear. At first glance he was certainly handsome, but was he kind? Would he treat her well?

Then he broke into an enormous smile, and she relaxed instantly, her pulse slowing, her breath coming back.

"Sara," he said in a deep, gravelly voice. "So nice to meet you."

She gave a little curtsy, as she had been taught, and then she looked him in the eye for the first time. "David. Lovely to meet you, too... at last."

He held out a hand, and she took it shyly.

Then the priest began to speak.

And so began the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. David Hawkinson.

The reception was well underway, and Sara had hardly had a minute to herself. Of course she knew no one, and was only able to smile shyly and shake hands as one person after the other was introduced to her and wished her all the best for the future.

A veritable feast had been arranged, and aside from the new oral delicacies the bride was introduced to, it was also the first time she had ever drunk wine. Delighted by the full and fruity flavour of the ruby liquid, she had already downed three whole goblets in quick succession, completely unaware of the consequences.

David, every inch the loyal husband, had not left her side since the exchanging of the vows, so he was the first to notice that his slender bride was becoming rather unsteady on her slipped feet.

"Perhaps you should sit down for a minute," he murmured in her ear. "This must have been a very tiring day so far, and you need to keep your strength up for a little while longer."

"Thank you, David, I think I should." Sara let him guide her to a lone bench in the far corner of the reception hall. He hovered beside her, obviously uncertain as to whether he should stay with her, or go back and mingle with their guests.

"Go and socialise, David, I'll be fine in a minute. Really, it's no problem."

Still he looked worried. "You're sure?"

She nodded, a shy smile playing on her mouth. "I am. Very sure."

"Well, I *do* have to talk to a couple of business acquaintances who've just arrived," David said

hesitantly.

“What are you waiting for?” The newlyweds looked up in surprise at the girl who had just spoken. She was tall and had a long mane of curly red hair. “Please don’t worry about your wife Mr. Hawkinson, I shall look after her,” she added. “My name is Helen, by the way. Helen Jameson.”

“You see?” Sara said, liking the girl on sight. “Go and mingle.”

David glanced from one young woman to the other, then he wandered off into the throng of people.

“Hi,” Helen said, perching beside Sara on the bench. “It all seems very daunting, I know, but it isn’t too bad. My wedding was the same. You don’t know anyone, and feel incredibly shy and in awe of your new situation. Going from being a child to a wife within just an hour is a huge transition to make. But you’ll soon see, it isn’t as large a leap as you might think.”

“How long have you been married?” Sara asked.

“I was married at the end of my eighteenth year, just like you. We all are - all the women, I mean. Most of the men here in Abbeyville don’t choose a bride until their mid-twenties.”

“Why so late? How can the men stand being in the Nursery until they’re that age?”

Helen laughed, displaying a perfect row of small, pearly white teeth. “They don’t stay in the Nursery! They leave there at eighteen, and then they go abroad to gather what they like to refer to as “life experience”. For a few years they explore the country, sometimes even other countries, and then they return here, to Ireland, to our little Abbeyville. Then they spend six months with the adult community, mostly with the other men, and finally, once the Elders have suggested a wife, they get married. Just like your David - and my Stanley.”

“Which one is your... Stanley? Can we see him from here?”

Helen glanced about the room. “There! Over there, you see? The one in the grey suit with the blonde hair. That’s my husband.” The pride and adulation in Helen’s voice as she talked about her spouse was undeniable.

“Did you love him at first sight?” Sara couldn’t resist asking.

Helen giggled. “Of course not! But the Elders are excellent at choosing the right couples to wed. Your David will come to be the centre of your universe, believe you me.”

Sara hesitated, wondering whether she should voice her deepest concern to Helen, who would more than likely be able to answer it properly.

“You’re worried about tonight, aren’t you? Your wedding night.” Helen said, eventually.

“How did you guess?” Sara was astounded.

“All brides are. It’s only natural. Listen, don’t worry about it. Nothing will happen. Our husbands don’t deflower us until we’re nineteen. It’s all been meticulously planned. All Abbeyville women are married two weeks before their nineteenth birthdays, in order that we should come to know our husbands better before we share a marital bed with them.”

