



A CHRISTIAN
GOTHIC ROMANCE™

SHE VOWED REVENGE
AND FELL HEADLONG...

INTO THE GRAE

NICOLA BEAUMONT

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by

Nicola Beaumont

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Dedication

To J.C., my heart. Everything I have is yours.

Praise for Nicola Beaumont

The Lighthouse

Night Owl Romance Reviewer's Top Pick!

Five Books: Compelling. Intense. Heart wrenching. Warm. Dynamic. Gripping. Moving. Powerful...

Ms. Beaumont writes with such dynamic force that I found my heart actually aching for Malachi and Rachel. The depth of their friendship, their caring and concern for each other and their secret pain held me captive from the first paragraph to the final sentence.

—Long and Short of It Reviews

Five Angels: ...I adored The Lighthouse...Nicola Beaumont crafts a believable story that shows a wide range of emotions..

— Fallen Angel Reviews

Forever from Paris

Five Books: Ms. Beaumont makes you hurt with her characters' pain, rejoice in their love, and the faith they show as they face their struggles is inspiring. I recommend this story without reserve.

—Long and Short of It Reviews

Outstanding A+ What Ms Beaumont has written here is sheer genius... I wouldn't think it possible to feel such a bond to characters I only just met mere pages ago, but I actually cried for them...Forever From Paris was so moving, and a true delight to read.

—Simply Romance Reviews

1

Scotland, 1823

Corpulent clouds bloated with rain cast restless shadows over Beacon Hill moor. Felicity Worthington tightened her grip on the horse's reins as the curricule jostled over uneven ground. The impending storm gave her a moment's pause. Was this venture worth the risk? She would end up in Bedlam, or worse, should her action prove to be folly. Still and yet, she snapped the leather, urging the black stallion to press on. Folly, or no, she would have the truth before this journey was complete. And her revenge.

Thunder rolled across the darkened sky, an angry mirror to her own knotted emotions. A bolt of lightning shattered the dusk. The horse reared, and Felicity's hold on the reins slipped. With a violence, she was thrust to one side, her pelisse flying open to the icy, howling wind. A startled scream escaped her as the chill penetrated her walking dress, her petticoats, her skin. The blood in her veins seemed to freeze.

As the clouds gave way to their burden, she struggled to right herself, to grasp the strap before she was cast off the seat completely. Rain came in torrents. Her soaked, gloved hand slipped ever-so slightly before finding blessed purchase along the leather.

Thank You, Lord. I knew we were in accord. Please help

me to reach Hamel House without further delay, that I may kill Graeme McCracken in due course. Clarissa's death would not be in vain. Felicity had vowed it. So it would come to pass.

Rain slapped at her skin, stinging her cheeks, blurring her vision in the waning light as the horse flung itself wildly, then grappled for foothold as the road turned to thick, innavigable mud.

Thunder and lightning dueled once again. The stallion reared then faltered. A carriage wheel slammed hard into a rut. The vehicle swayed violently. Felicity lost the reins, her arms and legs flailing as her body launched into the air. The curricule keeled, the stallion collapsed. Felicity landed hard on the wheel then rolled off, hitting the mud face-up. Pain exploded in her body. Rain poured into her mouth as she struggled for breath. She coughed. The clouds billowed across the sky. The horse whinnied.

Then, all went black.

"Eleanor, fetch me clean water."

The masculine voice penetrated the walls of Felicity's unconscious mind. The words were plain, but the deep tone, made musical by a Scottish lilt, reverberated like a melody. She tried to open her eyes, to seek the sound, to partake of it once again, but she could not.

Something soft traced across her forehead. Then something cool. "Awaken fair stranger. You shall be fine in no time at all." That voice. That touch. *Come again*, her mind beckoned.

"But, I am not a servant."

Felicity winced. The female voice was shrill and

whiny. Harsh.

"I need clean water, Eleanor. Why must you argue? Mrs. Haggerty is abed."

A door opened. Closed.

Something moved, caused Felicity to shift. Again, she struggled to open her eyes.

"Ah, that's it." The voice.

Speak again.

Light filtered in slowly. Her eyelids parted, and she focused on eyes as green as moor grass after a spring rain. They reflected compassion. Mesmerized, she could not look away.

"Welcome back to the living." *That voice.* He leaned over and gently brushed hair from her cheek. "Can you tell me your name?"

She breathed in the scent of him. A genuine and pleasant masculine aroma not covered by the harsh colognes one tended to wear in the City. Refreshing.

She gave him a faint nod; her head felt heavy as a sack of flour. "Felicity Worthington?"

"Are you not quite sure, then?" His voice blanketed her in warmth, distracting her mind.

She thought she was sure. "Of a certain," she said. Although, she wasn't.

He studied her with those green eyes as he rubbed an open palm across his stubbled chin. So out of fashion, she thought. *And so handsome.* The dark shadow lent him a mysterious air and formed a perfect frame for his light eyes as it joined his shock of black hair. "Well, you certainly gave us a fright. No one tackles these moors at night, especially during a storm."

"What do you mean, 'at night'?"

Felicity turned her gaze towards the harsh voice. She hadn't heard the door open, but now there stood a

woman on the threshold holding a porcelain jug.

"No one tackles these moors at all anymore," the woman said.

He glanced at her for a moment and then cast his gaze upon Felicity. A sadness was etched beneath those green eyes that tugged at her heart. "'Tis true." He placed a cloth that Felicity had failed to notice earlier into a basin beside the bed. "Well, Eleanor, thank you for fetching the water. Please come and make the acquaintance of Miss Felicity Worthington." He smiled at Felicity, but she took note that it did not meet his eyes.

The woman scoffed and dropped the pitcher onto the sideboard that sat to the left of the door. Liquid sloshed, leaving droplets of water on the rich mahogany surface. "I do not know what is wrong with you. I neither care to make the acquaintance of *Miss Felicity Worthington*, nor believe you should be playing nursemaid to her, Graeme. She is obviously ill-mannered and a trollop! Why else would she be out after dark and quite literally alone on the moor?" She spun and exited the room, the door slamming behind her.

Felicity lay stunned.

"I must apologize for my sister-in-law. She but worries on me overmuch and thinks I should have a care for my reputation." He shook his head, and ebony strands glided to and fro across his brow. "Why, I do not understand. My reputation is a shambles. I could do naught to worsen it."

Graeme. Surely it was not so! This beautiful male specimen with the voice like smooth, polished marble. A voice that stirred the soul even whilst it lay unconscious. This...this was Graeme McCracken, the very devil himself?

She fought sympathy and courted anger. To her relief, it surged to the full. But with it came a dose of unease that skittered through her middle like stones skipping along the lake. Suddenly she realized her recklessness. She had dashed headlong across the moor without a viable plan or thought of consequence. This man was a murderer. Would he do away with her as he had her friend? With Clarissa gone, Felicity was alone in the world. No one would miss her if she disappeared. What had she done?

She could not contemplate that now. She was arrived at her destination. She had but to follow through. Willfully, she steeled herself. "You are L-lord Hamel?" she asked, her tone somehow losing the edge she had intended.

He dipped his head. "At your service, milady. But you do not have to rest on such formality. You shall find that we lean not overmuch on ceremony here. You may call me Graeme, Miss Worthington...or is it missus?"

His soft gaze caused her anger to wane.

He *was* the devil! She gave a shake to her head, willing her battling emotions to calm. *Lord, please help me to keep my resolve. You and I agree this man needs to die. I know we do.*

She urged her body upwards in the bed. Her head swam, and dizziness almost overcame her.

He grasped her shoulders, the heat of his skin penetrating the thick, layered muslin gown she wore. "Miss," she said absently trying not to concentrate on the gentleness of his touch.