“Is that true?” Sara was trying her best to digest this sudden wealth of information, but the wine was still sloshing uneasily around in her stomach, and the excitement of the day had tired her immeasurably.

“There are a lot of things you don’t yet know, young Sara,” Helen said mysteriously. “But you will come to know all of them, very soon indeed. Stanley says that we’re different to the rest of the world down here in Abbeyville. When he spent his years travelling, he came to know other cultures and ways of life. He could have stayed... all young men may stay away if they wish. But he chose to come home, to marry me, because he soon realised that our way of life is the best. And though it might seem strange... even a little bit frightening to begin with, you will soon grow accustomed to marriage. And then you will come to adore your life, and your husband. You will see.”

“What are you talking about?” Sara whispered uneasily. “What should be frightening about marriage?”

“There you are, Helen.” Stanley appeared before them, his broad form towering over the sitting

girls. "Didn't I tell you not to wander off? Come along now, I think it's time we went home, don't you?"

Sara was stunned at his tone of voice. It was as though he was talking to his daughter rather than his wife. She glanced at Helen, sure that she would be as straightforward and outgoing with her husband as she had been with Sara. To her astonishment, though, Helen apologised instantly. "I'm sorry," she said meekly. "I just wanted to talk to Sara."

Stanley raised a disapproving eyebrow. "What about?"

Helen shot Sara a glance, as if to say, *don't say a word!* "About how beautiful her wedding gown is, and how touching the ceremony was back at the church. That's all."

Stanley glared at his wife, then at the bride. "Very well," he said at last. "Now say goodbye to your new friend, and then we shall go home."

"Good luck, Sara," Helen whispered. "I'm sure we'll see each other again soon."

"Bye Helen. Thanks for keeping me company."

With a parting glance, Helen took her husband's proffered hand, rose from the bench, and let him lead her away. Sara stared after them, wondering about the true nature of their relationship. Helen must have been at least twenty-four, and yet she let her husband speak to her as if she was a seven-year-old child. One thing was certain; Sara vowed to herself, she would never let David speak to *her* that way...

The evening progressed, and Sara became more and more exhausted. So many new faces at once, so many new names to remember. Helen's mysterious words echoed in the back of her mind. She had probably only wanted to reassure Sara, instead, she had succeeded in making her even more nervous about her new life as a married woman.

Eventually, David took pity on her. "I think we can leave now," he said kindly. "You look tired."

"I am."

He kissed her on the cheek. She wondered idly how long it would take until she grew accustomed to his touch. Not long, she hoped.

"I just have to make the parting speech. Wait here for a minute, then we can go home."

"Of course," she said.

David moved to the table in the centre of the room, and tapped the side of a wine glass with a spoon. Immediately a hush spread out amongst the throng of wedding guests.

"Thank you all for attending this special day," David began loudly, yet calmly. "On behalf of my wife and I, I would also like to thank you all for your gifts. As soon as we have had chance to open them, you will receive thank-you letters written by my darling Sara."

An appreciative murmur swept around the room.

"My bride is tired, which I'm sure will come as no surprise to any of you. Before we leave, however, I would like to express my gratitude to all those who helped me so greatly in preparation for this new life we are entering. Thanks to all who made this wedding such a wonderful occasion, and once again, thank you all for coming. Little Sara and I look forward to becoming productive and useful members of the Abbeyville community..."

Sara's ears pricked at the word "little". 'Little Sara'? She was his *wife* now, an *adult!* So deep in thought was she at that sudden, strange endearment that she didn't hear him finish his speech, and looked up in surprise when he suddenly stood before her once more. "Come along, darling," he said gently. "Time to show you your new home!"

Just as she had imagined he would, David picked Sara up and carried her over the threshold of

their new house as if she weighed nothing at all. He set her down in the reception area, smiling as she gazed at the surroundings. "It's... it's huge! Far too big for just the two of us!" she breathed, taking in the dark wood paneling, the high ceilings, the enormous, heavy wooden doors.

Fascinated, she wandered from one room to the next, expressing delight and marveling at the plush furnishings and elaborate decor. "Who paid for all this?" she murmured eventually.

"Never you mind. It's a pretty standard house for Abbeyville, nothing special." David shrugged.