"Perhaps you should lie back down."

Muslin. Not her pelisse-robe or her walking dress. She glanced downwards at the gown. "Where are my

clothes? Who..."

His hands came off her shoulders in a bolt. "Not I, dear lady. Never fear. That was Mrs. Haggerty who took your clothes and saw to your change of dress. She is our lone housekeeper and has since retired for the evening." He slid away from her and then pushed himself off the bed. "I am sorry, Miss Worthington, for the way this looks. I fear Eleanor is quite right. I should consider propriety a bit more. It is merely that I have had no cause to care or worry, what with things the way they are."

He looked so contrite, so forlorn. She wanted to reassure him that he'd done nothing wrong—but then, he *had* done something wrong, she reminded herself. He had killed Clarissa. "I can assure you; I am no trollop as your sister-in-law proposed. I shan't address you by your given name, Lord Hamel, and I take offense that you should suggest it."

Graeme. His name traveled through her mind as though it belonged there. Her lips parted, wanting to utter it aloud. She clamped them closed.

He backed towards the door, his gaze flitting from her face to the floor and back. He bowed deeply. "I am sorry, Miss, and quite pleased that you are recovered. I shall leave you now. Rest assured Mrs. Haggerty will attend you on the morrow." He reached behind him and levered the latch. The door opened with a whine, and he slipped through it.

Once the door clicked closed, Felicity buried her face in her hands. She was to kill this man, not sympathize with him. Never one to fall for a fop with good looks and a better story, she could scarce believe her reaction to this fiend who spoke with the voice of a seraphim and had eyes that would melt even the cold-

est of hearts. What a wicked turn of events, she lamented. Utterly and truly wicked. *Why, God?*

Somewhere in the back of her mind, a still, small voice began to speak, but Felicity ignored it. Bent on avenging Clarissa's death, she tamped all other emotion and turned her thoughts to how she would orchestrate the demise of one Graeme McCracken, Lord Hamel.

2

As Graeme descended the staircase, he fought the rising turmoil. To say the fair Miss Worthington was not the most beautiful creature he had ever seen would be a disservice to the very God who created her. And to say the guilt he felt at thinking such was not warranted would be an outright lie. It had been nigh on eight months only since his fiancée had taken that fatal fall from her horse. He was still in mourning and should not be noticing the beauty in another. Yet, Felicity Worthington was a vision—and possessed a deliciously saucy attitude, to boot. Something to which he had always been drawn. Clarissa had had a similar disposition. And Annabelle and Jane, too.

He threw open the doors to his study and stopped cold at the threshold. “I thought you would have retired by now.”

Eleanor rose from the leather smoking chair and crossed the room to him. “I wanted to apologize for my outburst up there.” She reached out and took his hand, leading him into the room. “It was terribly rude of me.”

He pulled away from her grasp. “Yes it was.”

Eleanor turned to face him and pouted. “But Grae, please don’t be upset with me. I am only attending your wellbeing. You know how ghastly the rumours are. Why must you insist on doing things to enflame them?”

He let out a heavy sigh that did nothing to lighten his burden or his mood. "I cannot care about the rumours. They will remain regardless of my actions." He shrugged one shoulder. "Besides, I fear they are not without merit. 'Tis true that everyone I have ever loved has wound up dead. It is a curse put upon me by God for—"

"Nay!" She stepped up and took both his hands in hers, cradling them close to her body. "You were not at fault for what happened to me, nor are you responsible for what has happened since."

He smiled down on her. "You have always been a loyal friend to me, Eleanor. I do appreciate it, although I worry that I am nothing but a burden to you. You stay here at Hamel House when you should be remarried and seeking happiness elsewhere. Sean has been gone ten years this approaching spring."

"We have been friends a long time, Graeme. I'm positive Sean would not want me to desert you."