"May I see upstairs?"

"Of course!" David smiled inwardly as she asked permission to go up her own stairs. There was no way she could know what sort of life was awaiting her within these walls, but her question had secretly let him know that it shouldn't be too difficult for her to grow accustomed to it.

Sara's eyes grew wider as she saw the luxurious bathroom done entirely in grey marble, with golden taps and a large, round bathtub. Never before in her sheltered life had she imagined such a house even existed. After a few minutes of admiring the gleaming sinks and soft rugs in there, she moved on, to the bedroom.

"It's beautiful," she exclaimed, taking in the enormous four-poster bed with scarlet drapes that dominated the entire room. Oil paintings were hung on the silk-lined walls, and the carpet felt soft even beneath her slippers. "I shall definitely have sweet dreams here!"

David cleared his throat. "Actually, this is *my* room," he said carefully. "Your bedroom is on the other side of the hall."

Sara stared at her new husband. "My bedroom? We have separate rooms?"

"I'll show you," David muttered, unwilling to address the situation in detail just yet.

Sara followed him across the landing, unsure what to make of the news.

"Milady, welcome to your new quarters!" David announced with a mock bow, and opened the white door.

The room was kept entirely in cream and ivory silks. A bed stood in the far corner, and though the bedclothes looked soft and expensive, it was much smaller than the four-poster in which David would sleep. A large white wardrobe covered an entire wall of the room, and there was a dressing table with a mirror and a small, round stool in another corner. Blue and violet flowers had been painted here and there along the walls, and the carpet was thick and springy beneath her feet.

"It's not quite finished yet," David added, after a long silence.

"It's very... pretty," Sara murmured eventually. It was indeed a very feminine, delicately furnished abode, but she was still dumbstruck that she should sleep in a different bed than her husband. She swallowed hard, not sure if she dared to ask the question she desperately wanted the answer to. Curiosity won, and she spoke hesitantly. "David... will I... will I be sleeping here permanently?"

David looked at his feet, clearly deciding how to answer. "Well... there are a lot of things you will come to know about the sort of marriage Abbeyville supports, but I think you are far too tired to hear them all now. I recommend you get some sleep, we can talk all you want to in the morning."

Sara stared at her husband. Part of her was relieved that she would not have to sleep with him the first night she knew him, but another part of her was bursting with anxiety and confusion over first Helen, and now David's mysterious words.

"Well," she muttered eventually, "I *am* rather tired. It was an exciting day..."

David cupped her chin in his large hand and tilted her face up so that she was looking directly into his brown eyes. "Don't look so worried, Sara," he murmured gently. "This all may seem very new and daunting, but I promise you, you will be the best cared-for woman in all of Abbeyville. You are beautiful and charming, and I thank you for agreeing to become my wife. I will spend the rest of my life taking care of you, my darling." He bent his head and kissed her, slowly but carefully.

At the pressure of his lips on hers, she felt a warm sensation spread through her body, and responded with an alacrity that surprised herself. All too soon, though, his mouth left hers.

"Good night, little wife," he whispered.

“Good night, husband.”

Sara stared at the door for a long time after he had closed it behind him.

Sara was still in a deep sleep the next morning, and David had great difficulty waking her up.

Taking her by the shoulders, he shook her, gently but firmly. “Sara,” he whispered. “You must get up and get dressed for breakfast. You’ll find clothes in the wardrobe. There’s somebody downstairs I would like you to meet.”

Sara blinked sleepily. “What? David?”

“You heard me. Come along now; please don’t keep our guest waiting. Be downstairs fully dressed in ten minutes at the latest.” His tone of voice had become slightly less gentle, and Sara struggled to recall where she was and what he was saying. She was still so tired.

David left the room, and his new wife clambered reluctantly out of the comfortable, warm bed. Wandering over to the wardrobe, she remembered what Eliza had told her about receiving a whole new set of things when she got married, and full of excitement at the prospect of elegant new clothes, she opened the cupboard door. Sara stared at the contents in dismay. Instead of the long, elaborate dresses suitable for a married woman, the rack was filled with short, childish dresses adorned with large bows and puffy sleeves. The drawer beneath them contained a style of underwear she had not worn since she was fourteen years old, frilly bloomers that went down to the tops of her knees, long socks, and not a bustier in sight. She gasped as she saw that the bloomers were the very old-fashioned type, the sort that opened at the back without having to be pulled down.

Sara shuddered as she remembered exactly what that opening was for, many a guardian at the Nursery had pried open that slot to spank her bared bottom with grim determination.

Had she been less tired, alarm bells may have begun to sound in the back of her mind, but Sara was still too sleepy to really register what she was doing or seeing. Having rifled carefully through the entire cupboard, without finding a single adult garment, she shrugged and slipped on one of the girlish dresses. There had no doubt been a mistake; David would sort it out later, after breakfast. Her stomach gave a growl, and she realised how hungry she was. With one last, puzzled look at the rack of dresses more suited to a six-year-old girl than a newly wedded woman, she made her way downstairs...

“Good morning,” Sara mumbled shyly, tiptoeing into the dining room.

“Sara, darling, this is Miss Violet.” David gestured to a large woman with a tight, brown bun atop her head, who was sitting with folded arms at the breakfast table.

“Nice to meet you, Miss Violet,” Sara walked up to the stranger and extended her hand. Violet looked to be in her late forties, and not very friendly at all. She proved this by ignoring Sara’s outstretched hand and glaring at David.

“From now on, you will call me Madam,” Violet said gruffly. “And may I ask why your hair is all loose? Did David not tell you to braid it?”

Sara was stunned. Who was this woman? How dare she treat her, the mistress of the house, with such disdain? “I beg your pardon,” she began furiously. “I am David’s wife, and I shall wear my hair as I please, if you don’t mind!”

Violet looked at David with a raised eyebrow. He gave her an almost imperceptible nod.

“As it happens, I *do* mind,” she said, standing up. “You show disrespect to your husband’s guest, young lady, and there’s only one way to make sure you don’t do that ever again!”

Before she had even spoken the last word, Violet had grabbed Sara, yanked her bloomers to her knees, flung up the hem of her dress, and bent her violently over the table.

“How DARE you...” Sara began, but her words soon turned to squeals as Violet’s large hand began to spank her bared bottom hard and fast.

Shocked and humiliated to the core, Sara looked around, desperately, for her husband. To her utter dismay, however, he had disappeared.

“From now on,” SPANK! “You will wear your hair in braids or pigtails,” SLAP! “You will be courteous,” CRACK! “Obedient,” WHAP! “And respectful to both me,” SMACK! “And your husband!” THWACK! Violet scolded Sara loudly and sternly, punctuating her words with hard, furious hand-spansks on Sara’s rapidly pinkening buttocks.

“OW! HOW DARE YOU-” Sara squealed, trying in vain to squirm away from Violet’s firm grasp about her waist.

Undeterred by the young girl’s protests, however, the large woman spanked away until she was satisfied that her point had been made. At last, she let go of Sara, shaking her stinging palm.

Her cheeks wet with tears, Sara struggled upright, too shocked even to pull up her bloomers. She stared at Violet, hardly able to believe what had just happened.

Just then, David reappeared in the doorway. “Violet, thank you. Please excuse us for a moment,” he said. Nodding, the stern woman left the dining room.

“David,” Sara began in a cracked voice. “Who was she? Why did you let her do that? What’s going on?”

His eyes flickered. “Take a seat, there’s something I need to explain to you,” he said eventually.

Sara’s hands went to her burning behind, and, realising her underwear was still resting at her knees, she blushed and tugged the bloomers gingerly back up to her waist. “I’d rather... stand,” she said in a quiet, sad voice.

“Very well. I shall sit,” David went on, taking a seat close to his tearstained, trembling wife.

“Listen carefully to every word I tell you now,” he continued. “Your life will change from this day on. Things are done in a certain way here in Abbeyville, including the way married couples live together. Violet will play an enormous role in your life from now on, as will I. She will be your guardian now. Either she, or I will determine everything you do or say. We own you, Sara. You will be my wife, but in our community, it is the custom for women to be treated with much more care and love than in other places all over the world. It’s for your own good, Sara. You will soon come to realise that. I promise you will be happy with your new life. And when you feel ready, I want you to call me... Papa.”