She squeezed his hands and then let go, turning from him to the fire which bathed the room in a rich, amber glow. "Why did you fetch her here in the first place?" Her tone was even now, the warmth and concern of a moment ago lost to history.

"I couldn't leave her wounded in the storm."

She turned her face to him. "How did you even know she was out there?"

He shrugged. She knew how he knew, and she knew it was something he did not relish discussing. Still, he answered her. "His voice. It beckoned me. I had to go."

She turned to him fully, the firelight illuminating one side of her features, but shrouding the other, giving her a harsh mien. "I do not understand, Graeme. If

you believe the God of our youth cursed you, why do you still believe He guides you? Forgive me, but it makes no sense."

"I do not understand the ways of God. I must pay for my sins, Eleanor. We all must. But I cannot turn my back on Him completely. I deserve my fate. Jesus did not deserve His. If I can but do some small service before my time expires, then I must."

Anger flashed over her features before she schooled them once again. "He abandoned you, Grae, but I have not!" She approached him, staring up into his face with a softened gaze. When next she spoke, her voice matched that softness. "We were inseparable when we were children. Do you remember?"

Without giving him time to respond, she stepped around him to the open door. "I never shall, you know."

He turned to face her.

She looked at him over her shoulder. "Abandon you. I never shall." She stepped through the doorway and closed the door.

Graeme stared after her. He had hoped her infatuation with him would temper with time. She had admittedly loved him in their youth, but whilst his brother lived, her attachment to Graeme had eased considerably.

But, after Sean's fateful end, Eleanor had needed much comfort and support, and Graeme supposed it was his attentiveness to her during that time that caused a resurgence of those feelings long forgotten. He had needed the distraction. Losing his wife and his brother in the span of but a few short months had almost been his undoing. Caring for Eleanor while she mourned Sean had kept him sane.

It was his fault she lived in such turmoil now, but he could not force himself to love her. He was a detriment to all who came in contact with him.

A slight knock on the door brought to a close his thoughts. "Come in, Eleanor."

The door opened. "'Tis not Eleanor."

His breath stalled in his chest; his words evaporated into the ether. She looked like Aphrodite, swaddled to the full within the bed sheet she'd wrapped around her. Auburn tresses fell in soft curls around her shoulders, splaying across the white cloth like a decoration.

She glanced down at herself. "I know not where my clothes are, I had no choice."

He raised his eyebrows then bowed slightly. "You are a vision, Miss Worthington." He could not keep the smile from his lips. She was not so much a stickler for the proper when propriety was broken of her own freewill, he noted.

She glared daggers at him with fierce eyes—eyes that sparked an explosion of emotion and shone the unusual shade of Peruvian Blue Opal. Sean had once told him that lore claimed the stone was to have restorative properties. The ability to quiet the mind and release a tranquil healing. Graeme did not believe in such superstitions, but one thing was certain—with eyes such a colour, or nay, Felicity Worthington did *not* quiet the mind. She made the mind scream for a happiness that could no longer be. She caused the soul to ache and the heart to falter—and that was after but a few hours in his home. What would be his happy end if she remained for any length of time?

"I must depart. I need my clothing and my horse and curricule. Please direct me."

For a moment he was speechless. Could she not hear the storm still raging outside? "Uh, you cannot leave Miss Worthington."

Her eyes grew dark, clouded with a fear that took him aback. "What do you mean I cannot leave? Of course I can." She used strong words, but her guarded eyes diminished the resolve he sensed she intended. Was she afraid of him? Had she heard the rumours?

"The storm continues; your clothes are still quite soaked, I can assure you; your curricle is missing one very broken wheel and...and well—" He cleared his throat of the hesitation suddenly lodged there. "—your horse is...dead."

Her mouth fell open. "Dead?"

He took a step towards her, and she took a step in retreat. He stopped. "I'm afraid we had to shoot him. His injuries were...beyond repair."

Sheer terror manifested in her eyes. "Shot?" she murmured, almost imperceptibly.

Then, she crumpled to the floor.

3

“Shot!” Felicity bolted awake.

“It’s all right. You’re all right.” Lord Hamel reached towards her forehead, damp cloth in hand.

She scrambled backwards, only to be stopped by...she glanced down...the back of a leather chaise longue. She froze, her mind scrambling for words and a plan. What happened to the resolve she’d had when she’d tacked up Morning Star? Tentatively, she met Graeme McCracken’s gaze.

He lowered his arm. “You have nothing to fear.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

He nodded. “I feared you had heard the rumours. I see I was right.”

Sadness clouded his green eyes with a grayish hue, and she lowered her gaze, focusing firmly on her folded hands. She had not heard the rumours to which he referred and had only been told of them when Clarissa’s cousin, Rutherford, had informed Felicity of her friend’s tragic—and suspicious, if he could be believed—end. Had Graeme McCracken actually committed other heinous acts? Was he afraid she would find out these rumours were true? He appeared to be innocent—the caring gentleman Clarissa had spoken of in her missives—but Felicity was wary. Perhaps Clarissa had been blinded by love. Could not the devil come as an angel of light? Felicity would not make the same

mistake.

She raised her gaze to his face and then quickly looked away again. She would not make the same mistake as long as she did not gaze into those emotion-filled eyes. "I have heard no rumours, my lord," she said slowly. "I only wish to return to England. My time in Scotland is nearly expired."

Startled by her own words, her gaze shot to his face seemingly of its own volition. She hoped her speech was not a portent of her own end.

He slowly stood and backed away from the chaise. "I should like to ask you a question," he said, turning away from her.

"Very well."

"I warn you, it may be an inappropriate question."

An alarm went off in her head, but she forced herself to remain calm. "Very well."

"Are you of birth, Miss Worthington?"

"No, my lord."

"I suspected as much."

Anger swelled. Who was he to judge? He knew nothing of her. She could have been highborn. Her clothes were from the finest mantuamaker in all of London and Morning Star was a thoroughbred of the most exquisite lineage. "What do you mean by that?"

He turned to her. "I do not mean to offend. I am merely assessing the situation." He held out his palms as if in supplication. It did nothing to ease her affront. "You are a woman traveling alone at night. Were you of birth, not only would you have a greater care for propriety and your well-being, your family would never have allowed such a carelessness."

"*Carelessness!*" The blood heated in her veins. She got to her feet.

"I agree you are no trollop, Miss Worthington, but neither do you adhere to customary patterns. If you did, you would not be here now, wrapped in a bed sheet as though you were some Roman god. You would not have left the rooms upstairs without proper attire, and you would not be so affronted by my mere observances of facts which cannot be denied."

She began to protest but he stayed her with a raised palm and a step in her direction. "I said I do not think ill of you. I merely think you are hiding something. You say you have not heard of the rumours of Hamel House—or should I say rather, the 'Butcher of Beacon Hill'—yet you cower each time I draw near. I have done nothing to cause you to fear me; therefore, you have a foreknowledge of something, Miss Worthington. You are here for a reason; I should like to know what it is."

To see you receive your just deserts. Her mind screamed the truth, but she scrambled for an answer she could put to voice. In the end, she settled for the truth—at least as much of it as she cared to reveal. "My parents are both gone to God, my lord. I was raised by a friend's family. My surrogate father is—was—a Viscount, yet I have not regal blood of my own."

"My late fiancée's father was a Visc..."

Something flicked in his eyes, reflected only by the firelight—a recognition that caused her nerves to tingle as though lit by lightning.

"Felicity Worthington!" Long, quick strides brought him to her side. "Clarissa's bosom friend has just such a name. *Felicity*. She came to live with the family after her parents perished in the sinking of the *Destiny's Bond*. Like a sister to Clarissa, she spoke of Felicity often."